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# Ten challenges in democracy support – and how to overcome them

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## Abstract

Democracy supporters face tough times. Authoritarian reversals across North and sub-Saharan Africa, combined with a lack of progress in the Middle East and Central Asia, have dampened funders' enthusiasm for the endeavour. To better understand these setbacks, we identify ten challenges in democracy support. These are the challenges of: (i) difficult cases; (ii) authoritarian backlash; (iii) adapting to context; (iv) confronting politics; (v) managing uncertainty; (vi) unintended side-effects; (vii) a tight funding environment; (viii) defining and demonstrating success; (ix) competing priorities; and – exacerbating all the rest, (x) a limited evidence base. While much has been written about the need for more coordinated and politically intelligent engagement to meet these challenges, far less has been said about the need to improve our evidence-base and the way in which policy-oriented research is produced. We identify several strategies that policy makers and practitioners can use to advance the field. All require better bridges between research, policy and practice, so we offer concrete suggestions about how such bridges can be built.

## **Policy implications**

- Agencies that fund democracy support need to be more realistic about what these programmes can achieve, and the time frame in which they can achieve it.
- The paucity of the evidence base underpinning democracy support exacerbates the other nine challenges we identify, but a better evidence base can be built if researchers collaborate more often with the practitioners who design and deliver democracy support.
- Researchers and practitioners should be more open – and more systematic – in the way that data about democracy support is produced, analysed and shared. This will be hard in some areas, such as political party support, and in highly repressive contexts where beneficiaries may be at risk, but longer-term collaborations can make it feasible.
- Governments seeking to make democracy support more effective should design funding mechanisms in a way that incentivises research at the programme level and supports the development of new analytical tools that translate evidence about past programmes into concrete recommendations for the future.

Democracy support<sup>1</sup> has never been easy, though there have been many who hoped it might be. As one experienced democracy promoter put it, ‘When I started doing this back in the early 90s, I thought this is a neat thing to do. I thought, I’ll be doing this for about 5 years and then we’ll be done. How difficult is this going to be?’ With the benefit of hindsight, he added, ‘Naïve, or what?’ (Simon Osborn, interview, 20 January 2014). Today, there is no shortage of cases demonstrating the difficulty of democracy support. In Mali, democracy promoters saw their investments in political institutions undermined by a military coup in 2012. In Zimbabwe,

President Mugabe's authoritarian regime has proved remarkably resistant to Western pressure to democratize. In Egypt there has been far less progress towards democracy than donors had hoped to see, given the Arab Spring, while progress in Afghanistan is often seen as disappointing given the substantial amounts of aid it has received. Yet there are also cases of (relative) success. The strategies that failed in Zimbabwe have made a difference in Burma; the military junta's cautious movements towards political liberalization appear to be motivated, in part, by a desire to see sanctions lifted. Such successes explain why donors including the United States, United Kingdom and European Union, continue to devote around US\$10 billion to democracy support each year (Barry, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

The patchy record of democracy support is worrying given growing concerns about the global trajectory of democracy. It has become clear that many younger democracies are less resilient than we thought. For example, those in East and Central Europe have experienced 'hollowing out' – declining popular involvement in the political system that reduces the depth or quality of democracy,<sup>3</sup> as well as backsliding and regression towards a more authoritarian form of government (Greskovits, 2015). In light of such developments, some have argued that we need to face up to the reality of democratic recession (Diamond, 2015). The more optimistic argue this apparent recession is the product of unrealistic expectations and unreliable empirical evidence, rather than a significant erosion of democracy (Levitsky and Way, 2015). Either way, the implication is the same; democracy support is getting harder.

The assumptions underlying democracy support are also under increasing pressure. When democracy support emerged as 'sector' in the 1990s, it did so in a context where many felt Western liberal democracy had 'won', proving itself to be most stable, sustainable and economically successful form of government available (Fukuyama, 1992). Today, the success of emerging economies with distinctly undemocratic regimes or models of democracy that do

not match the Western liberal ‘ideal’, together with talk of crisis in some Western democracies, raises the question of whether democracy support has a place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We argue that it does, if for no other reason than this: in most places, people want it. In most African countries, for example, a healthy majority want to live under a democracy, with an even larger proportion of the population rejecting one-party rule, presidential dictatorship, and military rule (Mattes and Bratton, 2016). This provides a compelling reason for continuing with democracy support. However, the nature of this work does need to change to be more grounded in evidence rather than idealistic assumptions about how democracy works, better adapted to context, and more humble and inclusive – so that it is open to supporting different varieties of democracy and rooted in genuine partnership than Western leadership (Dodsworth and Cheeseman 2018b). Making such changes will not be easy – indeed, they form the basis of some of the challenges we discuss below.

In this article, we seek to clarify precisely why democracy support has become so difficult, and in doing so, to map out routes that may make it a little easier. This paper is structured in two parts. In the first section, below, we identify ten challenges that organizations engaged in democracy support must overcome. These are the challenges of difficult cases, authoritarian backlash, adapting to context, confronting politics, managing uncertainty, unintended side-effects, operating in a tight funding environment, defining and demonstrating success, competing priorities, and a limited evidence base. Existing work has identified some of these before, but has tended to discuss them in isolation. By presenting these challenges together, we make their full impact more apparent and can explore the potential for interactions between them. This exposes the manner in which the last challenge – the limited evidence base – exacerbates all the rest, and in doing so highlights the importance of finding ways to improve it.

In the second section of the article we consider what can be done. Existing studies have suggested that democracy supporters need to pay greater attention to local context (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2016), think and work politically in order to overcome barriers to reform (DFID, 2013), coordinate their work more effectively (Cheeseman, 2015; Faust et al., 2012), and avoid hypocrisy if their efforts are to pay dividends. We agree, but rather than repeat established arguments we focus our efforts on areas that have so far received less scholarly attention. In particular, we argue that there is also a need to strengthen the evaluative framework and evidence base within which policy makers operate. This requires greater realism about where democracy support is likely to be effective, more research at the programme level, and new analytical tools that can help to translate evidence about what has (or has not) worked in the past into concrete suggestions about what might be done in the future. Each of these necessitates closer cooperation between researchers, policy makers and practitioners. Our suggestions cannot solve all of the challenges that we identify, but they will allow substantial inroads to be made in addressing the tenth and final challenge, that of the limited evidence base. This is crucial because that challenge intensifies the rest. Building a better evidence base will not automatically eradicate the other challenges, but it will make it easier to identify the most plausible strategies through which they can be overcome.

### **Ten challenges in democracy support**

Democracy supporters aim to strengthen democratic institutions such as parliaments, political parties and civil society, and to promote ‘democratic values,’ among which practitioners typically include transparency, accountability, equality and participation. To this end they employ a variety of strategies ranging from low-profile activities that support democracy indirectly through training and civic education, to more direct and high-profile approaches



In this context – one in which democracy support is becoming both more diverse, and more difficult – it is useful to think in terms of challenges; things that make supporting democracy hard, but not impossible. Our analysis draws on existing literature, but also on interviews and informal discussions with practitioners and policy-makers that have taken place as part of a collaborative research project that we are undertaking with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), the UK’s primary provider of democracy support.<sup>4</sup> That analysis suggests that those working to support democracy face ten key challenges in their work. These challenges relate specifically to the practice of providing democracy support, which is distinct from the broader process of democratization. Even if we were to identify the conditions under which democratic transitions are likely to occur, and under which democracy is likely to become embedded and grow, democracy supporters would still need to know how to promote these developments. To illustrate, while the success of democratic consolidation depends (in large part) on whether conditions on the ground are conducive to democracy becoming the ‘only game in town’ (Przeworski, 1991, p. 26), the success of democracy support hinges on the capacity of policy makers to identify these conditions and their ability to encourage and support local actors – both individuals and institutions – to make the most of them.

*(i) The challenge of difficult cases*

After the Cold War, democracy supporters focused their attention on countries where political and socio-economic conditions were generally favourable to democracy (Plattner, 2014). In Eastern Europe, democratization took place in a context of relative prosperity, in countries with well-educated populations and extensive historical ties to established democracies. When Hungary transitioned to democracy in 1989, it did so with an annual per capita income well above the threshold at which democracies are more likely to survive (Przeworski and Limongi, 1997). In sub-Saharan Africa, it was the conflict-free countries with relatively high levels of



political stability and supportive elites where more open and competitive political landscapes emerged. In cases like Botswana, such conditions made it easier for democracy to thrive.

Most of the countries that remain stuck under authoritarian rule are unpromising environments in which to promote political reform because a combination of factors militates against democratization. These countries include weak states in which poverty is widespread, monarchies with access to vast oil wealth, and strong states with single party regimes whose success in delivering economic growth provides them with legitimacy (Levitsky and Way, 2015). As countries in which conditions are more favourable to democracy have ‘graduated’ and now require less assistance, democracy supporters have found a larger proportion of their work taking place in countries where conditions are not conducive to democratization. For example, while Poland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were important targets for US democracy assistance in the 1990s (Carothers, 1999), Afghanistan and Iraq are now among the largest recipients of US democracy aid. These more difficult cases represent a significant challenge given accepted wisdom that democracy support can help to ‘speed up a moving train’ but has little impact when a regime’s political momentum is taking it away from democracy (Carothers, 1999, p. 304).

The challenge posed by these difficult cases is magnified by the fact that democracy support – is often disconnected from the rest of development aid, which at well over \$100 billion per year (OECD, 2017) dwarfs the \$10 billion a year spent on the former. As a result, it does not enjoy the full benefit of the leverage and engagement that international actors may enjoy in a given country. Despite the recent ‘political turn’ within development (Carothers and De Gramont, 2013), there remains a significant divide between efforts to promote democratic consolidation and the planning of development projects, which are often – though not always – focussed on resolving technocratic and logistical challenges (Unsworth, 2009; Hout, 2012). In some cases,

this is because democracy promotion has historically been a function of foreign ministries, kept separate from development agencies. In others, it is because programming tends to be developed in silos within the same development agency, such that projects do not always build upon one another. While a job creation programme may be supported partly in the hope that it will lead to more financially independent and assertive citizens, such initiatives are rarely designed to directly plug in to democracy support programming. This limits the political dividends delivered by development aid, and almost certainly reduced the impact of programs more explicitly targeted at the promotion of democracy.

*(ii) The challenge of authoritarian backlash*

Democracy supporters now face an increased risk that their activities will trigger retaliation by authoritarian rulers (Carothers, 2006). In the early 1990s, Western donors faced fewer barriers to democracy support because dictators did not believe it would work. Now authoritarian leaders actively resist democracy support in a much more systematic way. In Africa, for example, authoritarian incumbents have developed new strategies to outwit opposition parties and foreign donors. By diverting international funds to party coffers, deferring constitutional reform, and deploying new forms of coercion, incumbent presidents won 88% of the elections they contested between 1990 and 2010 (Cheeseman, 2010).

A growing body of research demonstrates that democracy support may lead to authoritarian responses that create far stronger barriers to political reform than existed previously. The danger, therefore, is not that democracy supporters take two steps forward and one step back, but one step forward and two steps back. For example, one recent study found that higher aid flows increase the risk that a country will pass laws that restrict the financing of NGOs, a danger that is exacerbated by the holding of competitive elections (Dupuy et al., 2016). Complicating matters, the risk of backlash is not constant, but varies across cases. For example,

the risk of backlash varies depending on the size of the military. Recent research shows that democracy promotion is more likely to trigger repression when recipients have larger armed forces (Savage, 2017). Democracy supporters therefore need to take account not only the danger of authoritarian backlash, but also the fact that this risk is likely to be higher in those countries in which the coercive capacity of the state is highest – compounding the challenge of difficult cases.

*(iii) The challenge of adapting to context*

Despite the weight of scholarly advice that ‘context matters’ in democracy support, some complain that context ‘is still not taken seriously’ by practitioners and policy makers (Grimm, 2015, p. 79). In our experience, the problem is not that this advice is not taken seriously, but that many are unsure what, precisely, it means. Exhortations to pay attention to context capture several different things, none of which are necessarily straight-forward.

At the national or ‘macro’ level, context-sensitive approaches require programmes that respond more effectively to a country’s specific circumstances, including its history of conflict, democratic trajectory and the extent to which the political elite are genuinely committed to democracy (Gershman, 2004; Schlumberger, 2006; Zeeuw, 2010). Yet precisely which aspects of national context matter most, when they matter, and why, remains murky. This makes it hard for democracy supporters to take the idea of adapting to context to heart.

At a more practical level adapting to context means avoiding ‘cookie cutter’ solutions in favour of responding to local needs and facilitating ownership. This sounds obvious, but it is not always done. A review of parliamentary strengthening programmes in five Pacific Island countries found that few had been informed by an assessment of local needs (Kinyondo and

Pelizzo, 2013). In one case, training was provided in a language (English) that few Members of Parliament (MPs) spoke fluently.

At a more conceptual level, adapting to context means not assuming democracy can or should work the same everywhere, accommodating varieties of democracy. While calls to recognize the value of alternative versions of democracy – particularly non-Western ones – have merit, there is no clear blueprint of what such a democracy would look like, and no good roadmap for obtaining one (Youngs, 2015).

*(iv) The challenge of confronting politics*

Almost universally, critics and defenders have advised democracy supporters to adopt more political approaches in their work. In the realm of parliamentary strengthening, for example, numerous policy papers and reviews have urged democracy supporters to take into account the incentives that drive the behaviour of MPs and to integrate support to legislatures with support to political parties (Menocal and O’Neil, 2012; Power, 2011). For over a decade, those who work with civil society have been told to expand their conceptualization of it to include more than (purportedly) apolitical, professionalized, urban-based NGOs (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2017; Ottaway and Carothers, 2000). Such advice reflects a broader shift in international development that has seen practitioners attempt to ‘confront politics,’ reducing their reliance on technocratic solutions in favour of more politically astute methods (Carothers and De Gramont, 2013).

Unfortunately, it is not easy to confront politics. Democracy supporters now routinely conduct political economy analyses but – as in development agencies (Hout, 2012) – these trigger changes in programme design and implementation only infrequently. Similarly, integrating the less politically partisan aspects of democracy support (such as support to the parliament as an

institution) with the more politically partisan (such as support to specific parties) is challenging.<sup>5</sup> These activities have traditionally been undertaken by different types of organizations that do not necessarily have the same ways of working (Burnell, 2009). Even WFD, a single organization with two arms – one responsible for parliamentary strengthening and one responsible for political party support – has found it difficult to combine these different aspects of its work. Moreover, the potential for synergies between these two types of work does not mean they will always be mutually reinforcing. Stronger political parties do not always lead to stronger, more democratic legislatures (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Randall and Svåsand, 2002). Tanzania's ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, has been the beneficiary of several party-support programmes, but its dominance of Tanzanian politics is a clear impediment to democratization. Thus, more politically minded programmes do not always result in more democratic gains.

(v) *The challenge of managing uncertainty*

Democracy support often confronts a very high degree of uncertainty. There is uncertainty about the timing of elections, their outcome, and the intentions of political leaders who may publicly endorse the efforts of democracy supporters while undermining them in private. While some of that uncertainty may be desirable in principle – elections in which results were certain would hardly be democratic – it nevertheless creates serious practical problems for those who design and deliver programmes of democracy support. Most obviously, key advocates of reform might lose their seats, only to be replaced by others who wish to preserve the status quo. Practitioners also have to cope with complex and speculative 'theories of change' (Vogel, 2012) because we lack academic and policy consensus on how democratization works and what can be done to facilitate democratic reform. As a result, projects that are designed to support

one specific component of democracy (for example, the political party system or civil society) often rest on vague assumptions about how they will strengthen democracy more broadly.

This uncertainty at both the practical and theoretical level pushes practitioners towards familiar solutions: things like strengthening parliamentary committees through training seminars, or supporting political parties through study visits to see the mechanisms of developed (and hopefully democratic) parties in action (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2016). Unfortunately, these ‘safe’ options often have less impact; they are typically more technically focused, less adapted to local political realities, and do less to alter the incentive structures that explain why democratic institutions – be they parliaments, political parties or civil society – are weak in the first place.

A classic example of this is the way in which democracy supporters respond to the high degree of turnover in parliamentary elections. In many newer democracies, it is by no means unusual for more than half of a legislatures’ members to be replaced in each election. Such high rates of turnover make it very difficult to identify which MPs are likely to retain their seats in the future, which means that it is hard to know whether an investment in a promising and reform-minded MP will have any value once elections roll around again. The standard solution is to focus on building the capacity of parliamentary support staff such as committee clerks or research officers. Such investments are valuable, but they inevitably have an attenuated impact on the behaviour of MPs, and an even more tenuous influence on the government.

*(vi) The challenge of unintended side-effects*

Democracy supporters must also deal with the risk that their work will have unintended, negative consequences. Authoritarian backlash is a particularly extreme form of this phenomenon. Democracy support can have other unfortunate side-effects that are less dramatic,

harder to predict, and more difficult to monitor. Democratization is a complex process, so attempts to intervene sometimes have unexpected and undesirable results. Even something as apparently innocuous as efforts to increase popular engagement in politics can backfire. In 2008, a programme designed to encourage citizens to monitor and report instances of electoral malpractice in Georgia's parliamentary elections successfully achieved its goals, but appears to have suppressed voter turnout by about 5% by increasing voters' fears of government surveillance (Driscoll and Hidalgo, 2014).

The challenge of unintended side-effects is similar to, but distinct from, the challenge of managing uncertainty. The latter relates to the unpredictability of events or actors that affect, but are not the direct product of, the programmes of democracy supporters. Uncertainty is primarily the product of external factors. By contrast, unintended side-effects are generated by democracy support programmes themselves. The distinction here is made clearer if we return to the issue of electoral turnover. Elections create uncertainty regardless of what democracy supporters do. In specific cases, that uncertainty may be shaped by democracy supporters' interventions. For example, organizations such as the African Parliamentary Network Against Corruption (APNAC), which recruits MPs committed to fighting corruption across African legislatures, often find that their work disrupted by the uncertain electoral fortunes of their members. This is not simply due to high levels of electoral turnover, but to the reforms championed by APNAC. In many African states, clientelism has been institutionalized as part of an MP's role (Lindberg, 2010). Because constituents tend to expect it, those MPs that refuse to engage in clientelism and devote their time to longer-term structural reforms – i.e. the members of APNAC – are the least likely to secure re-election.

*(vii) The challenge of the funding environment*

In an era of economic austerity, aid budgets, including budgets for democracy support, are under increased pressure. Under the Obama administration there was a substantial decline in US democracy aid. One report pegged this at 28%, noting that cuts were greatest in the Middle East and North Africa, where heightened uncertainty appeared to have outweighed the windows of opportunity created by the Arab Spring (Carothers, 2014). Early signs suggest that the situation is likely to get even tougher under the Trump administration. These signs include reports that the mission statement of the US State Department may be redefined to omit the promotion of democracy (Rogin, 2017), and attempts (rejected by Congress, so far) to cut the budget allocated to the ‘Democracy Fund’ from \$151 million to zero (USGLC, 2017).

Increased pressure on funding for democracy support has not always manifested as budget cuts. In 2016, the UK government doubled its funding to the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy. Yet where budgets have been maintained, democracy supporters are being asked to do more, and to do it better. Funders want to see more innovative methods, demonstrated impact, and measurable results. This combination of demands has the potential to prevent practitioners making more fundamental changes that would increase the impact of their work. In some cases, funding pressures prevent democracy supporters from adopting the recommendations of reviews that funders themselves have commissioned. For example, several reviews of parliamentary strengthening have advised democracy supporters to adopt more long-term approaches (Menocal and O’Neil, 2012; Tostensen and Amundsen, 2010), but most remain bound by short funding cycles that preclude this.

Similarly, while research suggests that democracy supporters need to be better at adapting to context, recognizing local norms and practices that could inform new varieties of democracy (challenge three), they have to account to tax-payers whose money is being spent. Domestic



audiences often expect to hear that their own version of democracy is being promoted – whether this is the most applicable model or not. In 2015, the International Development Committee of the UK’s House of Commons claimed to accept that there was no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to democracy but, noting DFID’s reliance on US organizations to implement democracy programmes, expressed alarm at the prospect of UK taxes being used to promote US models of democracy (International Development Committee, 2015, p. 45).

*(viii) The challenge of defining and demonstrating success*

Democracy is an essentially contested concept, so different democracy supporters have contrasting visions of what it means (Grimm, 2015). This makes it extremely difficult to determine what success looks like and how it should be measured. Does strengthening a single opposition party constitute success, or is such a programme successful only if it changes the nature of the political party system? Evaluations of democracy support also run into a host of methodological challenges (Green and Kohl, 2007). Democratization is a complex, uneven and lengthy process, so the benefits of a particular programme may only come to light years after its conclusion. To cope with this, democracy supporters have invested in strengthening their monitoring and evaluation systems. Yet most evaluations still take place months, not years, after the completion of a given programme.

The complexity of political change also means that confident attribution of causality is often impossible. The activities that comprise a programme may be successfully completed, but the contribution of those activities to changes in the national political regime can be extremely hard to detect. Given the wide range of factors that play into the performance of a political party during an election campaign, is it plausible to attribute an increase in a party’s vote share to a specific intervention? Even where sub-national variation makes this task easier, it is rarely possible to detect whether this has translated into changes in the wider political system. This is

even more difficult when other actors are supporting similar programmes, or indeed even the same institution, especially where limited information is available about other projects.

Except for the small number of cases in which a randomized controlled trial (RCT) is possible, democracy supporters do not have the luxury of testing what would have happened if their programme had not occurred. Even where RCTs are possible, the challenge of linking positive impacts on the behaviour of individuals to positive changes at the systemic level remains. In turn, the difficulty of defining and demonstrating success makes it harder for democracy supporters to defend their budgets during tough economic times, exacerbating the seventh challenge discussed above.

*(ix) The challenge of competing priorities*

The difficulties of sustaining funding and demonstrating success are compounded by another challenge – the competing priorities of donors and other international actors. Democracy support is typically one of a multitude of programmes that a Western government has in a country. Others will be aimed at economic development, brokering access to valuable natural resources, and combatting terrorism. Sometimes programmes will have several objectives. While multiple priorities can sometimes be pursued simultaneously, much of the time they are likely to work against each other (Grimm and Leininger, 2012). In the case of budget support programmes – a high profile attempt to fuse poverty-reduction with the pursuit of democratic reforms – programme managers’ technocratic vision of what those programmes were ‘really about’ tended to squeeze out political objectives (Dodsworth, 2017). Under these kinds of conditions, democracy support is often forced to take a back seat.

The role played by Western governments in propping up authoritarian allies around the world during the Cold War is well known (Westad, 2005). since the attacks of 11 September 2001, a

similar phenomenon has been identified with regards to those states that have found themselves on the frontline of the war-on-terror. The rise of al Qaeda and similar groups around the world fundamentally changed the outlook of the US and many of its allies. As Thomas Carothers has argued, one consequence of this shift was that American foreign policy under President George W. Bush came to reflect something of a split personality, ‘Bush the realist’ actively cultivates warm relationship with “friendly tyrants” in many parts of the world, while “Bush the neo-Reaganite” makes ringing calls for a new democracy campaign in the Middle East’ (Carothers, 2003, p. 85). Today, this is a global problem. In 2007, the highest recipients of military aid and financing in Africa were all states classified by Freedom House as either being ‘Not Free’ or ‘Partly Free,’ including Djibouti and Sudan (Cheeseman, 2015).

The impact of these contradictions on the work of democracy supporters has been dramatic. Many authoritarian governments around the world have manipulated US support for anti-terror legislation to introduce legal changes that enable them to erode human rights, and to crack down on civil society organizations and opposition political groups. In Kenya, a coalition of human rights groups came together in 2015 to condemn the government for using the cover of an anti-terror campaign to intimidate civil society (Cheeseman, 2015). In this way, the activities of other branches of government often serve to undermine precisely those groups that democracy supporters are trying to strengthen.

**(x) *The challenge of a limited evidence base***

The challenges identified above are exacerbated by the limited and conflicting evidence base that underpins democracy support. There is a curious discrepancy between the findings of quantitative and qualitative research. Cross-country quantitative studies tend to show that, at the aggregate level, aid targeted at strengthening democracy has a positive impact (Dietrich and Wright, 2015; Jones and Tarp, 2016; Scott and Steele, 2011). In contrast, qualitative

analyses often struggle to find anything positive to say about the international community's efforts to support democracy (Bader, 2010; Spoerri, 2010; Zeeuw, 2010). This divergence limits the utility of research to practitioners.

The utility of research is also limited because it is relatively scarce. One reason for this scarcity is the fact that, until quite recently, those who engaged in democracy support rarely commissioned rigorous, independent evaluations of their work. When they did, the results were generally not made publicly available (Erdmann, 2005). This reflects a broader disconnect between the academy and the policy world, which have not tended to be systematically engaged in what is now termed 'knowledge exchange.' The lack of knowledge sharing also reflects the kind of work done by democracy supporters. In repressive environments, practitioners must work discretely to win the trust of suspicious partners. Moreover, despite common goals, democracy supporters often compete for funding. They are understandably reluctant to share full details of their programmes and strategies, or their failures and weaknesses, with potential rivals.

In the years to come, these problems may get worse as efforts to adapt to context and confront politics (challenges (iii) and (iv)) encourage providers of democracy support to devolve more responsibility to local actors as a way of building democracy 'from the bottom up', increasing the number of relevant actors. As this happens, systematic research into the methods employed by democracy supporters and the outcomes they deliver will become more necessary, but increasingly difficult to produce. As it is, the aversion to sharing lessons learned has undermined the ability of the democracy support sector to cumulatively build a body of knowledge that could alleviate the challenges we identify above, particularly those of confronting politics, adapting to context, and demonstrating success. In this sense, the

challenges facing democracy supporters are both internal and external to the sector and need to be understood, and tackled, with this in mind.

### **Overcoming the challenges of democracy support**

Many of the challenges facing democracy supporters stem from factors beyond their control. They cannot simply create countries in which it is easier to support democracy, nor singlehandedly improve the economic context so that funding levels rise. To date, the literature on democracy support has proposed a number of solutions to these challenges, all of which are related to the kinds of strategies that policy makers employ. For example, one set of recommendations has focused on the limited coordination within the donor community. While this recommendation is made more frequently with respect to development aid than democracy support, several analysts have pointed out that donors would be far more likely to achieve democratic breakthroughs if they were to pool resources, agree a common agenda and present a united front (for example, see Faust et al., 2012; Grimm 2015).

Another proposed solution has focused on the negative impact of perceived Western hypocrisy on the credibility of democracy promotion efforts around the world. In the wake of African criticism of the tendency of the International Criminal Court to select African targets, and the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, researchers have argued that the perception of Western double standards has undermined the legitimacy of pro-democracy initiatives (Carothers, 2017). On this interpretation, winning the battle for hearts and minds requires reforming international institutions to make them more inclusive and representative, as well as maintaining high democratic standards back home.

While recognizing the importance of these issues and others like them, we suggest that insufficient attention has been paid to the paucity of the evidence base available to policy

makers, and important limitations in the way in which policy research is bring produced. This is particularly significant because better evidence will make it easier to respond to all of the challenges identified above. This is especially true of those issues for which the difficulty for policy makers is mainly or in part related to a lack of information and knowledge, such as: authoritarian backlash (ii); the challenge of adapting to local context (iii); the need to think and work politically (iv); the risk of unintended side effects (vi); and, the difficulty of defining and demonstrating success (viii). Moreover, to the extent that better-informed policy is likely to be more successful, improving the evidence base will also enable democracy supporters to demonstrate that they are providing value for money, and hence help in the battle for scarce government resources within competing government priorities (ix).

This raises the question of how the evidence base can be improved. We identify three main strategies that we can use to achieve this. The first is to be more open in the way that data is produced, analysed and shared. In 2010, Gero Erdmann observed a disconnect between research on political parties and political party assistance in practice, complaining that ‘the knowledge we have about political party assistance is not based on systematic political science research projects’ (Erdmann, 2010, p. 1280). For the most part, this remains the case – and applies with respect to democracy support more broadly – because those engaged in democracy support are wary of opening their programmes to outsiders. This is not simply due to fears of criticism, though that likely plays a role. It is also due to well-grounded concerns that claiming credit for political reforms will undermine local ownership and sabotage successful programmes by helping authoritarian leaders to brand them as the product of foreign interference.

However, it should be feasible to share evidence with a greater number of ‘outsiders’ – including more academic researchers – without making it fully public. Although some informal

sharing does take place at present, this is typically on a very small scale and the authors have personally experienced requests for information being rejected. Increasing the flow of data would be an important step; to overcome the challenge of a limited evidence base academics and researchers need access to evidence that only democracy supporters can provide. This, in turn, requires democracy supporters to structure the data that they collect in a way that makes it easier to share, and to become more tolerant of criticism. In the last few years, some have taken steps in this direction. The Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (NIMD) has made several evaluations of its work publicly available (Piron, 2015; Schakel and Svåsand, 2014), while WFD has adopted a more open and critical approach to its work in the wake of a parliamentary enquiry into the UK's contribution to legislative strengthening (International Development Committee, 2015). This is a good start, but both NIMD and WFD remain relatively small players, and their transparency remains an exception, rather than the rule. A broader range of democracy supporters need to share their 'lessons learnt' in a more systematic way if the challenges of democracy support are to be overcome.

A second strategy for overcoming these challenges is to bridge the gap between researchers, and the practitioners and policy makers who work to support democracy. This gap persists, in part, because political scientists often gravitate towards analysis of democratization – where the audience is larger – rather than democracy support. The two are related, but distinct spheres of enquiry. The former tends to focus on three things: the structural factors, such as the level of economic development, that determine whether democratic progress is probable; the bargains that are made among political elites, or between elites and the masses, that slowly shift a system towards democracy; and, the behavioural and cultural changes that help democracies to survive in the long-term. Research on democracy support represents a much narrower sphere of enquiry. It involves analysing the capacity of international actors to

incrementally strengthen specific institutions and values and alter the incentives facing those individuals who are in a position to block, or champion, political change.

Given this distinction, it is problematic to assume that research on democratization necessarily speaks to the challenges of democracy support and vice versa. While sometimes it does (for example, see Levitsky and Way, 2006), it often does not. Moreover, conflating democratization and democracy support is unhelpful for our purposes as it shifts the focus away from the strategies and options available to governments and aid agencies seeking to strengthen democracy abroad. It also fosters a belief that there is far more research on democracy support than is the case. Indeed, it is remarkable how few academic publications deal directly with democracy support compared to the wealth of studies on democratization. In the decade from 2007 to 2016, peer-reviewed social science journals published 5,726 articles that focussed on democratization, but only 432 that focussed on democracy support.<sup>6</sup>

Policy-minded researchers also need to do more to recognize and reach across this divide. At present research on democracy support tends to fall into one of three categories. The first category comprises cross-national quantitative analyses that capture democracy support by measuring of the volume of aid devoted to that task. This type of research is valuable because it identifies patterns in the ‘big picture,’ but it is of limited utility to democracy supporters. It might tell them where to spend their money, but it cannot tell them how to spend it, particularly given anecdotal evidence that some higher impact programmes are relatively cheap. The second category of research comprises country-level analyses, typically qualitative discussions of a single case, or perhaps a comparison of two countries. Such research helps us to identify where democracy supporters have, collectively, had more (or less) success. However, it struggles to explain which kinds of activities are most effective, and has limited generalizability. This makes it extremely difficult for researchers to provide policy makers and



practitioners with concrete recommendations about the kinds of programmes likely to have the greatest impact.

The problem of generating policy relevant results stems, in part, from the fact that it is often unclear why certain interventions fail. In the absence of programme-level research, it is tempting to conclude that failure was due to a lack of coordination on the part of international actors (implying programmes would have worked if they were implemented better), or contextual factors (such as ethnic divisions) beyond donors control (implying programmes were doomed to failure from the start). Without in-depth research on the aims, implementation and outcomes of specific programmes, assessing the impact of programme design and management on key outcomes is all but impossible. Bridging the gap between research and practice will make it feasible to conduct more research at the level of programmes, which is the most relevant from the point of view of practitioners.

This raises the question of how the gap between research and practice can be closed. We suggest two ways to advance this agenda. The first is to develop new analytical tools that help to translate backwards-looking research findings into forward-looking suggestions. Converting research findings into practical recommendations inevitably involves generalizing from limited experience. Analysis of existing programmes can carefully dissect exactly what went right and what went wrong. Turning this into a set of general principles to guide the interventions of democracy supporters requires transforming this information into a set of more broadly applicable propositions, something that inevitably does violence to the specifics of individual cases. The fact that research in the social sciences is by nature backward looking, while policy and practice is more future-oriented also makes it difficult to convert academic research into concrete, ‘take home’ lessons that democracy supporters can incorporate into policy and practice.

A possible route through this impasse would be for researchers to devise new ways of comparing the different options that democracy supporters must choose between in different contexts. In 2008, Peter Burnell made a similar suggestion (Burnell, 2008), but to date no solutions have been put forward; we still need new ways of categorizing democracy support programmes in ways that expose the advantages and disadvantages that different choices entail. In a recent paper, we have made tentative steps in this direction (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2018b). It is beyond the scope of this article to fully reprise our argument here, but we start from the basis that democracy support programmes vary in several key dimensions. These include their focal point (issue or institution) and the scope of who they include (narrow or broad).

The point at which donors position themselves on these scales has changed over time in response to experience and trends (some might say fashions) within the sector. For example, historically many programs tended to be institution-focussed because this was viewed as being less risky and more likely to generate sustainable change (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2018b). However, over recent years there has been a trend towards more issue-based approaches, focussing on themes such as human rights and gender inequality. This has been driven in part by disappointment with the outcome of institutional programs, in part by strengthening norms in favour of these rights in Western states, and in part by the rise of the Millennium (now Sustainable) Development Goals and the adoption of rights-based approaches by prominent NGOs such as Oxfam. We argue that both issue-based and institution-based approaches have a role to play, but that donors need to better understand their pros and cons.

To this end, we identify a set of trade-offs that occur as a result of the way that interventions are designed. There is no perfect programme, but when the pros and cons of different focal points and levels of inclusion are explicitly identified, practitioners and donors can decide

which costs are worth paying given the benefits on offer. Further work along these lines can help to translate prior experience with democracy promotion into a set of future-oriented guidelines setting out what is most likely to work, when, and in what way. In turn, this analysis could help democracy supporters to learn valuable lessons about how they should be adapting to context in their programming (challenge iii), and exactly how they can adapt their approach to think and work politically (challenge iv).

Our second suggestion for closing the gap between research and practice is to change the way in which research on democracy support is conducted. There needs to be more collaboration from the very start of programmes to the very end, building sophisticated research design in to the core of new interventions. Developments along these lines have already begun to take place in a small number of projects in which intensive monitoring and evaluation components have been integrated in to donor interventions. In recent years there have been a number of examples of prominent academic figures analysing interventions, such as the introduction parliamentary scorecards that rate the performance of MPs, and then evaluating their effect (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2012). However, this remains far from the norm. Even when it has occurred, the analysis tends to focus on the specific impact of a new piece of technology or innovation in a particular area (does the introduction of scorecards generate greater demand for accountability?), rather than the broader impact of donor programmes (did investment in accountability and participation promote democracy?).

Expanding and mainstreaming this kind of policy/research collaboration will create new practical and ethical challenges, which we elaborate elsewhere (see Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2018a). It will also require democracy supporters to invest in research, something that is rarely part of their core mandates and so can only be achieved if funders can be persuaded to come on board. In this sense, improving the impact of democracy support will require the

reform of the democracy promotion industry. While this may increase upfront costs, it will have significant long-term benefits. In addition to improving the general evidence base available to researchers and policy makers, more rigorous monitoring and evaluation strategies will help to better understand the potential negative side effects that may be associated with some interventions (challenge vi), and to develop more nuanced and persuasive ways to define and demonstrate success (challenge x).

Finally, for these strategies to pay dividends, it will be important to generate more realistic assessments of what is possible and in what time frame – otherwise we risk generating overly critical evaluations of projects that never stood a chance of success. Researchers and practitioners must explain to funding bodies, foreign ministries and heads of government that democracy support is harder than it was in the past, and so it is important to be realistic about what programmes can achieve, and the time frame in which they can achieve it. This is not an easy thing to do. Democracy support is competitive, so practitioners do not always have incentives to be frank with their funders about the probability of success, the likely magnitude of change, or how much time it will take to achieve.

The pressure to achieve results quickly can compound this problem. Democratic consolidation can take decades, but in the business of democracy support, three years is ‘long-term.’ Even where the government agencies funding democracy support are willing to commit to multi-year programmes, annual budget cycles tend to remain unchanged. Thus, most democracy support organizations continue to face considerable pressure to spend their funds by the end of the financial year lest they be lost to others. Those who delay an event to deal with one of the challenges to democracy support, such as responding to context or mitigating uncertainty, can find themselves penalized for doing so. Less rigid budget deadlines would give democracy supporters the flexibility they need to deal with the challenges that arise in their work. This

requires democracy supporters – and researchers – to convince funders that such a change is necessary, and requires donors to develop funding mechanisms that provide flexibility in a manner that can be reconciled with accountability to citizens, whose taxes fund democracy support. Demonstrating success will also require practitioners to be clearer and firmer about which interventions are unlikely to succeed, encouraging donors to focus their investments on the programmes and countries in which uncertainty can be best managed, and democracy support is least likely to generate authoritarian backlash (challenge ii). Only when this is done will the strategies discussed here play a significant role in assisting policy makers to overcome the barriers to successful democracy support.

### **The future of democracy support**

The full set of challenges facing democracy supporters are rarely set out systematically. Presenting them together, and highlighting the interactions between them – which are often mutually reinforcing – might make them seem insurmountable. However, mapping out these obstacles is an important step because it serves to highlight just how much the limited evidence base exacerbates attempts to deal with other challenges. Most of the challenges of democracy support stem from factors that are outside of the direct control of the sector; there is little that donors can do to make the hard cases less difficult, or to escape the uncertainty that is inherent in efforts to support democracy. The paucity of the evidence base underpinning democracy support is different. It is something that can be changed. While building a better evidence base on democracy support will not automatically solve all of the diverse challenges that policy makers face, it will make a number of them more manageable and point towards tactics that might allow them to be overcome. This makes it imperative to find better ways to connect research on democratization with the practice and policy of democracy support. Other

researchers have identified the disconnect between research and practice before us, but to date there has been little analysis of its precise consequences, and why it is so persistent. The last few years have witnessed relatively few suggestions as to what steps can be taken to change the status quo. In this article, we set out not simply to identify the problem, but to suggest concrete measures that can be taken to overcome it.

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<sup>1</sup> Though past work uses the term ‘democracy promotion,’ we primarily use ‘democracy support’ due to a strong preference for this term among policy makers.

<sup>2</sup> The more precise figures given by Barry (2012) are based on ODA commitments reported (by donors) to the OECD-DAC as being for the purpose of ‘Government & Civil Society,’ excluding aid flows to the ‘Conflict prevention and resolution, peace and security’ sector. They should be taken only as a rough approximation of spending in this area, as the OECD-DAC purpose codes do not map neatly to a clear definition of ‘democracy support.’ They are, however, consistent with figures quoted elsewhere (e.g. Carothers, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Although this phenomenon has also been observed in older democracies, our focus is on those regimes that have been the targets of democracy support.

<sup>4</sup> This research project includes a post-doctoral position funded by WFD. It has produced a series of policy papers on issues including parliamentary strengthening and political party support. Policy papers are available at <https://democracypromotion.wordpress.com/publications/>.

<sup>5</sup> Although parliaments are political institutions, donors generally consider support to them to be less political because it is provided to the institution, rather than to partisan political actors.

<sup>6</sup> Based on searches of the Scopus database (<https://www.scopus.com>). We categorised articles as focussing on democracy support if they included the terms ‘democracy support,’ ‘democracy assistance,’ ‘democracy promotion’ or ‘democracy aid’ in their title, abstract or keywords. We categorized articles as focussing on democratization if they included the terms ‘democratization,’ ‘democratic consolidation’ or ‘democratic transition’ in those fields.

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