Assessing the Quality of Democracy

An Overview of the International IDEA Framework

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Editor
Todd Landman

Contributors
David Beetham
Edzia Carvalho
Stuart Weir

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Assessing the Quality of Democracy: An Overview of the International IDEA Framework

Setting the scene

Democracy is the predominant form of government in the world today. While for the greater part of world history democracy has been a recent phenomenon,[1] successive 'waves' of democracy throughout the 20th century have meant that by the new millennium more countries are now governed through democratic than through non-democratic forms of rule. Various attempts to enumerate democracies in the world agree that more than 60 per cent of all countries today have in place at least some minimal form of democratic institutions and procedures.[2] The Community of Democracies lists more than 100 countries and the United Nations International Conference on New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD) has grown in depth, breadth and importance since its inauguration in 1988 as a forum for global democratic development. Increasingly, governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations emphasize that democracy is an end in itself, as well as an important means to other ends such as economic development, poverty reduction and greater protection of internationally recognized human rights.[3]

There have been many explanations for the remarkable growth, spread and pace of democratization. Internal explanations focus on major socio-economic transformations; mobilization by social movements and civil society organizations; class alliances, challenges and revolutions ('coloured' or otherwise); and elite agreements and concessions. External explanations focus on defeat of the incumbent regime in war; the role of 'contagion' from democratization processes in neighbouring states; the diffusion of democratic values through processes of globalization; and various forms of international intervention, including support for civil society groups and nascent political party organizations; state building; institutionalization; and the specification of criteria for appropriate and acceptable forms of democratic rule.

A crucial element in mapping, explaining and encouraging this growth in democracy has been the need for valid, meaningful and reliable ways to measure and assess democratic progress and the quality of democracy itself. Scholars and practitioners have adopted a number of strategies to measure democracy, including categorical measures (democracy vs non-democracy), scale measures (e.g. a rating on a 1 to 10 scale), objective measures (e.g. voter turnout and party share of the vote), hybrid measures of democratic practices, and perceptions of democracy based on mass public opinion surveys. In certain instances, measures have been developed for particular needs and then used for other purposes, while in others general measures of democracy have been developed for a wide range of application by the academic and policy community (e.g. the 'Polity' data set developed by the University of Maryland). The quest for comparability and broad temporal and spatial coverage, however, has meant a certain sacrifice of these measures' ability to capture the context-specific features of democracy, while the turn to good governance, accountability and aid conditionality among leading international donors has created additional demand for measures of democracy that can be used for country-, sector- and programme-level assessments.

In response to these many developments and the proliferation of democracy measures, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) has developed an alternative framework for democracy assessment that moves away from country ranking and external judgement towards an approach of comprehensive assessment based on national assessment teams led by governments or civil society and academic institutions. The framework combines a commitment to the *fundamental principles* of democracy, *mediating values* related to these principles, and a comprehensive range of *questions* about democratic performance. There is scope in the framework for using existing measures while at the same time incorporating much more context-specific information on the quality of democracy that can then be linked to domestic processes of democratic reform. Its use across new and old democracies around the world as diverse as Mongolia and Italy, Bangladesh and Kenya, and Peru and Australia has shown that it works, and demand continues for the framework to be applied in new and challenging contexts.

After numerous applications of the assessment framework in no fewer than 20 countries, International IDEA, along with Democratic Audit in the United Kingdom (UK), the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex in the UK, and the larger 'State of Democracy' network, has thoroughly revised the framework into a new hand-

book, entitled *Assessing the Quality of Democracy: A Practical Guide*. The Guide includes all the normative principles and practical elements of the framework, experiences from those countries that have used it, and the ways in which democracy assessment can be linked to the process of democratic reform. This much shorter Overview provides an introduction to the framework, including its fundamental *democratic principles*, its *mediating values*, the assessment *search questions*, examples of its application around the world, the typical steps involved in carrying out an assessment, and its value as a tool for promoting democratic reform.

The assessment framework outlined here (and more fully in the Guide) upholds International IDEA's fundamental principles in supporting democracy worldwide.

- Democratization is a process that requires time and patience.
- Democracy is not achieved through elections alone.
- Democratic practices can be compared but not prescribed.
- Democracy is built from within societies.
- Democracy cannot be imported or exported, but can be supported.[4]

Taken together, the Overview and the Guide provide a robust package of materials that are grounded in many years of experience and practical application in old and new democracies across the world. Both volumes should prove highly attractive to grass-roots democracy activists, civil society organizations, reform-minded actors in political society and in government, and those international donor agencies and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations that are committed to building democracy for the future.

Assessing democracy

The approach

The fundamental and underlying question in democracy assessment is:

'How democratic are our country and its government?'

There are many ways to answer this question. The International IDEA framework takes a particular approach that marks it out from other approaches to democracy assessment and measurement.[5] The main features of the International IDEA approach are as follows.

- Only citizens and others who live in the country being assessed should carry out a democracy assessment, since only they can know from experience how their country's history and culture shape its approach to democratic principles.
- A democracy assessment by citizens and residents of a country may be initiated by government or external agencies only under strict safeguards of the independence of the assessment.
- The prime purpose of democracy assessment is to contribute to public debate and consciousness raising, and the exercise ought to allow for the expression of popular understanding as well as any elite consensus.
- The assessment should assist in identifying priorities for reform and monitoring their progress.
- The criteria for assessment should be derived from clearly defined democratic principles and should embrace the widest range of democracy issues, while allowing assessors to choose priorities for examination according to local needs.
- The assessments should be qualitative judgements of strengths and weaknesses in each area, strengthened by quantitative measures where appropriate.
- The assessors should choose benchmarks or standards for assessment, based on the country's history, regional practice and international norms, as they think appropriate.
- The assessment process should involve wide public consultation, including a national workshop to validate the findings.
- Old as well as new democracies can and should be subject to a similar framework of assessment.

The primacy of internal actors and citizens of a country is an essential feature of the International IDEA approach, while it also allows for international expertise, support and resources to complement the assessment process. The experience of assessments thus far has shown various degrees of learning, sharing and support through local assessment teams, the State of Democracy network, international donor agencies, international academic experts, representatives of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and other key actors. In this way, the International IDEA approach avoids many of the pitfalls of existing approaches,[6] while at the same time developing local ownership and empowering citizens to improve the quality of their own democracy in ways that reflect their own history, culture and national priorities.

The framework

The key *democratic principles* that form the basis for the assessment framework are *popular control* over decision makers and *political*

equality of those who exercise that control. These principles define what democrats at all times and in all places have struggled for:

- making popular control over public decision making more effective and more inclusive;
- removing elite monopoly over decision making and its benefits; and
- overcoming obstacles to the equal exercise of citizenship rights, such as those of gender, ethnicity, religion, language, class and wealth, among many others.

The framework derives seven *mediating values* from the two democratic principles.

- *Participation*. Without citizen participation, and the rights, the freedoms and the means to participate, the principle of popular control over government cannot begin to be realized.
- *Authorization*. The starting point of participation is to authorize public representatives or officials through free and fair electoral choice, and in a manner which produces a legislature that is representative of the different tendencies of public opinion.
- *Representation*. If different groups of citizens are treated on an equal footing, according to their numbers, then the main public institutions will be socially representative of the citizen body as a whole.
- *Accountability*. The accountability of all officials, both to the public directly and through the mediating institutions of parliament, the courts, the ombudsman and other watchdog agencies, is crucial if officials are to act as agents or servants of the people rather than as their masters.
- *Transparency*. Without openness or transparency in government, no effective accountability is possible.
- *Responsiveness*. Responsiveness to public needs, through a variety of institutions through which those needs can be articulated, is a key indication of the level of controlling influence which people have over government.
- *Solidarity*. While equality runs as a principle through all the mediating values, it finds particular expression in the solidarity which citizens of democracies show to those who differ from themselves at home, and towards popular struggles for democracy abroad.

The mediating values have certain requirements and institutional means for their realization.

The overall structure of the assessment framework is derived from the democratic principles and mediating values to include four main pillars, each of which has further divisions used to organize 90 search ques-

tions (15 overarching questions and 75 specific questions) that form the core of democracy assessment. These main pillars are as follows.

1. *Citizenship, law and rights*
   Democracy starts with the citizen, and the subject of the first pillar of the framework is the rights of the citizen and the ability of the state to guarantee equal rights of citizenship to all through its constitutional and legal processes. The assessment includes civil, political, economic and social rights.

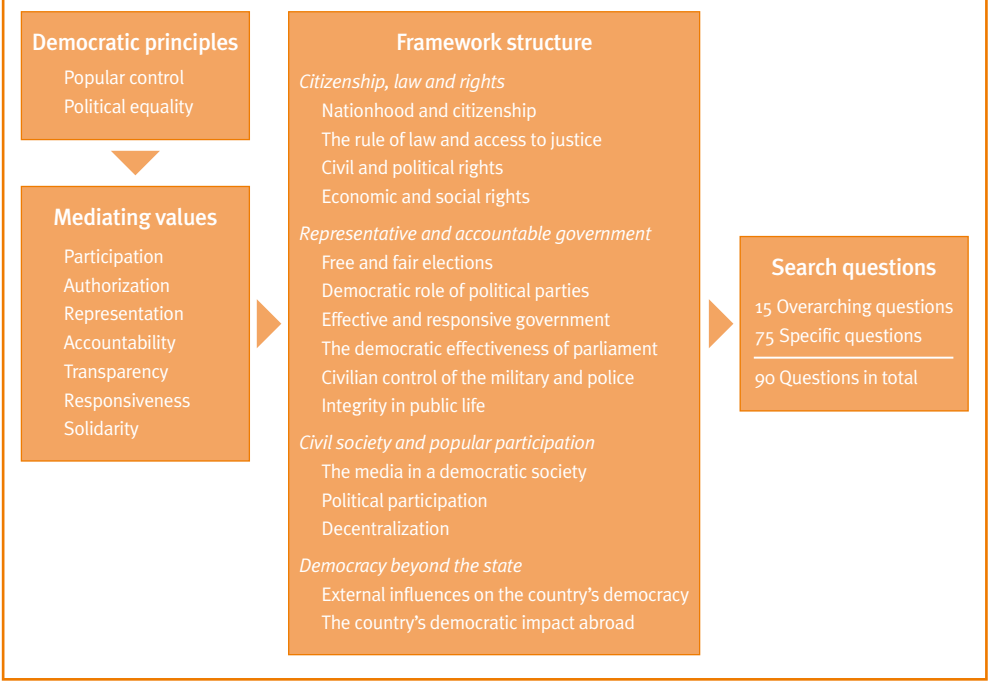
2. *Representative and accountable government*
   The second pillar comprises the institutions of representative and accountable government, including the electoral process, the political party system, the role of parliament or the legislature and other institutions in securing the integrity and accountability of government officials, and civilian control over the military and police forces.

3. *Civil society and popular participation*
   The third pillar is devoted to what is conventionally called 'civil society'. Democratic institutions depend for their effective functioning both on guaranteed rights upheld by the legal process and on an alert and active citizen body.

4. *Democracy beyond the state*
   The fourth pillar concerns the international dimensions of democracy. Its rationale is that countries do not form isolated units, but are mutually interdependent, especially in their degree of democratic progress. The assessment takes into account the external influences on a country's democracy and the country's democratic impact abroad.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the democratic *principles*, the mediating *values*, the structure of the *framework*, and the *search questions*. The appendix to this Overview includes a full list of the 90 search questions, while part 2 of the Guide provides comprehensive guidance on *'what to look for'* in answering each search question, *generalized sources of information*, *data and indicators*, and *standards of good practice*. These elements of the framework provide the core substantive content of an assessment, and when taken together reflect a larger set of values and principles associated with a general normative commitment to democracy and democratic values. Those who want a quick view of what the method involves can turn straight to the search questions in the appendix.

Figure 1: The International IDEA democracy assessment framework



Experiences of applying the framework

There have been a total of 17 assessment projects so far, comprising not fewer than 20 countries (since the South Asia democracy assessment was carried out in five countries). A team of academics is currently carrying out an assessment in Mexico, while more assessments are planned for countries in Latin America, Southern Europe, Eastern Europe and Africa. In addition, certain features of the framework have been adopted by the Open Society Institute's AfriMap project and in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Oslo Governance Centre's work on poverty reduction and gender mainstreaming.

International IDEA has held a series of expert meetings for the State of Democracy Network – in June 2004, in London; in 2005, at the University of Essex; in 2006, at the meeting of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) in Fukuoka; and in March 2007, in Stockholm, to reflect on the experiences of applying the framework across a range of different country contexts. International IDEA also made numerous presentations at two national workshops for the Fifth International Conference on New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD-5) in Ulaanbaatar in 2003 and 2006, and the inaugural

meeting of the Sixth International Conference on New or Restored Democracies (ICNRD-6) in Doha in November 2006. The reports and experiences from the different assessments reveal a remarkably diverse range of democratic situations as between countries, approaches and techniques. All the assessments that have taken place have remained committed to the standard methodology and the central principle of local ownership of the assessment process that encompasses the research, analysis and consultation processes, and the identification of priorities for future reform. But, as Krishna Hachhethu, a Nepalese member of the South Asia regional assessment team, says, 'Democracy has many stories'. This straightforward and insightful observation captures the essence of the approach: a standard method derived from democratic principles and values elicits democracy's many stories from around the world.

The assessment methodology was invented and first applied by Democratic Audit in the UK. It was developed for universal use under the direct aegis of International IDEA and then pioneered over a six-month period in eight countries – Bangladesh, El Salvador, Italy, Kenya, Malawi, Peru, New Zealand and South Korea. The pilot assessments covered different regions of the world and a mix of developed and developing countries in an effort to test the process. Nearly all involved a national conference of leading experts and interested parties within each country.

The pilot assessments showed that it has been relatively easy to:

- obtain a broadly agreed constitution with a bill of rights;
- establish some sort of office of ombudsmen and/or a public defender;
- hold free elections and establish universal suffrage;
- revive local government; and
- ensure respect for and the protection of basic freedoms such as party association, press, speech and assembly.

But they also revealed that has been more difficult to establish:

- the effective inclusion of minorities and women's participation;
- equal access to justice and protection of the right to life;
- meaningful intra-party democracy;
- control of executives;
- a reduction in private influence and private interests in the public sphere; and
- a significant role for opposition parties.

Since 2000, the assessment framework has travelled widely across regions and countries at different stages of democratization. The pilot assessments have been followed by assessment exercises in (in alphabetical order) Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the European Union (EU), Ireland, Latvia, Mongolia, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, the Philippines, the South Asia region (covering Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and the UK (the latest audit). These 'second-generation' assessments were largely conducted independently of International IDEA, and in many cases resulted from a deliberate selection of the methodology as the most appropriate from among the many assessment methods currently used internationally.

The origins, funding and form of the assessments differ greatly. The pilot assessments funded by International IDEA were all university-based and most of the non-International IDEA assessments so far – nine of the individual country assessments and the South Asian regional assessment – have their roots in universities, but there have been wide variations in the funding and in the process of assessment, ranging from nationally and internationally well-funded assessments (e.g. those undertaken in Australia, Latvia and Mongolia) to those that have been under-resourced and have been carried out in piecemeal fashion (e.g. the assessments in New Zealand and the Philippines). Three assessments (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ireland and the UK) sprang from civil society, while two (the Netherlands and Mongolia) were government-led, although the Dutch assessment was funded wholly by the government and the Mongolian assessment received technical assistance from the UNDP's Oslo Governance Centre and funding from various international donors. The government-led assessments in Mongolia, the Netherlands and Latvia (where the assessment was in a sense state-sponsored) were carried out without inappropriate intervention by the government and in many ways have tied the government to the larger agenda of democratic reform, although such a model may not be appropriate in all contexts.

There have been as many differing arrangements for carrying out assessments as there have been projects. It is clear across the experiences that the breadth of the investigations necessary to conduct full assessments has generally obliged the projects to involve a wide range of contributors. Assessment teams have variously comprised national and international academics, researchers and analysts from intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, members of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, and representatives from civil society and the media. The norm seems to be that projects generally have a small core of people who coordinate the

research and draft reports together with a wider set of experts, who have often been recruited from outside the bounds of the institution carrying out the assessment and who usually seem to work independently of each other.

The steps involved in carrying out an assessment

Assessing the quality of democracy is a large and complex task that involves many stakeholders and is affected by a variety of national and context-specific factors, including the size of the country (population and geography), its level of economic development, its type of societal cleavages and level of fragmentation, and its history of democracy and democratic stability, among many others. Despite this complexity and variety, the history of the democracy assessment framework has shown that it can apply equally across very different countries. The assessments have been carried out in new and old democracies, large and small countries, post-authoritarian and post-conflict countries, and rich and poor countries.

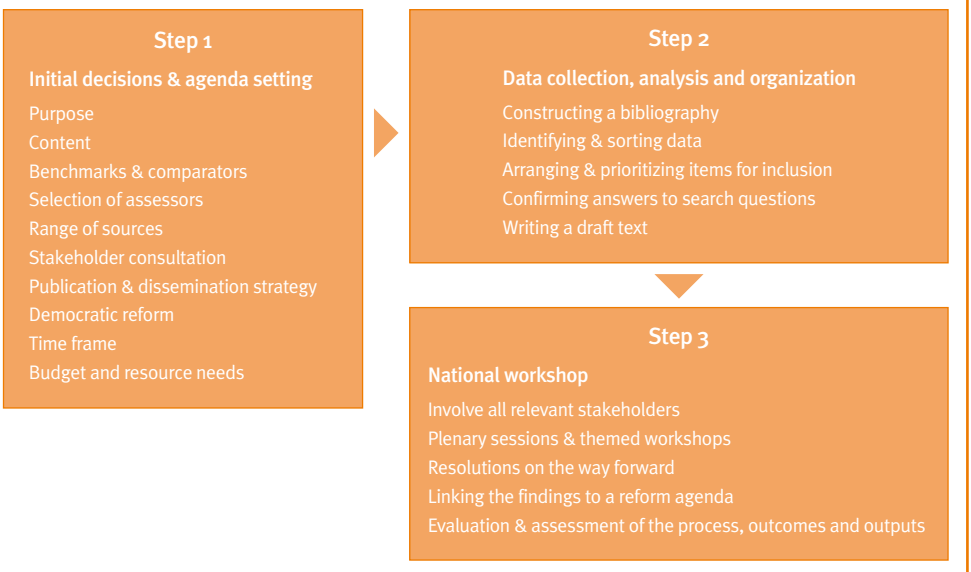
With this universal applicability comes a series of standard steps that all assessments undergo in order to make the best of the assessment experience. These include: (a) the initial decisions and agenda setting for the process of assessment; (b) the data collection, analysis and organization that form the core of the assessment; and (c) a national workshop and stakeholder event in which the final report is launched, discussed and evaluated and in which the future of democracy is discussed. Figure 2 summarizes the main elements of these three steps, while part 1 of the Guide contains two flowcharts that map in greater detail the components of each stage.

Step 1 includes all those decisions concerning the purpose of the assessment, the context in which it will be conducted, the range of benchmarks and comparators that will be used, the personnel that will carry out the assessment and many other crucial decisions.

Step 2 forms the core of the assessment and takes the largest proportion of the time, since it involves collecting and analysing data in order to provide valid, meaningful and reliable answers to all the search questions (every assessment thus far has provided answers to all the questions). The time it takes to complete an assessment is necessarily a function of the complexity of the context in which it is being carried out, the available capacity and resources, and the initial parameters that have been established in step 1.

Step 3 is a significant launch event that involves all relevant stakeholders, the media, key actors from civil, political and economic society, and in many cases the international community. It is a time to build consensus around the main findings of the report and to reflect on the kinds of reform that can be designed and implemented, as well as the ways in which the entire experience can be evaluated and assessed.

Figure 2: The steps involved in carrying out a democracy assessment



Democracy assessment outputs

There is considerable variety in the balance of the outputs between full assessments, special reports, partial audits and monitoring or follow-up reports, and in the way in which they are published and disseminated. Most of the projects have published a single volume reporting on a full assessment, while some have published additional supplementary materials (e.g. the South Asian team published separate Country Reports and is considering publishing its Case Studies and dialogues separately; and the Mongolians published a Country Information Note, Democratic Governance Indicators, and a National Plan of Action), while still others, such as the Philippines project, published books devoted to each pillar of the framework separately.

Different methods have been used to make the results of the comprehensive assessments more digestible for those who find a large book unmanageable. For the Mongolian assessment, five national experts

were selected to 'score' the assessment findings on a five-point scale from 5 (most democratic) to 1 (least democratic), and the results were published together in tabular form. The Latvian assessment constructed a similar table for each search question, the results being marked on a scale from 'very good' to 'good', 'satisfactory', 'poor' and 'very poor'. There then followed a brief item on the 'best feature' for that section, then the 'most serious problem', and finally a 'suggested improvement', all of which provided a quick 'snapshot' of the democratic condition in the country. In the latest UK audit, the findings from each section were summarized together at the end of the book in bullet-point form, and these were then edited for publication as a separate pamphlet.

Assessing for reform

The International IDEA framework stresses that the process of assessment is an effective means to communicate a particular story about democracy that has been forged through national consensus. The story itself ought to be communicated to as diverse and broad an audience as possible and it ought to lead to the formulation of *concrete proposals for democratic reform* that draw on the findings of the assessment in ways that are based on local ownership of the reform agenda. It is clear from the experiences of applying the assessment framework that assessment teams have moved beyond the set of search questions and have used the framework as a useful tool for critical reflection within the country that is being assessed. A domestic team of assessors and stakeholders based in the country of the assessment provides the empirical basis for answering the questions while reflecting on the democratic achievements and deficits for the period being assessed, *as well as identifying the obstacles for democratic reform that may exist*. In this way, the assessment is crucial for celebrating democratic achievements while revealing critical gaps in the lived democratic experience of the country and obstacles in need of attention through proposals for reform to move the democratic agenda forward.

The main gaps between early constitutional and institutional achievements, on the one hand, and longer-term problems that erode the democratic quality of life, on the other hand, are consonant with popular commentaries on and critical analyses of democratic underachievement beyond the countries that have undergone the kind of assessments carried out using the International IDEA framework. Such commentaries are critical about two key things: (a) an overemphasis on elections (known as the 'electoral fallacy') at the cost of examining

other key dimensions of democracy; and (b) the false logic of democratic 'sequencing'.[7] While elections are important and feature prominently in the assessment framework, the many other dimensions of the framework show that elections are but one facet of the democratic experience, where questions of rights, inclusion, the media, political parties and parliaments, among other things, must sit alongside the holding of regular elections. Democratic sequencing sees the development of democracy as a set of necessary steps in which the state and the rule of law are stabilized *before* democracy is introduced fully. A recent critique of this sequential approach cautions against this and argues that democracies and the democrats who inhabit them are best placed to bring about democratic reform, that their efforts to do so often *precede* rather than *follow* any interventions from the international community and that even in those instances where this is not the case the power of outside intervention in democracy promotion is overrated.

This view is largely compatible with the types of lessons that have been learned by applying the assessment framework across such a diverse set of countries, which – unlike the various debates on democratic sequencing – has included established democracies as well as new and restored democracies. The new democrats of Mongolia forged a competitive electoral system in which real alternation of power has taken place, and where all major stakeholders have become engaged in state reform and strengthening the rule of law. In the Netherlands, popular rejection of the EU constitution and two prominent political assassinations initiated an assessment that revealed the need to revisit issues of Dutch citizenship and the complexity of government itself in representing the needs and democratic aspirations of the population. In South Asia, the State of Democracy project sought to locate democracy in the context of that region of the world in order to discover what South Asians think about democracy and how they have adapted its very idea. The project showed that across the region democratic 'preconditions' are not necessary for the installation of democracy and that democracy has not yet been able to address questions of poverty.

These different examples suggest that the framework, in addition to being equally applicable to such a diverse range of country contexts, is equally useful in generating concrete proposals for democratic reform, the success of which relies heavily on the agents of the assessment and their ability to provide the broad conditions of ownership for key stakeholders that have the capacity and opportunity to drive the reform process. In terms of the assessment framework and within International IDEA's general orientation towards democracy as an ongoing and an evolving process, it is entirely to be expected that de-

mocracy is not an 'all or nothing affair', so that certain features may be better developed than others, and that the assessment of the quality of democracy necessarily requires a multidimensional approach that can provide a more nuanced and context-specific 'performance profile'. Moreover, the assessment framework lends itself well to the identification of possible explanations for the gaps between achievements and remaining challenges, which in turn can lead to the formulation of a democratic reform agenda.

The potential for initiating, implementing and sustaining significant democratic reforms, however, must be seen as a function of four larger factors that need to be taken into consideration. These factors are:

- the context under which the assessment was carried out;
- the types of influence that the assessment made possible;
- the audience to which the assessment was directed; and
- the type of outputs produced.

These factors can act alone or in combination to affect the type of democratic reform possible, both in the short term and in the longer term.

Across the experiences, the *context* of the assessment varied greatly across the main *agent of the assessment* (government, civil society or an academic institution), the relative *openness of the political process to reform*, and the relative *voice the assessment had* in the public domain and popular political discourse. Assessments can have direct influence on policy makers and other political elites, as in the cases of the Netherlands, Mongolia and Latvia, and to a lesser extent in Ireland and the UK. Assessments can also strengthen constituencies, non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations that can mobilize and add pressure for democratic reform. It is also possible for assessments to have longer-term cultural impact through raising awareness and being mainstreamed through educational curricula at secondary school level, as well as within the university system. Finally, different audiences for an assessment include national stakeholders within government and in political, civil and economic society, as well as audiences outside the country, including other countries wishing to carry out their own assessments and the international donor community.

These different dimensions of the assessment process (agent, context, openness of the political process, audiences, outputs and impact) create different opportunities and areas for democratic reform, which include:

- institutional reforms;
- resource-based reforms; and
- long-term cultural shifts.

Institutional reforms are based on enhancing accountability mechanisms in ways that prohibit the centralization of power or prevent power and decision making being exercised without real oversight. Across different institutional arrangements (e.g. unitary and federal systems, presidential and parliamentary systems, and proportional and majoritarian systems), the assessment experiences have shown that it is important that institutional mechanisms are in place for maintaining independent forms of representation and accountability. Institutional oversight requires real power backed with constitutional or statutory authority to oversee and control actions of government that can have a deleterious impact on human rights, including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Popular institutional solutions include the establishment of national human rights institutions, electoral commissions, anti-corruption bodies and ombudsman offices, as well as more traditional legislative and judicial powers of oversight that have evolved over long periods of time in the more established democracies. For transitional societies there is an additional demand for institutional solutions that confront authoritarian legacies (at a formal and legal level and at a cultural and practical level), the so-called military 'reserve domains' of power (e.g. in Bangladesh and Pakistan), and the use of emergency powers within national constitutions. Moreover, there ought to be institutional solutions to enhance participation and the inclusion of all groups, including minority groups and women.

The need for *resource-based reforms* stems from the fact that the framework is based on the idea that political and legal equality must be complemented by the means for realising social equality. The persistence of social and economic inequality constrains the ability of large numbers of people to take part in the public affairs of the country. Concentration on the fulfilment of economic and social rights is often criticized for placing a heavy burden on the fiscal capacity of governments, but programmes that enhance the protection of civil and political rights also entail such a burden. All rights depend to some degree on tax revenues and government spending. Thus, the improvement of the quality of democracy involves enhancing the fiscal capacity of states, while more democratic procedures and institutions can contribute to a better allocation of national revenue in ways that raise living standards and overall well-being.

Finally, there is a longer-term need for the kind of reforms that promote and develop a broader *political culture that is supportive of democracy*. The Bosnian and Latvian assessment experiences showed that new and restored democracies face harder challenges in this regard. Bangladesh has experienced ongoing military interventions in the political sphere which the general public in general has backed, which suggests a weak attachment to democracy and democratic principles. Indeed, the South Asian assessment found that 'an affirmation of democracy does not lead to the negation of authoritarian alternatives, so support for democracy is thin'. The Netherlands has sought to formulate an interconnected package of measures to guarantee, reinforce and – where necessary – renew democracy, together with the results of the Citizens' Forum (Burgerforum) and the National Convention (Nationale Conventie), among other initiatives. In Australia, assessment outputs form part of the curricula for university students, where 'students cut their teeth on *our* assessments of Australian political practices when learning about Australian politics…'.

Such institutional, resource-based and cultural reforms demand varying degrees of attention, time, and a wide range of different actors in order to build a broader, deeper and better democratic future. The assessment framework makes it clear that democracy assessment must be comprehensive, inclusive and forward-looking in ways that draw on the democratic achievements, are grounded in the many different contexts in which democracy flourishes, and require the support of all citizens within the country that is to be assessed. Democracy assessment engages all levels of society as well as key international actors in an effort to build and strengthen democratic institutions, democratic society and democratic culture in ways that reflect the needs of the population governed within the democracy itself.

Summary

This Overview has provided a short outline of the purpose, conceptual underpinning, methodology and main features of the International IDEA framework for democracy assessment. It has also provided a brief reflection on the experiences of applying the framework across a diverse set of country contexts. The framework makes a clear link between fundamental principles of democracy, mediating values, and specific questions that probe the overall quality of democracy and identify key areas for democratic reform. The method is grounded in the use of country-based assessment teams and the promotion of broad forms of participation in ways that develop ownership over

the assessment process and the larger democratic reform agenda. The fuller Guide lays out in much greater detail the framework; the sources of data, standards and good practice; the process of carrying out an assessment; the experiences of teams that have carried out the assessments in several countries; and how the lessons of an assessment can be used to pursue long-term democratic reform.

Notes

1 In *The History of Government* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Samuel Finer compares all forms of government from antiquity to the present and shows that his notion of the 'forum-polity' is the rarest and most recent of all forms of government.

2 See, for example, Diamond, Larry, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Przeworski, A., Alvarez, M. E., Cheibub, J. A. and Limongi, F., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Boix, C., *Democracy and Redistribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Doorenspleet, R., *Democratic Transitions: Exploring the Structural Sources of the Fourth Wave* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner, 2005).

3 See, for example, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) 2006 White Paper *Eliminating Poverty: Making Governance Work for the Poor*, Cm 6876 (London: The Stationery Office, 2006).

4 International IDEA, *Ten Years of Supporting Democracy Worldwide* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2005), p. 12.

5 Annex A to *Assessing the Quality of Democracy: Practical Guide* reviews the other main ways of measuring democracy.

6 These pitfalls include: (a) *conceptual problems* of oversimplification and a narrow focus on the institutional dimensions of democracy; (b) *methodological problems* of lack of transparency in coding, selective use of material, country-level aggregation, and the validity and reliability of measures; and (c) the *political problems* of giving primacy to outside judgement, the lack of local ownership in the measurement process and the tendency to engage in comparative ranking.

7 Two issues of the *Journal of Democracy* cover the many sides of this debate about democratic sequencing (see volume 18, issues 1 and 3, 2007).

Appendix: The search questions

1.	**Citizenship, law and rights**
1.1.	**Nationhood and citizenship** ***Overarching question: Is there public agreement on a common citizenship without discrimination?***
1.1.1.	How inclusive is the political nation and state citizenship of all who live within the territory?
1.1.2.	How far are cultural differences acknowledged, and how well are minorities and vulnerable social groups protected?
1.1.3.	How much consensus is there on state boundaries and constitutional arrangements?
1.1.4.	How far do constitutional and political arrangements enable major societal divisions to be moderated or reconciled?
1.1.5.	How impartial and inclusive are the procedures for amending the constitution?
1.1.6.	How far does the government respect its international obligations in its treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, and how free from arbitrary discrimination is its immigration policy?
1.2.	**Rule of law and access to justice** ***Overarching question: Are state and society consistently subject to the law?***
1.2.1.	How far is the rule of law operative throughout the territory?
1.2.2.	To what extent are all public officials subject to the rule of law and to transparent rules in the performance of their functions?
1.2.3.	How independent are the courts and the judiciary from the executive, and how free are they from all kinds of interference?
1.2.4.	How equal and secure is the access of citizens to justice, to due process and to redress in the event of maladministration?
1.2.5.	How far do the criminal justice and penal systems observe due rules of impartial and equitable treatment in their operations?

1.2.6. How much confidence do people have in the legal system to deliver fair and effective justice?

1.3. Civil and political rights
Overarching question: Are civil and political rights equally guaranteed for all?

1.3.1. How free are all people from physical violation of their person, and from fear of it?
1.3.2. How effective and equal is the protection of the freedoms of movement, expression, association and assembly?
1.3.3. How secure is the freedom for all to practise their own religion, language or culture?
1.3.4. How free from harassment and intimidation are individuals and groups working to improve human rights?

1.4. Economic and social rights
Overarching question: Are economic and social rights equally guaranteed for all?

1.4.1. How far is access to work or social security available to all, without discrimination?
1.4.2. How effectively are the basic necessities of life guaranteed, including adequate food, shelter and clean water?
1.4.3. To what extent is the health of the population protected, in all spheres and stages of life?
1.4.4. How extensive and inclusive is the right to education, including education in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship?
1.4.5. How free are trade unions and other work-related associations to organize and represent their members' interests?
1.4.6. How rigorous and transparent are the rules on corporate governance, and how effectively are corporations regulated in the public interest?

2. Representative and accountable government

2.1. Free and fair elections
Overarching question: Do elections give the people control over governments and their policies?

2.1.1. How far is appointment to governmental and legislative office determined by popular competitive election, and how frequently do elections lead to change in the governing parties or personnel?

2.1.2. How inclusive and accessible for all citizens are the registration and voting procedures, how independent are they of government and party control, and how free from intimidation and abuse?

2.1.3. How fair are the procedures for the registration of candidates and parties, and how far is there fair access for them to the media and other means of communication with the voters?

2.1.4. How effective a range of choice does the electoral and party system allow the voters, how equally do their votes count, and how closely do the composition of the legislature and the selection of the executive reflect the choices they make?

2.1.5. How far does the legislature reflect the social composition of the electorate?

2.1.6. What proportion of the electorate votes, and how far are the election results accepted by all political forces in the country and outside?

2.2. The democratic role of political parties
Overarching question: Does the party system assist the working of democracy?

2.2.1. How freely are parties able to form and recruit members, engage with the public and campaign for office?

2.2.2. How effective is the party system in forming and sustaining governments in office?

2.2.3. How far are parties effective membership organizations, and how far are members able to influence party policy and candidate selection?

2.2.4. How far does the system of party financing prevent the subordination of parties to special interests?

2.2.5. To what extent do parties cross ethnic, religious and linguistic divisions?

2.3. Effective and responsive government
Overarching question: Is government effective in serving the public and responsive to its concerns?

2.3.1. How far is the elected government able to influence or control those matters that are important to the lives of its people, and how well is it informed, organized and resourced to do so?

2.3.2. How effective and open to scrutiny is the control exercised by elected leaders and their ministers over their administrative staff and other executive agencies?

2.3.3. How open and systematic are the procedures for public consultation on government policy and legislation, and how equal is the access for relevant interests to government?

2.3.4. How accessible and reliable are public services for those who need them, and how systematic is consultation with users over service delivery?

2.3.5. How comprehensive and effective is the right of access for citizens to government information under the constitution or other laws?

2.3.6. How much confidence do people have in the ability of government to solve the main problems confronting society, and in their own ability to influence it?

2.4. The democratic effectiveness of parliament

Overarching question: Does the parliament or legislature contribute effectively to the democratic process?

2.4.1. How independent is the parliament or legislature of the executive, and how freely are its members able to express their opinions?

2.4.2. How extensive and effective are the powers of the parliament or legislature to initiate, scrutinize and amend legislation?

2.4.3. How extensive and effective are the powers of the parliament or legislature to oversee the executive and hold it to account?

2.4.4. How rigorous are the procedures for approval and supervision of taxation and public expenditure?

2.4.5. How freely are all parties and groups able to organize within the parliament or legislature and contribute to its work?

2.4.6. How extensive are the procedures of the parliament or legislature for consulting the public and relevant interests across the range of its work?

2.4.7. How accessible are elected representatives to their constituents?

2.4.8. How well does the parliament or legislature provide a forum for deliberation and debate on issues of public concern?

2.5. Civilian control of the military and police

Overarching question: Are the military and police forces under civilian control?

2.5.1. How effective is civilian control over the armed forces, and how free is political life from military involvement?

2.5.2. How publicly accountable are the police and security services for their activities?

2.5.3. How far does the composition of the army, police and security services reflect the social composition of society at large?

2.5.4. How free is the country from the operation of paramilitary units, private armies, warlordism and criminal mafias?

2.6. Integrity in public life

Overarching question: Is the integrity of conduct in public life assured?

2.6.1. How effective is the separation of public office from the personal business and family interests of office holders?

2.6.2. How effective are the arrangements for protecting office holders and the public from involvement in bribery?

2.6.3. How far do the rules and procedures for financing elections, candidates and elected representatives prevent their subordination to sectional interests?

2.6.4. How far is the influence of powerful corporations and business interests over public policy kept in check, and how free are they from involvement in corruption, including overseas?

2.6.5. How much confidence do people have that public officials and public services are free from corruption?

3. Civil society and popular participation

3.1. The media in a democratic society

Overarching question: Do the media operate in a way that sustains democratic values?

3.1.1. How independent are the media from government, how pluralistic is their ownership, and how free are they from subordination to foreign governments or multinational companies?

3.1.2. How representative are the media of different opinions and how accessible are they to different sections of society?

3.1.3. How effective are the media and other independent bodies in investigating government and powerful corporations?

3.1.4. How free are journalists from restrictive laws, harassment and intimidation?

3.1.5. How free are private citizens from intrusion and harassment by the media?

3.2. Political participation

Overarching question: Is there full citizen participation in public life?

3.2.1. How extensive is the range of voluntary associations, citizen groups, social movements etc., and how independent are they from government?

3.2.2. How extensive is citizen participation in voluntary associations and self-management organizations, and in other voluntary public activity?

3.2.3. How far do women participate in political life and public office at all levels?

3.2.4. How equal is access for all social groups to public office, and how fairly are they represented within it?

3.3. Decentralization
Overarching question: Are decisions taken at the level of government that is most appropriate for the people affected?

3.3.1. How independent are the sub-central tiers of government from the centre, and how far do they have the powers and resources to carry out their responsibilities?
3.3.2. How far are these levels of government subject to free and fair electoral authorization, and to the criteria of openness, accountability and responsiveness in their operation?
3.3.3. How extensive is the cooperation of government at the most local level with relevant partners, associations and communities in the formation and implementation of policy, and in service provision?

4. Democracy beyond the state

4.1. External influences on the country's democracy
Overarching question: Is the impact of external influences broadly supportive of the country's democracy?

4.1.1. How free is the country from external influences which undermine or compromise its democratic process or national interests?
4.1.2. How equitable is the degree of influence exercised by the government within the bilateral, regional and international organizations to whose decisions it may be subject?
4.1.3. How far are the government's negotiating positions and subsequent commitments within these organizations subject to effective legislative oversight and public debate?

4.2. The country's democratic impact abroad
Overarching question: Do the country's international policies contribute to strengthening global democracy?

4.2.1. How consistent is the government in its support for, and protection of, human rights and democracy abroad?
4.2.2. How far does the government support the UN and agencies of international cooperation, and respect the rule of law internationally?
4.2.3. How extensive and consistent is the government's contribution to international development?
4.2.4. How far is the government's international policy subject to effective parliamentary oversight and public influence?

Annex: About International IDEA

What is International IDEA?

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide. Its objective is to strengthen democratic institutions and processes. International IDEA acts as a catalyst for democracy building by providing knowledge resources, expertise and a platform for debate on democracy issues. It works together with policy makers, donor governments, UN organizations and agencies, regional organizations and others engaged on the field of democracy building.

What does International IDEA do?

Democracy building is complex and touches on many areas including constitutions, electoral systems, political parties, legislative arrangements, the judiciary, central and local government, formal and traditional government structures. International IDEA is engaged with all of these issues and offers to those in the process of democratization:

- knowledge resources, in the form of handbooks, databases, websites and expert networks;
- policy proposals to provoke debate and action on democracy issues; and
- assistance to democratic reforms in response to specific national requests.

Areas of work

International IDEA's notable areas of expertise are:

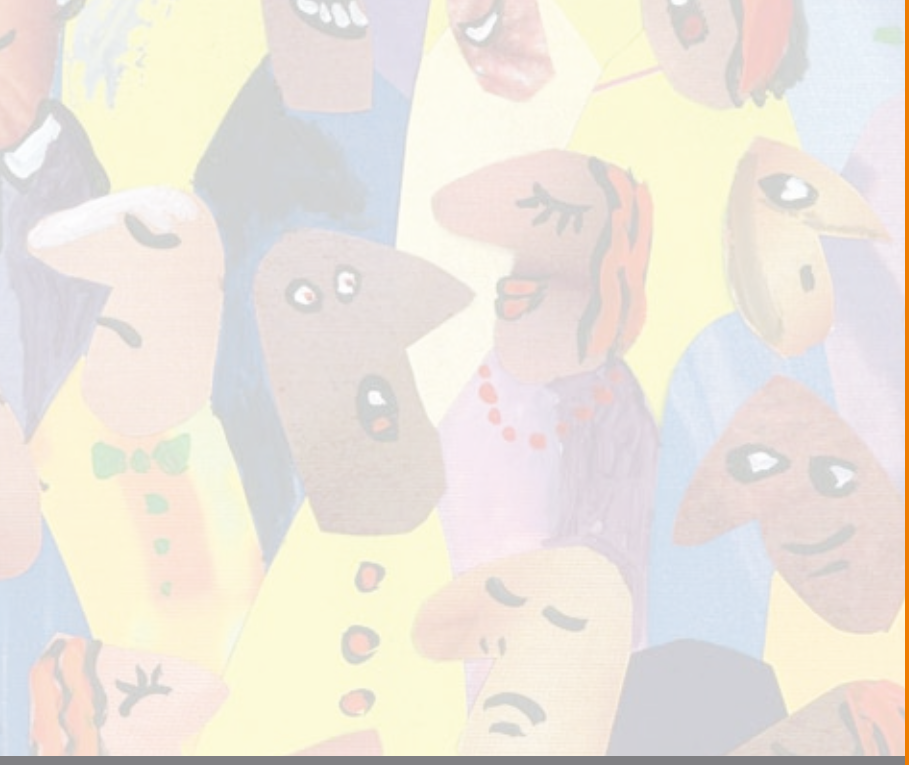
- *Constitution-building processes.* A constitutional process can lay the foundations for peace and development, or plant seeds of conflict. International IDEA is able to provide knowledge and make poli-

cy proposals for constitution building that is genuinely nationally owned, is sensitive to gender and conflict-prevention dimensions, and responds effectively to national priorities.

- *Electoral processes.* The design and management of elections has a strong impact on the wider political system. International IDEA seeks to ensure the professional management and independence of elections, adapt electoral systems, and build public confidence in the electoral process.
- *Political parties.* Political parties form the essential link between voters and the government, yet polls taken across the world show that political parties enjoy a low level of confidence. International IDEA analyses the functioning of political parties, the public funding of political parties, their management and relations with the public.
- *Democracy and gender.* International IDEA recognizes that if democracies are to be truly democratic, then women—who make up over half of the world's population—must be represented on equal terms with men. International IDEA develops comparative resources and tools designed to advance the participation and representation of women in political life.
- *Democracy assessments.* Democratization is a national process. International IDEA's State of Democracy methodology allows people to assess their own democracy instead of relying on externally produced indicators or rankings of democracies.

Where does International IDEA work?

International IDEA works worldwide. It is based in Stockholm, Sweden, and has offices in Latin America, Africa and Asia.



Assessing the Quality of Democracy: an Overview of the International IDEA Framework introduces International IDEA's State of Democracy (SoD) assessment framework, developed for use by local actors in assessing the quality of their democracies and mounting reform agendas.

The *Overview* highlights the elements that constitute the assessment framework: the *democratic principles* upon which it is based, the *mediating values,* the *structure* and *the range of search questions.* Examples of application of the framework in various parts of the world, critical steps for conducting SoD assessments, and examples of concrete proposals for democratic reform emerging from assessments are highlighted.

The Overview, together with *Assessing the Quality of Democracy: the Practical Guide*, forms a comprehensive package of knowledge resources for the implementation of the SoD framework.

INTERNATIONAL IDEA
SE -103 34 Stockholm
Sweden
Phone: +46 8 698 37 00
Fax: +46 8 20 24 22
E-mail: info@idea.int
Website: http://www.idea.int

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