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ABSTRACT: This document is a three page summary of *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* by Thomas Carothers. The summary was prepared for review by the USAID Office of Democracy and Governance.

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AIDING DEMOCRACY ABROAD: THE LEARNING CURVE

By Thomas Carothers

In Aiding Democracy Abroad (1999, Carnegie), the author declares that democracy promotion has been a fairly recent but not entirely successful part of U.S. aid programs. Democracy promotion has been heavily influenced by foreign policy strategy and subject to shifts in ideological changes particularly due to the ending of the Cold War in late 1980s.

- Early democracy programs in the 1960s and 1970s were influenced by Kennedy's Alliance for Progress and Title IV that emphasized civic education or municipal governance strengthening. Reagan's emphasis in the 1980s was countering leftist regimes in Central America using NED, CAPEL and ICITAP. The 1990s saw a "New Democracy Consensus" with greatly increased USAID spending in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia in more subsectors like civil society, elections and rule of law.
- Skeptics of democracy assistance point out, sometimes rightfully so, that the U.S. still supports authoritarian leaders if its in its best interest, that democracy assistance is so small that it has little impact, that democracy promotion interferes in the sovereign affairs of other countries, that democracy must be grown from within and cannot be exported and that the U.S. often sets bad examples of good governance for others.
- Four examples illustrating the impact of USAID programs include Guatemala where a military government ruled until 1985, Nepal where long-lasting monarch fell in 1990 and where nascent civil society movements were encouraged by the fall of communism, Zambia where strong civil society actors and the democratic shifts in Eastern Europe forced an autocrat to hold elections, and Romania which maintained one of the last of the former Communist European dictatorships but was very fragile due to its closeness to the EU.
- USAID Democracy-Governance core strategies focus on building civil society, the electoral process, and state institutions respectively. The history of US governance and institutions invariably influences DG approaches at times limiting strategies. Sequencing means there is a natural order to democratization that occurs in a society but sequencing does not always go smoothly, making aid providers' ability to adapt to local conditions a crucial element to DG programming (as in Romania where a bottom up CS approach changed to one of top-down assistance to state actors).
- Election and political party assistance is the most visible form of DG assistance with money going to designing electoral systems, good

administration of elections, voter education, election observing and electoral mediation. Elections themselves may be overemphasized, carried out more for public relations, and postconflict elections present special challenges. Party aid through the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute may create partisan bias in a country and in transforming formerly one-party state. Better media access from programming may inevitably harm democratic progress when demagogues gain access to it.

- Aid for state institutions include constitution reform (often criticized for following the US model too closely, judiciaries (rewriting and updating laws, upgrading the legal profession and increasing a legal access), legislatures (building capacities of legislators and staff, strengthening infrastructure and inputs from NGOs and media) local government (fostering system-level change like decentralization, building capacities and increasing citizen input) and civil military relations (opening the dialogue between militaries and civilians and professionalizing budgeting). Many programs show meager results though.
- In recipient countries, aid for civil society takes a bottoms-up approach with money usually going to non-governmental advocacy organizations with technical assistance and direct funding are the most common types of assistance. An NGO boom in the 1990s helped promote more democratic tendencies such as election monitoring and women's rights but many smaller NGOs are too poorly funded or badly run to be useful and can become corrupt if no accountability standards are used. NGOs are ideally politically engaged but that often translates into being partisan, creating a situation of outside interference into local politics. US DG programs now emphasize focusing on local NGOs over national ones and working more with non-DG sectors such as health, economic growth and agriculture. Civil society funds typically go to civic education (teaching civic values), the media (using radio, television and newspapers to better inform) and labor unions (workers need more political rights).
- Implementing democracy-governance programs requires an initial assessment of needs, a design based upon a project proposal, funds dispersal, a project execution using local input or expatriate expertise and a final evaluation by a separate contractor after the project ends. Problems include a frequent lack of local ownership (i.e. too much outside design/control), conducting a project with a shallow understanding of local society, a lack of flexibility and high costs. Using more local participation is critical especially at the design stages. Direct grants to local organizations are effective because they send money directly to locals who can avoid some bureaucratic delays but this strategy can also create a dependence on money from donors particularly when so many different US government and quasi-government organizations may be contributing. USAID-State

Dept priorities may conflict, delaying reform while smaller, privately-run groups like NED and Asia Foundation may be more useful in running certain programs.

- Democracy-governance programs are evaluated for effectiveness but problems exist including establishing criteria for success of a program and establishing the causal links between implementing programs and changes in recipient societies. Evaluators are often tied into the success of any programs, creating a conflict of interest. DG program success also cannot be measured as closely as economic growth and health programs and information-gathering methods of evaluations are usually limited in their analytic scope. Other shortcomings include using highly reductionist indicators in a costly way that produces little insight and distorts future programming. To improve the aid process, donors must accept that more objective assessments are necessary. In addition, donors must clarify the purposes of evaluations, and separate the measurement and implementation processes. Interviewing more people involved in the programs and using open-ended questions are essentials. Finally, utilizing participatory evaluations and participant-observer studies would also be vast improvements.
- Carothers determines that when a country is democratizing, foreign democracy promoters can normally find ways to help but the aid itself is not generally the reason for the improvement. Democratic change results from deeply rooted causes and workshops, training courses, equipment donations and small grants may only reach some elites without fundamentally changing the balance of political power. Russia is an example of a country where democracy aid cannot stop slippage and aid helps little in countries with little experience with open societies. The overall effect of aid is usually modestly positive or even sometimes negligible and at times negative. The significant accumulation of positive effects of programs does not often transpire because several conditions must exist simultaneously. Aid may be most useful via a less direct influence by helping countries that might set an example as did Central Europe or South America in the 1990s.

The author concludes that American donors are improving after years of misguided or simplistic aid strategies. Earlier reliance on institution modeling and sequencing is changing into more attention to adapting, and evolution in spending in civil society, governance and elections-political processes subsectors. However, improvements are needed in implementing and evaluating programs, and avoiding the “science of assistance” in favor of more qualitative measurements will be critical in making aid more effective. DG aid must be linked more to social and economic development. The role of women in democratization and communicating the purpose and use of aid to local populations should be given more attention as a whole.

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