Democracy's Development Dividend

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DEMOCRACY'S DEVELOPMENT DIVIDEND

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Development can be done democratically. The tradeoff between democracy and development is more purported than real. International donors can support the latter by working with—rather than bypassing—democratic institutions such as parliaments. There is no need for development specialists to view democracy as a "luxury" or "extra" that ought to be pursued only after a country achieves "developed" status. While there can be tensions between democratization and development, these are so often overestimated that development practitioners compromise on democracy when in fact they should be insisting on it. It is useful to examine why the belief that democracy comes at the cost of development is so persistent, and to consider cases where democracy has worked for, rather than against, development.

Quantitative studies of the democracy-development relationship, while not definitive, have over time produced findings more favorable to democracy. Thinking in the development field, however, has yet to catch up. Old impressions regarding "authoritarian success stories" such as Ethiopia and Rwanda still receive too much credence. There are doubts about the true extent of developmental success in these cases, about whether compromises with respect to democracy were truly needed, and about the degree to which the approaches taken in these countries can be replicated elsewhere.

In addition to ignoring new evidence, the development community has failed to look closely enough at the inner workings of political regimes. Development often takes place in regimes that are neither clearly democratic nor fully authoritarian, making it hard to see how democratic institutions contribute to development in practice. To further compli-

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cate matters, the ways in which democratic institutions—or democratic aspects of political institutions—assist development are easy to miss. Development practitioners accordingly have developed a habit of seeking to avoid political institutions, fearing that they cannot be changed.

The evidence, however, shows that this is a mistake. Development can be done democratically, and doing so benefits not only democracy, but development as well. The development community needs to find ways to work with, rather than around, democratic institutions. Democracy-support practitioners can help here by learning how to show what democracy can do for development, and by encouraging their development-focused colleagues to see democratic institutions as assets that can assist rather than hinder their own work.

Parliaments in many countries have quietly aided the effectiveness of development programs by ensuring that legislation is "fit for purpose." This has recently occurred in contexts as diverse as Burma with respect to microfinance, Malawi in relation to HIV and AIDS, and Kyrgyzstan in relation to the regulation (and potential repression) of NGOs. These quieter contributions to development are easy to miss but can prove very important over the long run.

Democracy and Development: A False Trade-Off

Many of the earliest studies in this area suggested that democracy might hinder economic growth. In 2005, a review of quantitative evidence concluded that "the net effect of democracy on growth performance cross-nationally over the last five decades is negative or null."[1] Democracies, one often heard, dampened investment through excessive zeal for redistribution, or were bound by short time horizons (the next election) that authoritarian leaders could ignore as they went about implementing unpopular but effective economic policies.

More recent research challenges this pessimistic view of democracy's economic returns. In 2019, statistical analyses conducted by a group of leading scholars suggested that "a country that transitions from nondemocracy to democracy achieves about 20 percent higher GDP per capita in the next 25 years than a country that remains a nondemocracy."[2] They reported that this effect was similar regardless of a country's initial level of development, and appeared to be the product of investments that democracies typically make in public goods, such as education and health, as well as their tendency to adopt economic reforms more readily than authoritarian regimes.

Likewise, a 2008 "meta-analysis" looking at 84 different studies of the relationship between democracy and economic growth concluded that democracy has a positive if indirect effect on growth.[3] The mechanisms suggested were several: Democracy is associated with higher human capital, lower inflation, less political instability, and higher levels of economic freedom. Another study came to an almost identical finding in 2012. It concluded that given recent research, which uses more data and better methods than prior work, the theory that democracy harms development "is discarded by the available evidence." As the review noted, this leaves two possibilities—"either there is no effect of democracy on growth: or democracy enhances growth," with the latter increasingly emerging as the more plausible of the two.[4]

While there can be tensions between democratization and development, these are so often overestimated that development practitioners compromise on democracy when in fact they should be insisting on it.

In earlier decades, it was the success of Asia's "tigers"—Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—that seemed to prove authoritarian regimes were better at development. More recently, Ethiopia and Rwanda have been cited to show that democracy should wait to be "sequenced" after development. Rwanda has a decidedly authoritarian regime—President Paul Kagame has held power for 21 straight years—and has achieved some remarkable development successes. Although the 1994 genocide left it one of the world's poorest countries, Rwanda became a global leader at achieving the Millennium Development Goals—the UN targets set in 2000 to be met by 2015. Improvements in infant, child, and maternal mortality as well as child nutrition have been especially impressive.[5] On the surface, at least, authoritarian Rwanda looks worthy of emulation.

A deeper look undermines this facile view, however. Rwanda's situation was hardly typical. Its development success came in the wake of a genocide that killed about eight-hundred thousand people from April to July 1994. Kagame took power as leader of the armed force (the Rwandan Patriotic Front) that ended the slaughter. His administration received ample aid from international donors whose first concern was stability.[6] Donors, alongside the Rwandan government, continue to play a central role in ensuring that poor Rwandans have access to crucial services.

Kagame's "developmental patrimonialism" is an authoritarianism of a very particular sort.[7] As Nic Cheeseman explains, it is a system in which "the potentially damaging aspects of patrimonial politics are held in check by a leader who enjoys tight control over patronage networks."[8] Developmental patrimonialism, in short, requires a special kind of personal political authority—one that leaders of other countries cannot hope to replicate. Research shows that sub-Saharan Africa's authoritarian regimes perform especially poorly due to the prevalence of unconstrained patrimonialism.[9] The region's more democratic states do better economically—and the more so the longer they have been democratic.[10]

The idea that developmentally successful authoritarian states are exceptions is reinforced by Steve Radelet. Writing a decade ago in these pages, he observed that the African countries which had achieved sustained economic growth since the 1990s (he called them "emerging Africa") typically had several things in common. Among these was democratic and accountable government.[11] Of the seventeen states that he identified as "emerging," only four bucked this trend: Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. To suggest that these exceptions should be seen as models is to ignore the dramatic economic failures that have been associated with authoritarian governance, most notably in the case of Zimbabwe.

Finally, narratives of authoritarian "success" can rest on doubtful information. As others have observed, "collecting verifiable data inside closed societies is nearly impossible."[12] The UN and the World Bank do their best, but to gather data at all they must regularly work with authoritarian governments eager to ensure that "the numbers" make them look good, bolster their legitimacy on the world stage, and reassure investors. There have long been warnings that the statistics generated by authoritarian states may be, to put it gently, less than wholly reliable.

In 2014, researchers used satellite images of nighttime lights to estimate changes in economic activity, then compared their estimates to annual rates of GDP growth as reported to the World Bank.[13] They concluded that, on average, dictatorships overstated growth rates by between 0.5 and 1.5 percentage points.

Statistics put out not long ago by the World Bank and Rwanda's National Institute of Statistics showed a sharp drop in poverty following 2011. A group of scholars, writing under the pen name "Maurice Okito," argued that this "decline" was a statistical illusion produced by changing how poverty rates were estimated. Poverty in Rwanda, they claimed, could actually be on the rise.[14] A high-profile investigation by the *Financial Times* suggested that some of Rwanda's development statistics may have been manipulated, and that government data "have been misrepresented on at least one occasion."[15] This does not wholly discredit the presentation of Rwanda as a developmental success, but it does suggest that claims made about its achievements should be approached with caution.

None of the above means that authoritarian regimes cannot promote development, nor that democratic regimes are guaranteed to deliver it. It does strongly suggest, however, that the purported trade-off between democracy and development is a false one, leading donors to sacrifice democracy in favor of development more often than is truly necessary.

One country where we can see this dynamic at play is Ethiopia. In a recent article, Stephen Brown and Jonathan Fisher document how Western donor officials employed the vaguely defined notion of the "developmental state"—commonly understood to be "a 'strong' regime with 'political will' and a non-negotiable approach to domestic governance"—to justify a withdrawal from any real attempt to press issues of democratic reform or human rights in Ethiopia.[16] When Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned in February 2018 and a young politician named Abiy Ahmed became his surprise replacement, Western donors were caught flatfooted. Abiy quickly signaled his openness to political reform, expressing skepticism about the developmental state and saying that Ethiopia needed multiparty competition and the rule of law. This represented a tremendous opportunity for political opening, yet as Brown and Fisher point out, Abiy's "rise occurred not through the engagement or actions of Western donors but, rather, in spite of them."[17]

As Abiy is known to point out, democracy can be, and often is, good for development—the comparative track record of democratic and authoritarian states in Africa makes this clear. Yet the successes (and failures) of democratic institutions are often less spectacular than those of their authoritarian counterparts. Growth rates under democracy, while positive, are generally modest—not sensational—and progress on developmental indicators is more gradual. In short, democratic successes in the pursuit of development are easy to overlook in contrast to the dramatic gains achieved in countries such as Rwanda. Yet must "quiet" or "not as obvious" mean "insignificant"?

The Quiet Success Stories

Although we often make a hard distinction between democracy and authoritarianism, the reality is that most regimes fall somewhere between the two. What is more, while democratic states may contain institutions that behave in an authoritarian fashion and are only weakly accountable to citizens, authoritarian regimes may contain institutions that operate (mostly nonobtrusively) in a fairly open and accountable manner. Here we can limn the makings of another form of "quiet" democratic success, this time at the level where institutions (as distinguished from whole regimes) can act to promote development.

Consider the case of Burma, where the national legislature has played a modest—but important—role in supporting the success of microfinance programs. Such programs have become a significant tool in the development "toolbox," often with support from international donors such as the United Kingdom. Providing credit to the poor, the thinking runs, will boost entrepreneurism, business development, and incomes.

Microfinance, however, can have mixed effects. A 2012 evidence review focusing on sub-Saharan Africa concluded that microfinance programs helped but also harmed the poor.[18] Their health, food security, and nutrition benefited, but their children's educations tended to suffer, and the negative effect became worse the longer reliance on microfinance continued.

This suggests that laws governing microfinance need to be crafted to encourage its positive effects while guarding against its negative potential. At the same time, such safeguards must not be overly burdensome lest they put microfinance organizations out of business or deter them from lending to vulnerable groups, such as women. In other words, developing countries need wise microfinance laws as well as good ways to monitor what existing laws are doing. For most developing countries, this is a demanding task that requires the solid engagement of that key democratic institution, the national legislature.

Burma's recent experience illustrates the role that democratic institutions such as parliaments can play in helping to ensure that microfinance helps rather than harms development. After the military regime formally relinquished power in 2010, the country saw a dramatic expansion of microfinance. Since that year, the United Kingdom alone has supplied an amount totaling almost US$260 million to support microlending. Its programs have aimed to incubate new microfinance institutions and to encourage foreign investment in microfinance, with special emphasis on bringing microfinance to rural areas and women.

While microfinance programs—including those with support from London—have had significant success in Burma, they have also faced challenges. One of these challenges has been regulatory. Burma's Microfinance Law, introduced in November 2011, allowed private institutions to start making microloans. Yet as the British government reported, the law "sets very low requirements for capital, solvency, performance and reporting."[19] At the same time, the law restricted microfinance institutions in ways that put the sustainability of rural microfinance in doubt—a serious problem given that Burma's rural areas are precisely where microfinance access is most needed.

Fortunately, as microfinance programs expanded in Burma, so too have programs designed to support the Assembly of the Union, the country's bicameral parliament. The U.S. National Democratic Institute, for example, has supported the Parliamentary Resource Center, which provides technical assistance to MPs regardless of party affiliation. To complement this, Britain's Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) has delivered programs aimed at strengthening postlegislative scrutiny (PLS) of existing laws to assess their effects and propose reforms. The WFD has provided details about PLS "best practices," offered technical training in how to carry out PLS, and helped to recruit experts to support a pair of parliamentary committees eager to pilot PLS. In mid-2017, with WFD's assistance, the lower-house Committee on Banks and Monetary Development launched PLS of the 2011 Microfinance Law.

The committee reviewed the law thoroughly, then consulted many stakeholders in order to assess how it was working in practice. Was it achieving its goals? Was it delivering benefits to low-income people in Burma? Evidence came from cabinet ministries and local authorities as well as 21 microfinance institutions and more than two-hundred microfinance clients drawn from four distinct regions of the country. The committee recommended amendments to keep borrowers from falling too deeply into debt, to make microlending institutions more sustainable, and to improve microfinance clients' financial literacy. In February 2020, the lower house unanimously approved a new law based on the committee's report. The covid-19 pandemic has delayed upper-house approval, but it is expected. Burma is not a democracy—Freedom House currently gives it a Not Free rating and the military still wields enormous power that it has used, most notoriously, to repress the Rohingya minority with brutal force. Yet Burma's parliamentary lower house is one of the country's more democratic institutions, and it has acted in support of development.

A second case demonstrating the kind of quiet success that democratic institutions can deliver is that of Malawi and its 2017 law for preventing and managing HIV and AIDS. There, parliamentary committees played a central role in ensuring that a major piece of proposed legislation was properly drafted. Donors have given substantial support to the government's HIV and AIDS response in this landlocked country of 19.1 million—likely the better part of $1.5 billion over the decade following 2008. There was strong donor interest in the new law.

Southern Africa has the world's highest incidence of HIV or AIDS, and Malawi ranked ninth-highest in the world in 2017. With donor support, however, Malawi's progress has been considerable: Data from UNAIDS via the World Bank indicate that in 1998, more than a seventh of its population (14.6 percent) was living with HIV or AIDS; two decades later, this share had fallen to 9.2 percent. Women especially saw improvements. In 1998, almost 11 percent of Malawian women between 15 and 24 had HIV or AIDS, while twenty years later that figure had shrunk to 4.3 percent. Fully 95 percent of pregnant women with HIV were receiving antiretroviral medicine to prevent mother-to-child transmission.

Donors had been urging the government to introduce an HIV and AIDS bill, but the draft that began to circulate in June 2017 threatened to put progress at risk. In a shock to donors, the government's proposed legislation took a regressive and draconian approach to preventing the spread of HIV. One worrisome clause imposed mandatory HIV testing on pregnant women and their sexual partners. This had the potential to backfire by deterring pregnant women from seeking care for fear of the stigma that a positive test would bring and the consequent obligation to persuade their partners to be tested (a requirement that activists warned might trigger domestic violence). A second problematic passage permitted certain prospective employers—not only the police and security services but also private domestic employers—to demand an HIV test as a condition of hiring. Finally, a third part of the draft threatened the counterproductive criminalization of "negligent or reckless conduct" leading to HIV transmission. Fearing fines or jail, people who needed tests would instead avoid them.

Fortunately, in this case, Malawi's development donors chose to work with, rather than around, democratic institutions in this (according to Freedom House) Partly Free country. The challenge appeared formidable. The health minister who had introduced the bill squarely backed its draconian approach, as did spokesmen for most of Malawi's political parties. To counter this, UNAIDS and other donors worked with the MP chairing the relevant committee to ensure that the legislation was thoroughly reviewed prior to National Assembly floor debate. Donors helped the committee to recruit expert consultants while financing and facilitating meetings that brought in a broad selection of MPs (beyond those on relevant committees) to engage groups whom the law would specially burden.

This parliament-focused approach had the benefit of helping to amplify the voices of those who would be most affected by the new law—Malawian women living with HIV and AIDS. According to interviews that we held with participants in this process (including donor officials, MPs, parliamentary staffers, and civil society representatives), this played a critical role in shifting the attitudes of MPs toward the more problematic aspects of the bill. Seeing that impersonal, legalistic arguments were gaining little traction, activists worked with groups such as the Coalition of Women Living with HIV and AIDS to bring their members to meet with legislators and explain firsthand the harmful and counterproductive things that the proposed law would do. This proved crucial. Women MPs, many of whom had been inclined to favor the government's proposals, turned firmly against the bill. As a female MP from the HIV, AIDS, and Sanitation Committee told us in a February 2019 interview, "We heard them . . . it changed our minds. We will not allow our women to be criminalized."

The HIV, AIDS, and Sanitation Committee formally recommended changes to the bill, including removal of its harshest provisions. During floor debates, MPs who had been engaged in the consultations rose to highlight the discriminatory impact of the proposals and the risk that they would undermine Malawi's fight against HIV. On 29 June 2017, Jessie Kabwila, who chaired the National Assembly Women's Caucus, pointed out that "research has shown that when you criminalize HIV and AIDS in any way, you increase stigma and you decrease the number of people who are going to go for testing." In the final debate, on 27 November 2017, Esther Jolobala, the deputy chair of the HIV, AIDS, and Nutrition Committee, argued against compulsory testing of pregnant women on the basis that it would "victimise and become a burden to women."

The HIV and AIDS Act that resulted still has problems—it may permit the disclosure of HIV status without individual consent, for instance—but it did lack the draft bill's most problematic provisions as outlined above. A law that threatened to harm rights and also likely backfire had been changed—by parliament—into one that lays a rights-based foundation for efforts to tackle HIV and AIDS in Malawi. As we learned through interviews, people living with HIV or AIDS and their advocates also see the new law as an important symbolic victory. Worries persist that the new law may prove hard to implement, but these concerns underscore a clear signal that people living with HIV and AIDS have rights—and those rights need to be respected.

A third example of how democratic institutions can make modest but significant contributions to development comes from another Partly Free country, the Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan. There, in 2016, the 120-member unicameral parliament (called the Supreme Council) rejected a series of proposed legal changes that came to be known as the Foreign Agents Law. Part of a broader trend that has seen governments around the world increase legal constraints on civil society, the law would have repressed NGOs with onerous regulations.

The Critical Role of NGO Laws

Laws governing NGOs are viewed as crucial by donors. They rely heavily on NGOs to deliver aid, especially in countries where corruption is rampant or the state's respect for human rights is in doubt.[20] Research also suggests that NGOs have positive effects in key areas such as health and governance,[21] gender equality,[22] and the inclusion of marginalized groups such as the LGBT and indigenous communities.[23] When regulation of NGOs is used as a pretext for crushing them, all these positive contributions are put at risk. Repressive NGO laws not only hamper donors' immediate ability to send aid where it is needed, but can undermine NGOs' longer-term survival. In countries that have introduced repressive NGO laws, such as Ethiopia, researchers have documented the disappearance of smaller NGOs and those focused on human rights, as well as substantial declines in bilateral aid as NGOs are removed from the aid-delivery ecosystem.[24] Fortunately, in the case of Ethiopia, a more liberal law regulating NGOs was introduced in 2019, though it is not yet clear whether human-rights NGOs and bilateral aid levels will recover.

Initially proposed in September 2013, and clearly inspired by a similar law in Russia, Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Agents Law included provisions that would have required organizations receiving funds from abroad to register as "foreign agents"—a term generally seen as synonymous with "spies." The proposal also granted the government extensive powers to oversee (and potentially interfere with) the activities of such "foreign agents," and included reporting requirements so onerous as to overwhelm the capacity of smaller organizations. Many activists within

Kyrgyzstan interpreted the proposed law as an attempt to control civil society. After the bill's late-2014 formal introduction in the Supreme Council, these activists urged lawmakers to reject it, explaining that it "contains discriminatory provisions contradicting the basic democratic principles and, if passed, it will considerably restrict activities of non-commercial organizations."[25]

All this made the Foreign Agents Law a significant threat to development in Kyrgyzstan. Even as debate over the bill went on, foreign aid continued to roll into this republic of 6.5 million people: Our review of data from the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD suggests that about a tenth of the country's annual GNI (or 40 percent of government spending) comes from beyond the post-Soviet republic's borders. Our calculations also indicated that NGOs and other civil society groups delivered a fifth of all DAC bilateral aid across the decade from 2008 to 2018. In October 2014, Kyrgyzstani NGOs warned that the law would "have a negative effect on all NGOs, including charitable and humanitarian organizations that provide social services to people," leading to "a reduction in social services which people need acutely."[26]

Donors and international advocacy groups also expressed concern. In October 2014, the U.S. embassy in Bishkek warned that the law "fundamentally threatens human rights."[27] Two months later, the U.S. ambassador highlighted what NGOs were doing for youth, HIV and AIDS response, and education.[28] When in May 2017 we interviewed NGO representatives in Bishkek, they told us that such diplomatic pressure did put a dent in the executive's enthusiasm for the law. This was not, however, enough to keep it from staying alive in the legislature. The proposal continued to enjoy support within the cabinet and the Supreme Council, where pro-Russia parties—who were suspicious of Western efforts to exert influence on this issue—held a significant number of seats.

In this context, the response of Kyrgyzstan's more progressive legislators became crucial. Bolstering them was a small but spirited and persistent civil society campaign. Early in the bill's history, the Supreme Council's Committee on Human Rights, Constitutional Legislation, and State Structure asked the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) for a legal review of the bill. That review was not long in coming. It appeared in mid-October 2013, and was highly critical. It called the bill "an interference into several fundamental rights," and advised that the government "not pursue its adoption."[29]

Since this legal opinion had been provided at the request of Kyrgyzstan's own lawmakers, it possessed a degree of legitimacy exceeding what donor and diplomatic statements could claim. Although debate on the bill would go on for several years, as its opponents used various delaying tactics to buy time to build their case, the activists whom we interviewed told us that the early thumbs-down from the Venice Commission and the ODIHR was crucial to the bill's eventual defeat. That defeat came on 12 May 2016, when 65 of the 111 deputies present in the Supreme Council voted against the bill.

Stopping the Foreign Agents Law in Kyrgyzstan was a win for both development and democracy. While the Supreme Council does not deserve sole credit for that victory, the ability of Kyrgyzstan's more progressive legislators to resist repressive regulation of the NGO sector provides another example of a democratic institution contributing to development in a less obvious way. The hope now is for Kyrgyzstan to stay the course of not repressing NGOs. A new version of the Foreign Agents Bill appeared in the Supreme Council in December 2019, though as of this writing in late 2020 it is not clear if it will make progress toward becoming a law.[30]

The successful examples in Burma and Malawi also show that even in states falling short of full-fledged democracy, political institutions that operate in a more democratic way can make valuable contributions to development. Those quiet successes are not simply tangential to development, but rather touch on issues that donors regard as key, including the effectiveness of microfinance, the need for rights-based responses to HIV and AIDS, and the availability of NGOs as a channel for aid delivery. Arguably, this kind of small, nonflashy success can help to explain empirical findings that underline democracy's superiority to autocracy where development is concerned.

Democracy Is Not an Obstacle

International donors typically claim to see democracy as an important part of development. Yet in practice, this rhetoric often rings hollow. Some within the development community have genuinely embraced the need to work politically, acknowledging the value of democratic institutions as development actors.[31] Yet among most development practitioners there remains a deeply entrenched belief that democratic institutions tend to get in the way. Democracy might be desirable, but it is a luxury to be pursued later, after the primary goal—development—has been secured.

We have argued that the purported trade-off between democracy and development is a false one. The persistent belief in its existence is the product of several factors, including an overreliance on authoritarian success stories and a failure to look closely enough at the less spectacular, but still substantial, development gains that democratic institutions are capable of producing.

This does not mean that international donors should embrace democracy as a guaranteed way of achieving development—democracies do have flaws and weaknesses. It does, however, mean that many within the development community should update their assumptions about the purported incompatibility of democratization and development. It also means that the democracy-support community should be more vocal in asserting the promise that their work holds for development. Development can be done democratically, and doing so can deliver substantial dividends. This insight will count for little, however, if no one really believes it.

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