

MICRO-ASSISTANCE TO DEMOCRACY: TWO REVOLUTIONS IN PROMOTING CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

Despite acknowledging the need for nurturing democracy from within, democracy assistance programmes have often been carried out in a top-down fashion. By starting from the limits of democracy assistance, this article outlines the notion of micro-assistance to democracy, which can be defined as support to local civil society organisations operating at the most grassroots level, and establishes a comparison between micro-assistance to democracy and the case of micro-credit in anti-poverty policies. Both micro-credit and micro-assistance to democracy share the same understanding of development (the former economic, the latter political) as a bottom-up process. In cases of democratic consolidation where it is deemed to be a feasible and effective approach, micro-assistance to democracy encourages the deepening of democratic practices and vertical accountability and responsiveness. Acknowledging the potential of micro-assistance to democracy would bring about two revolutions in the way democracy assistance has been traditionally conceived of. The first revolution is a Copernican revolution, since democratic consolidation comes to be understood as a mainly bottom-up process, radically opposite to the more traditional top-down rationale of the last decade of democracy promotion policies. The second revolution regards how to measure democratic advancement. Arguing that

democracy assistance can more effectively be assessed at the micro-level of local projects, this analysis maintains that micro-assistance to democracy provides international donors with more reliable information on the impact of democracy assistance programmes. Since micro-assistance to democracy produces a regression to local democratic development as the first source of knowledge, this second revolution might be seen as a Cartesian epistemological reconstruction.

1. INTRODUCTION: TWO REVOLUTIONS IN SUPPORTING CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY

Foreign actors have always influenced political changes in developing countries. During the Cold War, for instance, Western governments extensively promoted their political and economic interests in areas as various as Latin America, Africa and Asia, often by opposing democratically elected governments under the justification of countering the 'red danger' of quickly-spreading socialist ideals. Since 1990, with the apparent victory of liberal democracy over all possible alternatives, the promotion of democracy has become part of the foreign policy agenda of Western governments (Fukuyama, 1992; Diamond, 1992; Carothers, 1999). Not only did humanitarian interventions become common in several regions of the world, but international interference for promoting democracy and protecting human rights also came to be justified as duties of the international community.

As one of several democracy promotion policies, democracy assistance differentiates itself from other instruments since it understands consolidation of democracy as an internal process that cannot be forced from the outside. However, despite acknowledging the need for nurturing democracy from within, democracy assistance programmes have often been carried out in a top-down fashion.

Besides other intrinsic limits, this top-down approach has ultimately undermined the effectiveness of democracy assistance in most cases. Indeed, one of the challenges posed to many democratic consolidations stems from local democratic development: in practice this means that, despite that political elites have been socialised into the newly democratic regime, the majority of the population still lives under non-democratic power structures that resemble patrimonialism

(O'Donnell, 1993; Mamdani, 1996). This element should also be regarded with concern when considered together with further problems such as the limited political responsiveness and accountability of representatives to the citizens, the high level of poverty that affects most of the population, and the difficulty of delivering policies due to poor institutional structures and scarce contact between the grassroots population and state institutions.

By starting from the limits of democracy assistance, this article outlines the notion of micro-assistance to democracy, which can be defined as support to local civil society organisations operating at the most grassroots level of a society with the closest contact with the population. By establishing a parallel between economic and political development, this article compares micro-assistance to democracy with the case of micro-credit in anti-poverty policies. In the case of micro-credit, a radical bottom-up inversion of traditional financial instruments proved more effective than longstanding macro-policies backed up by international financial institutions. According to this analysis, the same might apply to micro-assistance to democracy since it can promote consolidation of democracy by fostering popular participation and vertical accountability. In this view, micro-assistance to democracy would bring about two revolutions in the way democracy assistance has traditionally been conceived of. The first revolution is a Copernican revolution, since democratic consolidation comes to be understood as a mainly bottom-up process, radically opposite to the more traditional top-down rationale of the last decade of democracy promotion policies. The second revolution regards how knowledge about democratic advancement can be produced: according to this view, democracy assistance can more effectively be assessed at the micro-level of local projects where monitoring and evaluation produce significant information on the concrete impact of programmes on their beneficiaries. At the same time, more reliable knowledge about the impact of programmes can be also utilised to attempt a reconstruction of potential outcomes at different levels, from the micro- to the macro-level. In this respect, since micro-assistance to democracy allows for a regression to local democratic development as a source of more reliable information, the second revolution might be seen as a Cartesian epistemological reconstruction of knowledge.

2. PROMOTING CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY: TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES

Promoting democracy became an overtly publicised task for many international actors after the end of the Cold War. The main reason for the factual absence of official pro-democracy policies is to be found within the dynamics of a world divided between two spheres of influence: the capitalist governments led by the United States of America (US) and the socialist countries under the influence of the Soviet Union. In general, the foreign policy agenda of the US was tailored to counter the spread of socialist movements, most of which were backed by broad support at the grassroots level.¹⁾ If not in official terms, this task led to an actual anti-democratic foreign policy in many areas of the world in which popular activism and participation were seen as the uncontrollable springboard for socially oriented policies. Support was offered to authoritarian forces with the consequence of wiping out grassroots mobilisation under the motivation of erasing all initiatives that might have been even remotely regarded as a threat to capitalist control over the political and economic space.

During the 1970s and 1980s the political discourse of democracy promotion was haphazardly employed when it suited the strategic interests of Western governments. For instance, during the 1980s the US President, Ronald Reagan, supported the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy, and many European governments declared their opposition to the authoritarian system of *apartheid* in South Africa. Yet in both cases the official positions were extremely mild and the task of promoting democracy fell to the bottom of the actual political and economic agendas of Western governments (Holland 1988; Carothers 1999).²⁾ The US reinforced its support to fierce dictatorships in Central and South America, as well as Asia and the Middle East, while European governments kept backing (at least economically) warlords and strongmen in Africa.

With the end of the Cold War, the promotion of democracy was slowly rediscovered as a task of established liberal democracies. For security and economic reasons, the spread of democratic regimes was viewed as a way of reducing conflicts, as well as promoting trade

and financial cooperation in an ever more global market economy. Accordingly, the promotion of democracy became a core issue in foreign policy for government and non-government actors, and the official expenditure on pro-democracy programmes peaked during the 1990s both in Europe and America (Carothers, 1999; Youngs, 2001b). International actors became more and more varied. Besides governments, including secret services and a vast array of government-agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the European Commission (EC), many private actors came to the stage, including a vast and burgeoning network of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social movements, private foundations, religious associations, party organisations and the like. With the introduction of financial aid to encourage democracy, many of these new entities started performing the role of international donors.

Acknowledging the wave of pro-democracy policies and programmes of the 1990s does not imply that the goal of promoting democracy became genuinely pursued without other implications or hidden agendas, especially as a means of promoting economic liberalisation and financial adjustment. Yet, even in those cases in which pro-democracy policies have been designed with the honest commitment of fostering democracy in a target country, problems and deficiencies have often proved overwhelming and have by far outweighed the presumably good intentions, with extremely scarce (to not say nonexistent) benefits for the intended beneficiaries.

Under the definition of 'democracy promotion', scholars and practitioners usually mean a variety of policies that swing from highly coercive instruments such as military intervention, sanctions and embargoes, to softer instruments such as conditionality and democracy assistance (Brouwer and Schmitter, 1999; Burnell, 2000). Democracy assistance refers to the practical implementation of that part of foreign aid that regards democracy issues and that is usually termed 'political aid': under this category, we find programmes aimed at institution building, as well as support to parliaments, political parties, civil society organisations and the like. However, the distinction between democracy assistance and other measures of democracy promotion is not only grounded on the acceptability of the intervention. More importantly, instead, it is based on a different understanding of democratisation dynamics: whereas other instruments (for example, military

intervention, sanctions) imply that democracy can be imposed from the outside, democracy assistance implicitly accepts that democratic development is mainly an internal process in which domestic forces are the key players. In this respect, democracy assistance understands foreign political intervention as a means of triggering democratisation from within (Burnell, 2000).

However, the limits of democracy promotion policies are also intuitive. Whereas non-democratic regimes can be forcefully imposed on the population with the collusion of foreign actors, this can obviously not apply to the case of promoting democracy, which must receive the consent of the citizens. This radical distinction narrows the range of policies available to international actors. Indeed, while it is relatively easy for international actors to back up authoritarian forces that can rely on highly coercive (and hence controllable) means, it is extremely difficult to stimulate democracy without exerting detrimental influence on the entire political system. Therefore, whereas the system of international influence that dominated the Cold War era proved extremely fit to counter democratic development, the same system struggles nowadays to be turned into a driving force toward democracy.

This limit has consequences on the entire democracy promotion process. During pre-transitional phases, external actors are often faced with high levels of uncertainty given that the democratisation process is extremely volatile and genuine democratising forces are not well defined (Whitehead, 1996a). As a consequence, promoting democracy during transition is relatively difficult and the likelihood of failure is comparatively higher than in successive phases (Brouwer and Schmitter, 1999). Obviously, the underlying assumption here is that the goal of democracy promotion policies is the achievement of a democratic regime. In fact, many international actors might (and often do) have 'hidden agendas' whose real goal is likely to be different from genuine democracy promotion. Yet, even in cases of genuine engagement for democracy promotion, limits are overwhelming and the whole range of instruments available to promote democratic transitions can rightly be called into question.

In those cases in which a transition to democratic rule has been positively achieved, the problems involved in the consolidation process might nevertheless be challenging. In this context the action of international actors might become more effective, at least poten-

tially, given that all forces playing in the arena (for example, parties, interest groups, civil society organisations) are somehow more definite and their role is more delineated. On the other hand, though, the importance of international actors diminishes too, since the process is already ongoing and the room of manoeuvre is comparatively smaller than during transition (Burnell, 2000). However, when one looks at recent political developments, especially in Africa, it becomes clear that many new democracies have been struggling to secure consolidation, battling in a confused grey-zone composed of several hybrid regimes, with the façade of liberal democracy concealing the incapability to become something more than low intensity democracies (Gills *et al*, 1993; Zakaria, 1997; Carothers, 2002). Elections, no matter how free and fair, do not equate to democracy, and the process of consolidation can require many years and continuous popular and elite mobilisation to be completed.

Although aiming at promoting democracy from within, democracy assistance has often been top-down. Donors have devoted the bulk of funds to elections (almost exclusively transitional national elections) (Kumar, 1998), and have usually failed to assist countries in the aftermath, that is, when democratic loyalties must be constructed and democratic deepening becomes a serious challenge: in a word, during the consolidation of democracy. Donors have also supported institutions such as parliaments, the judiciary and the like, by working at the elite level, forgetting that in many cases the real challenge of consolidating democracy is to make the entire political system more democratic (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Santiso, 2001). Finally, many international actors have showed a rather naïve understanding of the process of democratisation, confident that transitions from authoritarian rule necessarily result in democratic regimes and that democratic consolidation can be easily achieved through a combination of technical adjustments coupled with the right dosage of elite involvement and institution building (Carothers, 2002). On the contrary, several cases from Africa and Latin America have clearly pointed out that training political and social elites does not necessarily bring about democratic consolidation, especially when the majority of the population still lives under power structures that resemble patronage (O'Donnell, 1993; Mamdani, 1996). Moreover, these cases have challenged the definition of democratic consolidation as a definite stage in the democratisation process, posing the question of whether

consolidation of democracy would not be better understood as a continuous process of democratic deepening.

So, despite the fact that democracy assistance rightly signals the need to encourage domestic dynamics, it proved scarcely effective to reach those layers of the political system where the most serious challenges to democratic consolidation lie. As a response, a few donors have started to acknowledge the need to take alternative instruments on board with the aim of promoting democratic deepening: in doing so, they have started looking at local, often community-based organisations as a vehicle to support democracy from below. These organisations are often advice offices, development oriented groups, rural or semi-urban associations that fulfil advocacy and information tasks. Their staff is composed of local people, usually coming from the same communities that these organisations assist, and are often linked to other civil society organisations within more or less stable networks. They perform different activities, ranging from legal advice to democratic awareness campaigns, human rights education, and micro-conflict resolution (usually family disputes and domestic violence), but they are also likely to participate in campaigns of general interest at the national level.

This specific sector is what I term micro-assistance to democracy. Supporting a bottom-up process of democratic consolidation has important theoretical and practical implications, as I will argue in the following part of this article by drawing from the experience of micro-credit in the fight against poverty.

3. CONSOLIDATING DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW: A COPERNICAN REVOLUTION

There exists a nexus between promoting democracy and fighting poverty which goes beyond the obvious (although not always accepted) fact that democracy cannot be sustained where poverty is rampant and where high inequality shadows the gains of democratic government. In this section I will use the insights drawn from the international fight against poverty to shed some light on similar challenges posed to democracy assistance around the world.

In spite of the fact that the official fight against poverty has long been permeated by a top-down mentality, several attempts to

develop bottom-up strategies proved more successful than long-standing policies implemented by governments and financial institutions. This inversion of thinking was largely brought about by the success of micro-credit experiments during the 1980s and 1990s. The idea of micro-credit was first put into practice in Bangladesh by the economist Muhammad Yunus with the establishment of Grameen Bank: the bank of the poor. The rationale of micro-credit is as simple as it is effective: poverty can only be successfully countered if loans are made available to the poor. In fact, the commercial bank system systematically excludes the poor because of the high requirements concerning loans. In the micro-credit vision, economic development is a daily process in which local needs and dynamics play a determinant role. Since micro-credit tries to promote cooperative attitudes among people, local involvement is crucial for success. For instance, in order to reach good levels of cooperation, individuals are put together in groups and responsibilities are shared within each group. In this peer system, "any unpaid loans become the responsibility of the whole group". That such an institutional innovation can change lives and build social capital is attested by the exceptional loan-recovery rate of the bank (Murshed and Choudhury, 1997).

By dispersing access to capital that has typically been monopolised by rural elites, not only did micro-credit fight poverty but it also undermined the deeply entrenched dependence of the rural poor on local elites for credit, wages, and agricultural inputs. Therefore, at the same time that micro-credit weakens vertical chains of exploitation, it builds new horizontal solidarities by using peer monitoring to substitute the physical and monetary collateral that the poor cannot provide.

However, this requires a high level of knowledge, especially about cultures and traditions, which more often than not can be successfully exploited to encourage cooperation. This clashes against the point of view of international financial institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which, on the contrary, understand economic development as the outcome of a correct, standardised macro-economic recipe. In sum, in the micro-credit view, traditional anti-poverty policies fail not only because they do not result in positive outcomes for the intended beneficiaries, but also because they understand economic development as a top-down process that can be supported with some technical financial adjustments.

When it comes to analysing democratic consolidation, many lessons may be learned from the micro-credit example, whose underlying element regards the importance of people's involvement and participation. In the micro-credit view, the implication is that giving people a loan to start a productive activity is an effective way to contribute to the general economic development of a society: since the productive system is not accessible to the poor, micro-credit gives them a chance to be an active part in it. A similar point can be made as to micro-assistance to democracy: since the democratic system remains scarcely accessible to the people, small civil society groups at the local level can be a vehicle of popular access to democratic governance and, ultimately, vertical accountability. Therefore, micro-assistance to democracy would basically mean assistance to those spontaneous collective initiatives undertaken by local civil society organisations.

Another insight that can be drawn from the micro-credit experience is the need to operate in a conflict-free environment. Indeed, despite its merits as a conflict-resolution tool, micro-credit was understood as a means to eradicate systematic poverty in relatively peaceful societies. A similar thinking applies to micro-assistance to democracy: pre-transitional phases often show high levels of conflict and a scarce leverage for small civil society groups with very local membership. For this reason micro-assistance is deemed to be more viable during democratic consolidation when the deepening of democratic attainments becomes the key challenge.

At the same time, micro-assistance to democracy takes into account most of those criticisms that have often been raised against democracy promotion policies. To begin with, there is the criticism that democracy promotion is authoritative and patronising because it is based on an imposition from the outside. This applies to extremely forceful instruments such as military intervention or sanctions, but also to political conditionality and, to a certain degree, democracy assistance. Indeed, when democracy assistance is carried out in a top-down fashion it often fails to receive local support and, in the best scenario, it comes to be perceived as a useless effort whose actual role is to please donors rather than encourage effectual democracy. On the contrary, in the bottom-up philosophy that characterises micro-assistance to democracy, the level of local ownership of many projects would be favourably increased by a further component:

authorship. Local organisations and their members should be expected to define the aspects and the goals of their own activities by understanding the problems and the issues that are more crucial for local democratic development in a way which is compatible and respectful of specific cultural and traditional dynamics. In this respect, micro-assistance to democracy thoroughly refuses the principle of tendering, according to which donors define the activities to be carried out and then hire civil society organisations to implement them.

The principle of micro-assistance to democracy also contributes to eliminate another well-known criticism of democracy promotion policies: the standardisation of intervention. Democracy assistance programmes have been criticised as highly standardised across countries, as if supporting democracy was nothing else than applying the right recipe of institutional modelling (Carothers, 1999). Given the relatively limited knowledge that external actors have of specific case-by-case circumstances, the standardisation of programmes seems to be a cost-effective approach that which renders democracy assistance a technical process rather than the result of deep political analysis. Also patronising in its practical implementation, this aspect of democracy assistance has been one of the most deleterious, due mainly to the need to report back home to tax payers rather than meeting local demands (Carothers, 1997). On the contrary, since micro-assistance to democracy requires local actors to define the aspects of their own involvement, not only encouraging much higher levels of ownership but also carving out space for *authorship*, the activity on the field would be tailored to best respond to local, specific dynamics and characteristics. As a consequence, micro-assistance programmes would not follow a prefabricated model but, instead, would learn from a continuous experience based on a case-by-case approach.

Micro-assistance to democracy can also contribute to re-examining the general assistance to civil society. In this respect, a widely echoed criticism has been raised about what kind of civil society donors encourage and to what extent this pattern of civil society actually contributes to democratic development. Indeed, several researches have confirmed that international donors privilege a certain kind of civil society organisation, namely westernised advocacy NGOs (Ottaway and Chung, 1999). This favour toward a certain type of civil society organisation is mainly due to three factors. First of all,

donors tend to replicate abroad what their experience with civil society is at home. This element is also corroborated by the assumption (scarcely grounded on the historical development of European and American democracy) that apolitical civil society is a natural driving force to democracy. This point leads to the second factor, which is donors' reluctance (to not say the overt refusal) to support politically involved civil society (Carothers, 1999; Youngs, 2001a). The third factor is that highly professionalised NGOs are more likely to comply with those procedures required by donors in order to disburse funds. Indeed, professionalised NGOs have the skills to offer highly technical performances and to gather data and collect information, often in fancy statistical fashion, which are usually deemed important by donors (especially government-agencies) that have to justify their expenditures at home.

The consequence of this approach to civil society aid is that, in many cases, those NGOs that become the target of donors' assistance have very poor grassroots contact, while civil society groups with a more specific popular involvement are systematically excluded from donor funding. Not addressing this problem may seriously damage the development of a country-specific civil society and bring about a standardisation of civil society actors around the world, regardless of the capacity of these actors to effectively interact with the specific cultural and social needs of the local population (Ottaway and Chung, 1999).

All these limits come from the assumption that international donors know better than locals. Democracy assistance has often been permeated by the rationale that democracy is a relatively technical process to master and requires good techniques and the right institutional balance. But this approach is merely the product of an assumption that does not even correspond to the history of Western societies, let alone the particularity of different social and political settings in other regions of the world (Carothers, 1999). Once it is accepted that donors should refrain from applying common patterns to democracy assistance, the problem becomes how to promote democracy without a model. So the question is: how much can be learned from the daily practice of democracy assistance? This final point leads the analysis to the epistemological level.

4. EVALUATING DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW: A CARTESIAN REVOLUTION

A recurring enigma for scholars and practitioners has often regarded how to evaluate democracy assistance: how does one determine whether a programme or a project have brought about democratic development or not? Evaluating democracy is an extremely haphazard sector of research that has more to do with art than science (Robinson, 1996; Carothers, 1999). Macro-indicators are extremely debatable, not only for the rough way in which they are constructed, but also because they require the extremely costly assumption that there exists a correlation between the amount of funds that is spent on a country and its democratic performance. When a country becomes more or less democratic, it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to argue that this is due to the impact of democracy assistance programmes: too many factors overlap, existing causal relations are hard to detect and too many actors are involved. In trying to assess the outcome of democracy assistance, evaluators face what has been termed the 'causal conundrum' (Carothers, 1999).

Despite remaining a difficult effort, evaluating micro-assistance to democracy is likely to overcome or simplify many of the obstacles faced when evaluating macro-programmes. Evaluating outcomes at the micro-level is more feasible for the simple reason that the impact is potentially visible in the restricted universe that surrounds the project on the ground. For instance, ultimate beneficiaries are at hand and they can be involved in the evaluation process. Monitoring activity can produce valuable information on the actual impact of the project on people's attitudes. The interaction between local organisations and local government may be more easily understood and potential shortcomings detected. But more importantly, the act of evaluating itself might become part of the democratisation process. Beneficiaries and other stakeholders could more easily be involved in evaluating the performance of the project, and so encouraging further socialisation and, ultimately, democratic deepening. Assessing micro-assistance to democracy might provide an extremely fertile ground for a participatory methodology to evaluation in which evaluation does not occur as a process external to democracy assistance (Crawford, 2001b). In the framework of micro-assistance to demo-

cracy, the process of assessing results might inherently contribute to the goal of promoting popular participation and democratic deepening.

If the general notion of micro-assistance to democracy can be defined as a Copernican revolution, since it inverts the process of political development, when it comes to evaluation methodology the revolution is essentially Cartesian: by regressing to the grassroots impact, which is the only measurable one, it is possible to reconstruct the chain of influence that single projects have on higher levels of the political system (Brouwer and Schmitter, 1999). Clearly, evaluating micro-assistance to democracy is more demanding than asking some questions to donors' officials in quick fly-in missions from abroad. It requires the willingness to reach out to the projects on the field, to monitor their development over time, and to rely more extensively on the skills and knowledge of local actors. In more radical terms, it requires donors to trust local knowledge and put an end to the conviction that foreigners know best. Despite difficulties, it should not be forgotten that other more traditional methods of evaluation have been particularly notorious for their failures, and significant information has been nonexistent or sporadic at best. Usable information has been reduced to regular auditing and financial reports, but well-administered funds do not make a democracy. Democracy assistance, ever since the enthusiastic wave of donor funding in the 1990s, has basically operated in the darkness (Crawford and Kearton, 2002).

5. CONCLUSION

There are obvious limits to what can be expected from civil society (Fine and Ray, 1997). Civil society cannot be employed as a *pass-partout* to democratisation, especially when other important factors strongly oppose democratic advancement. In some cases, for instance, strong governments could exploit the moderate liberalisation of civil society to bestow an air of respectability without in any meaningful way constraining their control over policy-making and attempts (Haddenius and Ugglä, 1998). Nevertheless, civil society movements proved extremely effective in many regions of the world to bring about political change and favour the transition to democracy, especially when supported from the outside as in Eastern Europe and some regions of Africa.

But if democracy is to endure and expand, no external factors

can be as relevant as domestic forces: in particular, those forces that act at the very grassroots level. In this context, international donors can promote democratic consolidation by supporting those civil society organisations that are more likely to promote popular participation and contact between state institutions and the citizens, especially in the most rural and least served areas of many developing countries.

Clearly micro-assistance to democracy is not a rapid means for supporting democratic consolidation, just as micro-credit has never claimed to eliminate poverty overnight. The limits of a micro-strategy to development (both economic and political) are evident. Nevertheless, gradual development can make the difference, especially when other (more ambitious) strategies have dramatically failed even after requiring expensive structures and painful adjustment plans. Moreover, micro-assistance to democracy does not exclude more specific forms of pressure, especially when dramatic political reversals take place. What is important, though, is that micro-assistance to democracy not only understands the consolidation of democracy as a primarily domestic process, but also as a bottom-up process that must be encouraged and nurtured from below. Although applicable to many cases of democratisation in the world, micro-assistance to democracy would prove particularly accurate in those instances of difficult democratic advancement which are infamous in most of Africa, where the real challenges facing many new democracies come from the frequent spots of authoritarianism that still rule a relevant part of society and from the limited improvements that democratic rule has brought to the majority of citizens.

The argument that democracy assistance systematically fails is often echoed in different circumstances, from some more radical academic debates to social movements' discourse. Although revealing relevant concerns, this pessimistic argument misses part of the picture: internal democratising forces can positively exploit democracy assistance. In the case of micro-assistance to democracy, foreign assistance can provide thousands of people with a socially active role, especially in cases of consolidation where political apathy is more than a remote possibility. To its credit, micro-assistance to democracy might offer a new and more effective perspective for the commitment of international organisations, non-governmental agencies or transnational civil society organisations to re-design a 'second generation' democracy assistance (Santiso, 2001).

Micro-assistance to democracy implicitly recognises that a democratic society does not have to necessarily mirror the functioning and the decision-making process of many Western, so-called 'liberal' democracies. Political regimes have their own cultural and historical particularities that must be taken into account when trying to support political evolutions and change (Parekh, 1993). In fact, by supporting local authorship and by recognising cultural differences, micro-assistance to democracy assumes that there can be many different paths to the construction of a democratic society.

Micro-assistance to democracy is an idea that stems from the practice of many small civil society organisations that operate at the frontline of democracy promotion and are often neglected by donors' big plans. Micro-credit was not developed as a theory, but instead was born as a practice. Its actual functioning gave birth to a theory of development. So does micro-assistance to democracy.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for instance, Jean Kirkpatrick's 1979 article in *Commentary*, "Dictatorships and Double Standards", which held that the United States must support friendly anticommunist authoritarian regimes in developing countries. When Reagan formed his first administration, Kirkpatrick took part in it as UN Ambassador.
2. More coherent were non-government initiatives such as the German *Stiftungen* (party foundations) that, for instance, were quite active in supporting democratic movements in Spain and Portugal before these countries' regime change.

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