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## Localizing Democracy Promotion

### Seven Steps to Transforming U.S. Democracy Assistance

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## Executive Summary

Why do U.S. efforts to promote democracy so often fail? And can the U.S. do better?

This policy brief argues that U.S. strategies to promote democracy have been largely unsuccessful because they misinterpret local understandings of what democracy means, and they overlook local organizations that are cultivating democracy at grassroots levels.

People around the world are fighting for the *values* of democracy—political freedom, social justice, and equality of economic opportunity. But they want to imagine and build the institutions of democracy on their own terms. Attempts to recreate democracy in the West’s own image misinterpret the opportunity that promoters of democracy face. U.S. policymakers should rethink their tradition of promoting democracy largely by funding international NGOs and a small group of local human rights NGOs to carry out technical projects related to electoral, legislative, and judicial reform.

President Biden has made promotion of democracy a key pillar of his foreign policy agenda. This commitment to democracy comes at a critical moment, as citizen-led social movements such as the Arab Spring, Hong Kong’s Umbrella movement, and Black Lives Matter in the U.S. showcase a global demand for democracy amid democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence. The Biden Administration should focus its energy on encouraging and facilitating local democracy-building efforts. These efforts should note that key characteristics of traditional democracy-assistance—its focus on procedural democracy, its delivery through technical projects, and its separation from other forms of foreign aid—all contribute to its poor track record in actually bringing about democracy.

Toward that end, this policy brief lays out a new path forward for U.S. efforts to assist democracy. With the aim of shifting the power to build democracies to local citizens, the brief suggests seven reforms to U.S. strategies. These include:

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### 1. Facilitate discussion, debate, and collective problem-solving among local citizens.

Efforts to assist democracy typically focus on constructing more democratic political institutions—especially elections, legislatures, courts, and the media. While such institutions matter, the U.S. should consider placing a larger emphasis on building cultures of democracy at grassroots levels. To do so, democracy promoters should help create environments and venues for discussion, debate, and collective problem-solving among local citizens. Such spaces can serve as public spheres in which citizens develop and practice habits of democratic citizenship. They can also provide opportunities for citizens to design their own countries’ democratic institutions.

### 2. Streamline program areas around themes instead of functions.

U.S. aid agencies should consider de-siloing aid programs. Recognizing the interconnectivity of political, economic, and social issues, as well as the cross-sectoral collaboration and local leadership necessary to bring about change, aid agencies can consider streamlining foreign aid program areas. Aid organizations can break down funding silos—and even phase out “democracy” and “good governance” program areas—without abandoning their commitments to supporting democratic political reform. Program areas could be redesigned around broad social change themes rather than around discrete political, economic,

and social development fields. They could also be structured to ensure that local citizens, rather than foreign aid providers, are the primary decision-makers in all aspects of program design and implementation.

### **3. Seek out new local partners.**

Currently, most democracy-assistance flows to international NGOs and local human rights NGOs whose agendas align with funders' goals of reforming institutions and bringing about procedural democracy. Yet many local NGOs labeled as charity and development organizations are in fact incubating democratic cultures and nurturing democratic citizens. Their work on economic and social rights, collective action, and free expression makes them important contributors to democracy-building processes. These organizations' connections to local citizens across a range of geographies make them key partners in promoting democracy. The U.S. should also look beyond formal NGOs and identify other types of groups working for change. These might include voluntary grassroots organizations, social enterprises, faith-based organizations, and community philanthropy groups.

### **4. Focus assistance packages on co-creation, technical assistance, and small grants.**

Foreign aid—whether for democracy, development, or humanitarian relief—is delivered primarily through financial mechanisms. Large contractors, international NGOs, and a select group of local elite NGOs are awarded contracts to carry out projects designed by aid agencies. Most grants and contracts are too large for local organizations to absorb. Moreover, they typically fund discrete, short-term projects rather than the long-term mobilization work involved in building democracies. Rather than focusing on monetary assistance, aid agencies should prioritize learning from local organizations and facilitating local organizations' leadership of democratization efforts. The aim should be to center the voices of local citizens—especially traditionally marginalized citizens—in democracy-building efforts.



### **5. Simplify and localize application, evaluation, and reporting requirements.**

The U.S. will also need to revise democracy-assistance application, evaluation, and reporting requirements to make them accessible to local groups. Currently, such forms are complex and bureaucratic. Application forms ask organizations to lay out strategic plans, budgets, theories of change, timelines, and anticipated results, while evaluation reports ask organizations to provide detailed reports on the results of their projects. Often, though, long-term *processes* appear more important than short-term *outputs*. By revising application and reporting requirements, the U.S. can incorporate more locally rooted organizations into its efforts to promote democracy and cross-organization collaboration over long time horizons.

### **6. Expand the local presence of aid agency staff in target countries.**

Aid agencies should develop a stronger presence on the ground in target countries in order to identify local social change groups and funding intermediaries; determine local priorities and democratic aspirations; and build trust with local citizens. To accomplish this, agencies may need to hire more staff and create new positions. Additionally, foreign service officers (FSOs) could be granted longer stays in their posts to develop more local cultural awareness and expertise, while foreign service nationals (FSNs) could be given more input into developing strategic priorities. Perhaps most importantly, a democracy-assistance strategy that supports local leadership and local actions needs a staffing base that prioritizes learning and facilitation

over implementation. The mental, emotional, and even physical energy required for staff to adopt this approach will need to be modeled, incentivized, and rewarded by aid organizations' senior leadership.

## 7. Increase aid agencies' tolerance for risk.

Agency staff, Congress, and the American people must take on a much greater tolerance for risk to transfer power over democracy-building to local organizations.

Locally led democratization strategies may result in governance institutions unfamiliar to American observers. They may result in groups considered to be undemocratic coming to power. They may incite popular uprisings that threaten to disrupt regional power balances. Or, they may simply fail to deliver immediate observable results. All these scenarios pose major risks—risks that aid providers currently avoid taking. To overcome risk aversion, aid agencies will need to launch campaigns to educate Congress, the White House, and American citizens about the distortions caused by current top-down democratization strategies and showcase the potential value of localized approaches.

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## Introduction

In December 2021, President Biden hosted a virtual Summit for Democracy. The summit convened leaders of governments, civil societies, and private sectors from around the world to discuss the opportunities and challenges confronting democracy and announce commitments and reforms designed to bolster democracy and defend human rights globally.

The summit came at a crucial time. In the past decade, social movements showcased a global demand for democracy as the Arab Spring protests toppled dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen; the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong demanded free and fair elections; and the Black Lives Matter movement in the

United States galvanized support for racial justice.<sup>1</sup> Yet the decade was also marked by resurgent authoritarianism. After brief experiments with democracy, the Arab world remains mostly under autocratic rule and mired

in devastating civil wars. China has asserted its power, cracking down on human rights at home, overseeing the repression of activism in Hong Kong, and

exporting an authoritarian ideology through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Governments throughout the Global South used laws and informal harassment to restrict the space for civil society. And in the U.S., yawning political polarization and inflammatory rhetoric by former President Donald Trump ended in the January 6, 2021 insurrection on the U.S. Capitol Building.

The Summit for Democracy took the important step of acknowledging global democratic backsliding. But in announcing a “Year of Action” to follow the summit, the Biden Administration offered no novel solutions or innovative paths forward. Instead, the administration promised to announce commitments designed to defend free and fair elections, fight corruption,

support independent media, advance rights for women and marginalized groups, and strengthen civic capacity. Such promises are not new. Pledges to reform elections, media, and civil society have long formed the bedrock of U.S. efforts to promote democracy. Those efforts have largely failed in the past and there is no reason to believe that they will be any more successful today.

Moreover, attempts to recreate democracy in America's image misinterpret the opportunity that democracy-promoters face. Citizens who are taking to the streets, along with those enacting democratic principles in less conspicuous ways, are not demanding a democracy that mimics America's. People around the world are fighting for the *values* of democracy—political freedom, social justice, equality of economic opportunity. But they want to imagine and build the institutions of democracy

on their own terms. Encouraging and facilitating local democracy-building efforts is where the Biden Administration should focus its energy.

Toward that end, this policy brief lays out seven proposals to give local citizens, rather than funders, the power to build democracies. These proposals include:

1. Facilitate discussion, debate, and collective problem-solving among local citizens.
2. Streamline program areas around themes instead of functions.
3. Seek out new local partners.
4. Focus assistance packages on co-creation, technical assistance, and small grants.
5. Simplify and localize application and reporting requirements.
6. Expand the local presence of aid agency staff in target countries.
7. Increase aid agencies' tolerance for risk.

### **Backstory: The U.S. Democracy Promotion Playbook**

U.S. efforts to promote democracy took hold in the 1980s and became a key pillar of foreign assistance in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. As its name suggests, democracy-assistance has the expressly political intent of promoting democracy. In the case of autocratic states, democracy-assistance aims to coax the country toward political liberalization and, ultimately, a democratic transition. In new and emerging democracies, assisting democracy focuses on consolidating democratic governance by strengthening national political institutions such as legislatures, judiciaries, elections, and the media.

Democracy-assistance is administered by a variety of agencies, both public and private. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department of State are the two most prominent federal

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government agencies assisting democracy. In 2020, those two agencies committed nearly \$3.2 billion to building democracy abroad. In 2012, the year after the Arab Spring protests emerged, that number reached \$4.4 billion. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is the most well-known private funder of democracy promotion, although it has tight connections to Washington. NED, which makes grants to NGOs in South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, receives the bulk of its funding from Congress and is subject to congressional oversight as well as monitoring by USAID and the Department of State.

Democracy-assistance flows largely to international NGOs working in target countries. Two quasi-governmental organizations, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute, receive large shares, as does the private nonprofit organization Freedom House. Other international NGOs join these big three in promoting democracy from branch offices throughout the world. At the local level, advocacy and human rights organizations in target countries are important players in the democracy-promotion arena and receive the bulk of democracy grants that flow to local groups.

While each organization in the democracy-assistance field operates by its own specific goals, strategies, and tactics, most hew closely to a set of overarching principles and practices that constitute a democracy-promotion playbook.

First, these efforts try to spread a procedural form of democracy resembling that of the U.S. and other Western democracies. It targets political institutions—both the structure of government agencies and the rules that shape governance activities. Elections are prioritized, with the establishment of free and fair elections serving as a benchmark indicator of democratic progress. Representative legislatures, independent judiciaries, and autonomous civil society organizations and media round out the other major institutions that democracy-assistance seeks to construct. Funds for building democracy also support projects related to citizen engagement, but even these contain a procedural

bent as such engagement is often thought to increase pressure for institutional reforms.



Second, democracy-assistance provides funds for technical projects carried out by trained professionals. Grants typically flow to international NGOs and local advocacy and human rights NGOs that employ university graduates. These employees typically are fluent in the vernacular of democracy, are committed to the principles of liberal democracy, and can speak to both local intellectual elites and members of the international community. Employees are also skilled in navigating the democracy-assistance bureaucracy. They understand complicated application procedures and reporting requirements and know how to frame projects in ways that will win grants.

Typical projects funded by democracy-assistance include: producing research and reports on policy issues; hosting trainings and workshops for citizen activists and political leaders; monitoring elections; and consulting in efforts to reform legislative and judicial bodies. These projects produce short-term, measurable outcomes that grant recipients report to funders, who in turn channel the results to congressional members and staffers to show signs of progress.

Third, democracy-assistance constitutes a discrete strand of foreign aid, separate from aid for social and economic development and humanitarian assistance. Within the U.S. Agency for International Development, for example, democracy-assistance is overseen by the Center for Democracy, Human Rights,

and Governance. Grants are dedicated to programs centering, for example, on electoral processes, civil society innovation, human rights defense, transparent budgeting, rule of law, and independent internet and media. Projects in fields such as education, health care, arts and culture, and infrastructure fall under aid budgets allocated for socioeconomic development. Grants that support responses to natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies flow from budgets allocated to humanitarian assistance.

## Democracy Promotion's Poor Track Record

The three main characteristics of democracy-assistance—its focus on procedural democracy, its delivery through technical projects, and its separation from other forms of foreign aid—all contribute to its poor track record in bringing about democracy.

U.S. attempts to export liberal democracy in America's own image often raise a mix of hostility, skepticism, and ambivalence in target countries. U.S. efforts to impose its own ideas of what democracy looks like tend to stoke pride and defensiveness among people who want to decide for themselves how their country's institutions should be designed. These conditions hamper fruitful

dialogue between democracy brokers and local citizens.

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Moreover, U.S. standing to promote procedural democracy has been diminished since the presidency of Donald Trump. If America's political institutions allowed for the election of a president who displays autocratic

tendencies and spreads lies about the outcome of the election that ended his tenure, the thinking goes, why should the rest of the world believe that such institutions are superior? The January 6, 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters who claimed he was the rightful victor of the 2020 presidential elections further called into question the strength of America's government structures.

The export of American political institutions not only disrespects the preferences and decision-making power of local citizens, it also ignores the evolving threats that

governments face. Migration, climate change, global health crises, rising wealth inequality, and global great power competition are only some of the most high-profile challenges that political institutions will need to be designed to address. The adaptability of centuries-old political institutions to these contemporary problems cannot be taken for granted. Political institutions must be resilient in the face of such global problems and reflect domestic bargains, struggles, and opportunities.

The technical nature of assisting democracy also detracts from its effectiveness. The international NGOs and human rights organizations that receive most democracy

aid are typically based in capital cities and operate out of well-equipped offices. This sequesters them from most citizens. The high education levels of democracy-promotion NGO staff, coupled with their fluency in the specialist language used in foreign aid circles, further distances democracy-assistance from everyday citizens. Thus, democracy-assistance circulates in an elite milieu of international organizations and highly trained professionals rather than spreading widely throughout the population.

Application and evaluation procedures tame and depoliticize programs to build democracies. They incentivize organizations to take on narrowly defined projects whose outcomes can be quantitatively measured and observed in short periods. As a result, organizations bankrolled by democracy aid focus on producing short-term, technical outputs (e.g., reports, workshops, legal defense, and trainings) rather than on long-term citizen organizing and real improvement.

These activities, while ostensibly targeting political reform, actually depoliticize reform processes. They conceptualize democracy-building as a top-down, technical process focused on the reform of government institutions, and fail to address more fundamental power dynamics. They leave grassroots, rural, and marginalized communities out of the conversation and largely overlook concerns about economic justice. They

do not encourage radical re-thinking about the future or incite revolutionary actions. And yet, since they are tagged as “democracy promotion,” they are easy targets for ruling autocrats to suppress.

Efforts to assist democracy also suffer from being disconnected from other strands of foreign aid. Because

it constitutes its own program area with dedicated program officers and budgets, democracy-assistance is effectively isolated from economic and social issues and concerns. Yet all three pillars must be addressed in concert for democracy-building efforts to succeed. Economic structures that allow for vast wealth

inequalities and that limit opportunities for a country’s poor, for example, open the door to bribes and vote-buying—both of which inhibit democratic process. The democratic idea that all citizens are endowed with equal rights may face resistance in societies where women, minorities, and underrepresented communities do not share the same rights as men and majority populations. And the process of claiming basic economic and social rights from the government is a fundamentally democratic act. The separation of democracy-assistance from other forms of development aid disrespects this marriage of economic, political, and social concerns.

Maintaining a separate program area for democracy and good governance outside other areas of development also jeopardizes the legitimacy and security of NGO grantees. Organizations operating in autocratic contexts cannot afford to win grants and conduct programs that will get them into trouble with the government, and “democracy promotion” grants often do just that. The tag of “democracy” also opens organizations to being accused by the public of implementing foreign agendas. This presents a dilemma: many organizations need foreign funds in order to survive, yet accepting certain types of funds—especially grants for building democracy—threatens their legitimacy on the ground and attracts government scrutiny.



## Reforming the Democracy Promotion Playbook

The time is ripe for significant revisions to U.S. policies and practices of democracy promotion.

First, there are opportunities. The Biden Administration's high-profile Summit for Democracy drummed up energy for a Year of Action leading to a second summit in 2023. At the same time, calls are growing for aid providers to decolonize their grantmaking and support innovative local solutions rather than imposing priorities and projects<sup>2</sup>. And social movements around the world show that citizens will risk their lives to claim their rights. The U.S. can leverage this energy to refashion democracy-assistance in ways that resonate locally.

Second, there are threats. China is using its Belt and Road Initiative to spread autocratic ideologies through infrastructure projects that—at least in theory—respond to people's economic concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic allowed autocrats to use emergency laws to tighten their control over society. COVID-19 also hurt many people economically, making them more susceptible to despotic rulers who address their bread-and-butter concerns. And governments have revised NGO laws that restrict funding for, and the activities of, organizations working in the fields of democracy and governance. A more localized approach to building democracy can counter these threats by responding to people's current needs in ways that circumvent the latest government crackdowns.

Here are seven recommendations for a more localized approach to assisting democracy.

### 1. Facilitate Discussion, Debate, and Collective Problem-Solving Among Local Citizens

First, the U.S. should shift its focus from exporting institutions of liberal democracy abroad to facilitating spaces for discussion, debate, and collective problem-

solving among local citizens. Such spaces can serve as public spheres in which citizens develop and practice habits of democratic citizenship. They can also provide opportunities for citizens to design their own countries' democratic institutions.

Discussion, debate, and collective problem-solving are all habits of democratic citizenship. Deliberations in the public realm in which participants discuss and debate current events and public affairs embody the essence of democracy as it was originally conceived. Public discussions not only allow participants to voice their opinions on public policies, they also encourage citizens to develop norms of tolerance, inclusion, and social solidarity that autocracies discourage. The very acts of disagreeing with a strongman ruler and debating alternatives as a collective group of diverse individuals both constitute acts of democracy and fundamentally challenge the culture of fragmentation, fear, and silence that upholds autocracy.

Public deliberations also constitute a substantive form of democracy when they encourage participants to be aware of current events and to hold government officials accountable. When the understanding of democracy is narrowly focused on contested elections, issues of actual governance and accountable representatives are unaddressed. Unless mechanisms are in place to hold politicians accountable to the public, they may very well end up creating policies and engaging in practices that benefit only themselves and the elites from whom they derive favors. Public discussion forums provide spaces beyond the ballot box for citizens to identify shared grievances and mobilize to claim their rights from government officials.

Public deliberation can also spur wider participation in civic life. In autocratic states, rulers encourage citizens to depend on the state so the autocrats can build loyalty, discourage opposition, and reduce citizen agency. When people come together to identify mutual challenges and develop and implement community-based solutions, they fundamentally challenge the governing

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regime's control over everyday life. Public deliberation and collective problem-solving reverse the political disengagement that arises when citizens acquiesce to an all-powerful state.

Finally, public deliberations create spaces in which citizens can decide for themselves what type of democracy works for their societies. The U.S. tends to use a common institutional template when it promotes democracy. But institutions should be built to reflect domestic bargains as well as global challenges. Today's democratic institutions may not be resilient in an era of changing climate, global migration, and inequality. To effectively address both domestic and international realities, societies must be able to design their own political institutions.

## **2. Streamline Aid Around Themes Instead of Functions**

Second, U.S. aid agencies should consider de-siloing aid programs. Transformative change happens not within specific fields and sectors but through efforts of interconnected groups and organizations that transcend political, economic, social, and sectoral boundaries. Artistic production, for example, not only enhances culture; it also creates economic opportunities and produces a space for the type of free expression that challenges the status quo and undergirds pluralism. Education leads to job opportunities, but it also provides the literacy and critical thinking skills necessary to serve as an engaged democratic citizen. Good health is a necessary precursor to civic and political engagement. Moreover, free expression, high quality education, and health care are all human rights; their protection undergirds and sustains a free and democratic society. By recognizing the interconnectivity of political, economic, and social issues, as well as the cross-sectoral collaboration and local leadership necessary to bring about change, aid agencies can consider streamlining foreign aid programs. Aid organizations can break down funding silos—and even phase out “democracy” and “good governance” program areas—without abandoning their commitments to supporting democratic political reform. Program areas could be redesigned around broad themes for social change rather than around discrete political, economic, and social development

fields. They could also be structured to ensure that local citizens, rather than foreign aid providers, are the primary decision-makers in all aspects of program design and implementation.

Thematic areas that might be timely and relevant include:

- **Local innovation.** Funding in this area would support initiatives developed through community-led collaborations. Priorities and solutions would be identified at the community level, and community members would be involved in all programmatic levels including planning, implementation, and evaluation. The overarching aim would be to support citizens' efforts to define and build their community's and country's future by providing the space to practice collective visioning and civic action. Local ownership of the agenda would be key to success.

- **Community-led development and human dignity.** Grants in this area would support all facets of human rights including education, health care, jobs, community infrastructure, and a clean environment. A focus on rights-based development would mean entrusting local citizens with deciding what constitutes “rights” and ensuring that citizens have the education and tools necessary to claim those rights.

- **Information and expression.** Grants in this area would support all forms of free expression and access to information. Grants to education programs, arts and culture production, and independent media would aim to support a culture of idea exchange and debate, self-expression, critical thinking, and tolerance of competing viewpoints.

## **3. Seek Out New Local Partners**

To adopt a more comprehensive, citizen-oriented approach to building democracy, aid agencies will need to look beyond the usual suspects as grantees and seek a wider range of views and insights from people across geographical, socioeconomic, religious, and cultural communities.

Currently, most democracy-assistance flows to

international NGOs and local human rights NGOs whose agendas align with funders' goals of reforming institutions and bringing about procedural democracy. Yet many local NGOs that are labeled as charity and development organizations are in fact incubating democratic cultures and nurturing democratic citizens. Their work on economic and social rights, collective action, and free expression makes them important contributors to democracy-building processes. These organizations' connections to local citizens across a range of geographies make them key partners in democracy promotion.



The U.S. should also look beyond formal NGOs and identify other types of groups working for change. Governments around the world are reforming NGO laws to tighten restrictions on organizations' activities, funding, and membership. As a result, social change activists are increasingly turning to other types of groups and networks through which to mobilize citizens for political, economic, and social reform. Some are forming voluntary grassroots organizations that operate outside of the formal NGO sector. These groups bring people together around shared interests such as sports, organic farming, arts and culture, and charity, with broader goals of long-term, citizen-led change. Social enterprises are also popular throughout the world, as they offer the promise of long-term financial sustainability without the constraints imposed by aid bureaucracies. Still other activists are rejecting formal groups altogether and organizing through informal initiatives and networks.

None of these forms of organizing may be eligible for, or even receptive to, foreign aid—especially the large aid contracts that aid agencies typically provide. Yet many of them could benefit from participating in co-creation activities and receiving technical support and small grants. Aid providers could offer such assistance through intermediary organizations such as community foundations, social enterprise incubators, and local crowdfunding platforms.

Community foundations, which are proliferating worldwide, offer particularly promising venues for intermediary grant making. These organizations raise funds from both local citizens and international funders and then rely on members of the local community to decide where grants should be allocated. By shifting the power over mobilizing resources and making decisions from international funders to local citizens, community foundations are well positioned to fund grassroots groups and initiatives and to cultivate democratic processes

of local decision-making and problem-solving. Social enterprise incubators and crowdfunding platforms similarly prioritize locally rooted ownership over political, economic, and social change by targeting support to local social entrepreneurs.

#### **4. Focus Assistance Packages on Co-Creation, Technical Assistance, and Small Grants**

To reach and respond to the needs of local organizations, U.S. aid agencies should consider ways to refocus their assistance packages on co-creation, technical assistance, and small grants rather than large grants and contracts.

Foreign aid—whether for democracy, development, or humanitarian relief—is delivered primarily through financial mechanisms. Large contractors, international NGOs, and a select group of local elite NGOs are awarded contracts to carry out projects designed by aid agencies. Most grants and contracts are too large for local organizations to absorb. Moreover, they typically fund discrete, short-term projects rather than the long-term mobilization work involved in democracy building.

Rather than focusing on monetary assistance, aid agencies should prioritize learning from local organizations and facilitating local organizations' leadership of democratization efforts. The aim should be to center the voices of local citizens—especially traditionally marginalized citizens—in democracy-building efforts.

Aid agencies can begin by convening co-creation activities in which groups learn from each other and collaborate to build momentum and develop programs aimed at democratic reform. Co-creation events serve several purposes. First, they help aid agencies to understand local groups' priorities, opportunities, and challenges. Second, co-creation gives local leaders the chance to share best practices, brainstorm new ideas, and develop collaborations. Third, co-creation can result in tangible democracy-building programs that aid agencies can support.

Technical assistance, particularly around local capacity development, should constitute a second realm of democracy-assistance packages. This support should aim to develop the capacity of local individuals, organizations, and networks to convene citizens in the types of cross-cutting programs outlined in Proposal 2. Technical assistance may help local actors better deliver programs, evaluate impacts, form collaborations, and adapt to local needs. Importantly, each technical assistance package should be designed to support the recipient organization's unique goals.

Of course, organizations do need funds to survive. But locally rooted organizations require far less than contractors and international NGOs. To support these groups, aid agencies will need to provide smaller grants for general operating support. Funding should provide organizations the sustainability and flexibility to carry out long-term work while remaining responsive to shifting priorities, power dynamics, and environmental realities. It will also need to flow to organizations throughout target countries. Because grassroots groups don't have the wide reach of international organizations, aid providers will need to issue more grants to cover cities, towns, and villages outside the capital.

## **5. Simplify and Localize Application and Reporting Requirements**

The U.S. will need to revise democracy-assistance application, evaluation, and reporting requirements to

make them accessible to local groups. Currently, such forms are complex and bureaucratic. Application forms ask organizations to lay out strategic plans, budgets, theories of change, timelines, and anticipated results. Throughout the life of the project, organizations must report back to the funder on progress made. At the termination of the grant, organizations must provide detailed reports on the projects' results. By revising application and reporting requirements, the U.S. can incorporate more locally rooted organizations into its efforts to promote democracy and expand cross-organization collaboration over long time horizons.

Aid agencies could begin by working with local NGO leaders to create application forms that are both accessible to grassroots organizations and useful for funders. One simple reform is to accept applications in the language of the target country. Aid groups could also look for creative ways for organizations to conceptualize and describe their proposed projects.

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And rather than expecting applicants to propose short-term, measurable outputs, aid agencies might consider asking them how the processes involved in projects are likely to contribute to building democracy over the long term.

Evaluations could also be retooled to encourage creative assessments of an organization's progress toward long-term goals. As with applications, evaluations should recognize that in many cases processes will be as important as direct outcomes. Public discussion, arts and culture production, free expression, and the claiming of rights, for example, are democratic acts in their own right, regardless of immediate outcomes.

tested international organizations that are skilled in designing projects that yield measurable outputs fairly quickly.

Aid providers also tend to think of democratization and development as processes that occur in stepwise fashion along causal chains and that produce indicators of progress along the way. These assumptions contribute

As part of the evaluation process, funders and grantees can benefit from acting as co-learners, engaging in honest conversations about what seems to work and what does not. If grantees are encouraged to be honest about the challenges they face, funders can more effectively work with them to try to overcome those obstacles. Strategies may need to change mid-course as the external environment changes. Funders should be as flexible and accommodating as possible to such changes. This co-learning and adaptability will require funders to be accessible to their grantee; yet another reason to strive for a wider and more locally rooted presence.

Aid agencies will need to understand that reform processes happen over the long term. Transformative change is unlikely to occur in one-, two-, or three-year grant cycles. Therefore, funders should seek to identify organizations doing good work and support them for the long haul with general operating support that allows organizations to fund all aspects of organizational operations.

## **6. Expand the Local Presence of Aid Agency Staff**

Aid agencies should develop a stronger ground presence in target countries in order to identify local social change groups and funding intermediaries; determine local priorities and democratic aspirations; and build trust with local citizens.

They probably will need to hire more staff to accomplish this. During the Trump Administration, both USAID and the Department of State lost staff. Missions and embassies in particular will need to fill their staff vacancies, and new positions may need to be created. Working with local partners means awarding more small grants, providing tailored technical support to local organizations, and spending time cultivating long-term relationships with local social change actors and organization leaders. Current staffing levels are insufficient to cover these needs.

The rotation of foreign service officers (FSOs) between posts may need to be reconsidered. FSOs typically spend only two years in an assigned country before moving to a new post. While this short period does help FSOs maintain a critical distance from, and objective stance

toward, local power brokers, it is too short a period to develop a rich and nuanced understanding of local languages, norms, and power dynamics and to develop trust among local citizens and organizations. Yet FSOs possess significant decision-making power—particularly vis-à-vis the foreign service nationals (FSNs) who already possess that rich contextual knowledge. Those decisions may be better informed by more extended stays in each post.

Additionally, the hiring criteria for foreign service nationals may need to be revised. FSNs are typically fluent in English, conversant in the jargon of democracy and international development, and members of elite social and economic strata in their countries. Their work for an international aid organization further amplifies their power and prestige in their societies. These characteristics do not necessarily position FSNs to embed themselves in grassroots communities and build trust and understanding with marginalized groups.

Mission and embassy-based staff could be empowered to have more leadership and authority over programming. FSOs, FSNs, and program officers could be given more latitude to determine which local priorities, projects, and partners should form the core of their democracy-building strategies. Staff in Washington can serve as important sounding boards, helping local staff consider how their work aligns with a bureau's overarching goals, but as much power over funding decisions as possible should be delegated to the most locally embedded staff.

Finally, a democracy-assistance strategy that supports local leadership and local actions needs a staffing base that prioritizes learning and facilitation over implementation. Positioning oneself as a learner and facilitator rather than an expert and leader requires humility, time investment, flexibility, and a high tolerance for risk. The mental, emotional, and even physical energy required for this shift will need to be modeled, incentivized, and rewarded by aid organizations' senior leadership.

## **7. Increase Aid Agencies' Risk Tolerance**

Finally, U.S. aid agencies will need to increase their tolerance for risk. Aid providers tend to be relatively risk-averse. Federal aid agencies rely on Congress to achieve observable results or, worse, that cause harm

to local populations or to the agency's or country's reputation. Aid providers therefore prefer to fund well-tested international organizations that are skilled in designing projects that yield measurable outputs fairly quickly.

Aid providers also tend to think of democratization and development as processes that occur in stepwise fashion along causal chains and that produce indicators of progress along the way. These assumptions contribute to the risk-averse behaviors and a culture of control. If social change is conceived as something that can be designed and managed, then it is logical for agency staff to lead and oversee agenda setting, program design, and implementation. But we know that social change rarely occurs in neat, predictable, and controllable ways.

Transferring power over democracy-building to local organizations that lack track records and that may be unschooled in the types of work that aid providers and legislators expect to see will require agency staff, Congress, and the American people to take on a much greater tolerance for risk. Locally led democratization strategies may result in governance institutions unfamiliar to American observers.

They may result in groups considered to be undemocratic coming to power. They may incite popular uprisings that threaten to disrupt regional power balances. Or, they may simply fail to deliver immediately observable results. All these scenarios pose major risks—risks that aid providers currently avoid taking.

To overcome risk aversion, aid agencies will need to launch campaigns to educate Congress, the White House, and American citizens about the distortions caused by current top-down democratization strategies and showcase the potential value of localized approaches. Agency risk assessment strategies will also likely need to be adapted to allow aid providers to take on a more advanced risk posture.

### **Promising Signs: Localization at the U.S. Agency for International Development**

In recent years, the U.S. Agency for International

Development has taken several promising steps to localize its work in development and humanitarian spheres. These can lay the groundwork for a more localized approach to assisting democracy.

An emphasis on localization took hold with the establishment of USAID Forward during the Obama Administration. USAID Forward, which ran from 2010 to 2016, launched the agency's efforts to engage more local partners after decades of working primarily with contractors. The Local Solutions Program, which also targeted local partnerships, followed USAID Forward and was integrated into the Trump Administration's "Journey to Self-Reliance" strategic plan. While both programs faced cultural and bureaucratic hurdles, they did institutionalize commitments to localization within USAID.

Samantha Power, who became USAID's administrator in 2021, brought new momentum to the localization agenda. Three early indicators of potential progress include policy statements from Administrator Power, staff leadership appointments, and the advancement of local partnership initiatives and capacity-development policies.

On the policy front, Power indicated from the start that she is not satisfied with the agency's current slate of implementing organizations and is keen to work with more local partners. In a November 2021 speech, she identified three pillars of a new agency strategy: 1) diversify the types of organizations with which USAID partners, 2) amplify the voices of marginalized groups, and 3) listen and respond better to local groups in the countries where USAID works. Toward that end, Power committed to directing 25% of USAID funding to local partners—up from the current 6%. Even more important is Power's objective to integrate local voices into 50% of all USAID programs by the end of the decade. This pledge would help ensure that funds that do flow to local groups contribute to locally designed and locally led initiatives. This would help to truly shift the power over democratization and development to local citizens.

At the staffing level, Administrator Power hired Don

*Aid providers also tend to think of democratization and development as processes that occur in stepwise fashion along causal chains and that produce indicators of progress along the way.*

Steinberg, former Deputy Administrator of USAID under then-Administrator Raj Shah, to serve as “expert consultant.” In essence, Steinberg is the agency’s localization czar. He spearheaded locally led development efforts under Administrator Shah. Under Administrator Power, Steinberg “will support new and ongoing efforts to enhance our development localization agenda and expand strategic ties with foundations and major philanthropies.”<sup>3</sup> Other senior staff are equally committed to Administrator Power’s localization vision and the strategic commitments she has made to date.<sup>4</sup>

USAID has also taken concrete steps to localize its programs. The agency’s New Partnerships Initiative (NPI) was launched in 2019 to expand and improve partnerships with new, nontraditional, and local actors including civil society organizations, religious groups, cooperatives, and diaspora groups. Currently, NPI is expanding efforts around inclusive development while also integrating diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility into its programming as it seeks to center non-traditional voices in USAID’s activities. The agency’s Local Works program is another flagship locally led development program. Local Works, funded through a congressional earmark, sends five-year discretionary grants to missions to fund locally led programs and initiatives.

In August of 2021, USAID released a draft Local Capacity Development Policy that establishes an agency-wide vision and approach to developing local capacity. The draft policy stresses the importance of understanding capacity in locally resonant terms—not on USAID’s terms. Principles of the draft policy include working within local systems, aligning capacity development with local priorities and existing capacities, and collaborating with local actors to assess performance.<sup>5</sup> Agency staff are currently combing through hundreds of pages of public comments and revising the draft to incorporate perspectives from global stakeholders.

In the humanitarian realm, USAID is a signatory to the Grand Bargain—an agreement that commits funders

to provide 25% of global humanitarian funding to local responders. Through the Grand Bargain, USAID committed to joining a “participation revolution” that requires better listening and more expansive inclusion of voices in addition to sending funding to local groups. This would be a significant shift for the agency, whose approach to localization for humanitarian issues has traditionally been limited primarily to informing local actors of projects rather than placing them in the lead.<sup>6</sup>



While all these moves toward localization are promising, they primarily target the realms of development and humanitarian assistance. The recommendations put forth in this brief are designed to incorporate democracy-assistance into the funder

community’s laudable attempts to shift the power over foreign aid to local actors.

## Conclusion

In framing the importance of the Summit for Democracy, President Biden stressed that, “For the United States, the summit offered an opportunity to listen, learn, and engage with a diverse range of actors whose support and commitment is critical for global democratic renewal.”<sup>7</sup> Listening, learning, and partnering with a wide range of local actors should be at the core of U.S. efforts to promote democracy abroad. Toward that end, this policy brief has proposed a series of steps that funders can take to adopt more facilitative and supportive postures in strategies to assist democracy.

The proposals outlined in this brief are bold. But bold action will be required to truly shift the power over democracy-building to local citizens. Such citizens have proven they are prepared to fight for democracy with or without U.S. backing. To meaningfully support a global democratic renewal, the U.S. should seize the opportunity to support the range of voices who are molding the democracies of the future. This would be a sign of true American leadership in an era of transformational change.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that all these movements also generated resistance and critique from fellow citizens and government officials alike.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/13/opinion/africa-foreign-aid-philanthropy.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.devex.com/news/is-samantha-power-taking-on-the-aid-establishment-100481>

<sup>4</sup> This includes Michele Sumilas, Assistant to the Administrator of the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL).

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/LCD\\_Policy\\_-\\_FORMATTED\\_508\\_01-11.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/LCD_Policy_-_FORMATTED_508_01-11.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/What\\_is\\_Locally\\_Led\\_Development\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/What_is_Locally_Led_Development_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.state.gov/further-information-the-summit-for-democracy/>

**The views expressed in this policy brief are solely those of the authors and not the Campbell Public Affairs Institute, the Maxwell School, or Syracuse University.**

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Herrold's research centers on civil society, international development, and democracy promotion. Her first book, *Delta Democracy: Pathways to Incremental Civic Revolution in Egypt and Beyond*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2020. The book uncovers the strategies that Egyptian NGO's used to advance the aims of the country's 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. It was awarded the 2021 Virginia A. Hodgkinson Research Book Prize from the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA).

*(Re)Mobilizing the Masses: Youth, Civil Society, and Social Change in the 21st Century*, Herrold's second book project, studies the role of Palestinian voluntary grassroots organizations, social enterprises and community philanthropy groups in mobilizing citizens for social change.

In a third book project, funded in part by a Fulbright Scholar grant, Herrold is studying locally led development in Serbia.

Her work has also appeared in the journals *Social Problems*, *Middle East Law, and Governance*, *Public Administration and Development*, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, and *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*.

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