

## **Symposium on New Efforts to Promote Democracy**

Taiwan Democracy Program, Center on Democracy, Development & the Rule of Law, and Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies  
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### **Some reflections on the history and mission of IDASA**

**PM Graham**

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In August, the managers of IDASA's specialist programmes will meet for their annual strategic planning meeting for the 20<sup>th</sup> time. At this event, they will review the mission of the organisation, conduct an organizational audit which includes an appraisal of the context within which IDASA operates, the project portfolio which it has developed and the resources which it has at its disposal to conduct its various projects and activities. While the agenda is still being established and the preparatory work must still be undertaken by the various staff teams, I expect that this year we will spend considerable time reviewing the rather substantial organizational restructuring which has been undertaken over the last 24 months and the evolving African project of economic integration and political/constitutional harmonization set in place through the African Union.

It will consider the implications of its present mission – the promotion of sustainable democracy based on active citizenship, democratic institutions and social justice – for the countries within which we have offices – South Africa, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe – those where we have a range of ongoing projects – Uganda, Zambia, Angola, Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania, Mozambique, Swaziland – and those where we have partners and obligations to assist those partners in their work. It will be helped in this by looking at the results of the Afrobarometer, a citizen survey in 18 African countries in which it is a partner organisation, and various other governance studies, some of which it contributes to.

At the conclusion of this strategic workshop IDASA will amend its closed circulation Strategic Review document which forms the basis of its project development.

Some time ago, we were challenged to decide whether we would be democracy activists in South Africa, where we were founded in 1987 and in which we had conducted the majority of our work, often in the early days with support from democrats in other countries, and technical assistants or consultants outside South Africa. We have chosen to take a normative approach everywhere we operate. This does not mean we do the same thing everywhere; indeed it ensures that we do not and cannot.

DT Niles, a Sri Lankan theologian, described evangelism as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find food”. To the extent that it is possible, our staff follow a similar approach in the work that we do. We start from the premise that Africans want the personal power, self-government, autonomy and

KUTLWANONG DEMOCRACY CENTRE  
CNR VISAGIE & PRINSLOO STREETS • PRETORIA 0001  
PO BOX 56950 • ARCADIA 0007 • SOUTH AFRICA  
TEL + (012) 392-0500 • FAX +27 (012) 320-2414

[www.idasa.org](http://www.idasa.org) • REG NO: 198700079/08

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freedom that comes with democracy, narrowly defined, and that they will use the public space that democracy provides to expand these freedoms, protect their rights and make development choices which are appropriate to their own needs.

The Board of IDASA established some time ago the principle that expanding our work into other countries in Africa could not be done unless we continued to work to strengthen and deepen democracy in South Africa. While this was to become our base for operations and our staff and projects were to increasingly treat it only as one country amongst many, it provided legitimacy as well as the primary lessons about how to develop projects in authoritarian circumstances, during democratic transitions, and in post conflict and poor countries.

While we are thinking hard about democracy and the importance of active citizenship, democratic institutions and social justice for ensuring that we can build democratic societies in Africa – and forge appropriate procedures and practices to meet immediate challenges and also ensure that future as yet unpredictable problems can be resolved – we are more interested in giving people space to have their own discussions about democracy than in telling them what we think. It turns out that these conversations do not come easily to many societies and much of what we do is establish, support and organize these conversations. We are fortunate in that we have been able to point to normative frameworks for democracy which are indigenous – in the first place, the constitutional history of South Africa and the 1996 constitution, and more recently the Constitutive Act of the African Union and the Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.

We think our core skills are social research and analysis, training and public education, coalition and network building, political facilitation (combining advocacy, dialogue, problem solving, consultancy, and project management) and monitoring and information dissemination. Each of our projects contains elements of some or all of these. In the distant past in South Africa we were complete generalists, ready to do anything that might push the democratic project forward, and focusing quite intently on certain influential elites and how best they could be bound in to this project.

Over time, however, we have begun to focus on certain sectors which seem to match our capabilities and make a real difference. So we presently have programme groups which focus on economic governance, including budget transparency; political governance, including parliamentary engagement with citizens and local governance; community and citizen empowerment; migration policy; and governance and HIV/AIDS; and police reform. In each of these programme groups we expect projects to be developed which encourage engagement between governments and their citizens. As we consider capacity to consist of two aspects – willingness and ability – we tend to ask ourselves whether the particular problem being faced is the result of lack of will or ability. On the whole, we will start with the assumption that it is the latter and look for the best in everybody. We are working with complex situations and institutions, and we are looking for allies in the promotion of democracy. These can be found in many places.

Of course, we do work in places where there are some who do not want democracy. But even in such places there are pro-democracy groups and individuals, and it is possible to consider ways in which the balance of forces may be changed. We are not sure that there are short cuts to building democratic societies. Better to accept this and plan long term strategies rather than a series of short term projects predicated on rapid change.

It is for this reason that we have recently developed a series of educational courses based on substantial investments in relatively small groups of people. We are busy building this project into a School for

Democracy which draws quite heavily from the popular education traditions of South Africa and the 'folkbildning' processes of Sweden. Our citizen leadership course, for example, insists that individuals who attend the four month programme are sponsored by an organisation, attend together with a mentor, conduct activities back home which can be evaluated, and join a post course alumni society which is self-organised and continues to support graduates of the programme.

I have tried to describe an organisation which learns from its work. Indeed, there is some evidence that we go through a cycle which follows a relatively consistent pattern. We identify a gap – some democratic deficit if you will. We build social pressure to do something about this, including developing options as to how this might be done. When the society starts to act, we offer policy support, drafting legislation, conducting participatory processes, educating people to make use of these if they exist, and amplifying voices which might otherwise be silent. Once the policy is in place, we will assist in ensuring implementation, either by building capacity, by rolling up our sleeves ourselves, or by monitoring the actions of others. Inevitably this means that new gaps are identified.

This is a long cycle – and we cannot pretend that we are consistently successful. Fortunately there are potential achievements and milestones at each part of this cycle. We have also been fortunate to find financial partners willing to support various projects – but invariably we have to communicate much shorter planning cycles and much more concrete objectives in order to obtain this support. So keeping an eye on the bigger processes and the long term mission can be difficult. Keeping our leadership and managing the relationship between project objectives (and log frames) and mission requires a certain degree of missionary fervour and organisational creativity, especially for people working in weak currencies and far from the funding capitals.

We realize that if it is difficult for us, it is even more difficult for many of our partners in other parts of Africa. Figuring out how to manage these inequalities and develop a continental organisation, albeit one based in one of the key African capitals, is an increasing challenge. Our Nigerian office is staffed by Nigerians and has just been headed by a Nigerian. It has a Nigerian board and that board is represented amongst the members of our company – the people who own IDASA on behalf of a larger public. Our staff is increasingly cosmopolitan, but still is dominated by South Africans. Any project site office employs nationals and in most countries we have a civil society partner with, in some countries, memoranda of understanding with government institutions. Indeed, because we believe that democracy requires indigenous organized civil society, we are very conscious of taking up space which should be occupied by such organisations, whether this is the policy space or the resources of the donor community.

Negotiating these complexities does take a considerable amount of time, and as we expand it becomes difficult. Unless we can find a financial partner – whether through competing for a grant, developing a joint project, or sub-contracting to a donor or a donor contractor – we cannot do the work, however much we think it might need to be done. And political work is time sensitive – two year planning cycles might be possible with some activities but others require a confluence of political will, the right actors, and the right activities all applied at a particularly apposite time. Fortunately there are still some donors who can meet these challenges, or have some spare change which can be used. Often these activities require little money but they do require available staff, with time. Keeping such staff and making sure they have the time is not easy when they are working on long term structured grants or cost recovery consultations.

These financial partnerships come in a variety of forms, most of a standard nature and almost entirely drawing on international development funds, however mediated. From the beginning, we have tried to

maintain a broad spectrum of donors in order to avoid become dependent on one source of funds and become too closely associated with that source. We have been less successful in mobilizing African funds and this is a matter of continuing concern.

We have for some time been involved in three funding arrangements – donor, domestic government and us as a non-governmental agency. With South Africa becoming more involved in democracy promotion in Africa, we are seeing the emergence – less rapidly than wished for – of so-called trilateral arrangements: donor, domestic government, South African government and, in some cases, us as a non-governmental agency. In the DRC we act as a mediating agency for local civil society groups.

Let me conclude by re-iterating the point that democracy is not an imposition from outside. It is both an aspiration of oppressed and marginalized people throughout the world and, since 1948, an internationally recognised human right. South Africans fought for and achieved this democracy and have begun to build a democratic society. How can we deny others the same privilege we have received, especially since so many contributed to our freedom? Promoting democracy is for us an obligation. Ensuring that democracies get established, strengthened and deepened in ways that are sustainable in the various contexts within which Africans live demands that we apply our minds professionally and thoughtfully, but not without passion.

## *Appendix – extract from the IDASA Strategic Review, end 2006.*

“Social scientists have identified three key factors crucial to sustaining and consolidating democratic rule. The first fact has to do with economics. ... wealthier countries are far more likely to maintain democratic rule. Poor countries can, however, increase the prospects of democratic endurance if their economies grow steadily and if they reduce inequalities. ... The second has to do with political institutions. That is sustainable democracies require a professional civil service and strong viable and autonomous courts, legislatures, executives and electoral systems at national and local levels. ... The third factor has to do with the attitudes of rulers and citizens. Put simply, democracies require democrats.”<sup>1</sup>

IDASA acts on the understanding that democracy must grow country by country, and that the manifestations of democracy – its procedures and practices – will differ from country to country. However, there is increasing consensus about both the value and necessity of democracy as opposed to other forms of government, and about the basic norms and standards of these democracies. Indeed, the constitutional democracy in South Africa, with its values and bill of rights, and its commitment to representation and participation is providing an inspiration to citizens in many countries, even if the institutional manifestations of that constitution are not viable within their contexts.<sup>2</sup>

We have been an Institute for Democracy based in South Africa, making use of South African experience and expertise working with colleagues and partners in this and other countries in Africa to build, deepen, and strengthen democracy. Our legitimacy and our practice in large part came from a continuing commitment to the needs of South Africa. From 1998 onward we had country projects in Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Angola, Nigeria and Malawi, and multi-country programmes in which we are able to provide cross country comparatives and sharing of expertise. In 2005, it became apparent to us that we had a role and responsibility in the continent, based on the lessons learned during this period.

All of the various projects in which we are engaged emerge from a combination of local demand, anecdotal need, consultation and the matching of our expertise, local partners and available financing. Our local know-how is kept current by the fact that we are not merely a think tank or research organisation but also are involved in training, public education, and what we call facilitation – a combination of advocacy, problem solving, consultancy (in the best sense of the word), and project management; but we do also have what is now probably the most effective governance and democracy research tool on the continent – the Afrobarometer. This tool received the 2004 Data Set Award of the American Political Science Association's Comparative Politics Section. It enables us to match our strategic sense of what is important and relevant with the perceptions of African citizens from 15-18 countries, and over time it will also enable us to measure the impact of democracy promotion work in those countries even if we cannot separate our efforts from those of others and from the more general milieu which either enhances or hinders democracy.

### **I. THE MISSION**

**IDASA is an independent public interest organization committed to promoting sustainable democracy based on active citizenship, democratic institutions and social justice**

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<sup>1</sup> Mattes, R. *Healthy democracies? The potential impact of AIDS on democracy in Southern Africa*. Institute for Security Studies paper 71, 2003. Page 2.

<sup>2</sup> Opening comment extracted from Executive Report to IDASA Council of Members June 2004