

# **Review of the UK's approach to democracy and human rights**

Literature review

**January 2023**



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# 1. Key findings

## 1.1 Defining and measuring democracy and human rights

Most international donors see democracy and human rights as being two sides of the same coin, not least because respect for political rights and civil liberties is central to most working definitions of democratic government. In the context of development assistance and diplomacy, the concept of democracy is usually thought of in terms of respect for civil liberties and political rights, most notably free speech and the right to vote, and the quality and independence of democratic institutions, including the legislature, judiciary and electoral system. Human rights are generally understood in the context of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and the international human rights system. While human rights-based approaches are premised on the interdependence and indivisibility of civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights, the rights and liberties that are most likely to be emphasised in donor programming on democracy aid include the right to life, protection from slavery, torture, or degrading treatment, the right to liberty and security, freedom of speech, assembly, belief, expression and religion, gender equality and protection from discrimination.

Although the UK government's commitment to democracy and human rights has been regularly reiterated over the last six years, exactly how it defines these terms is often ambiguous. Key documents do not always provide a specific and comprehensive definition of either 'democracy' or 'human rights'. These definitions can be inferred, however, from the stated principles around which UK foreign policy is said to revolve, for example: "We believe that strong democratic institutions and accountable governments, which uphold universal rights and the rule of law, are key building blocks for secure and prosperous states" (James Duddridge, then Minister for Africa, UK Parliament, 2021).

In recent years, the UK government has increasingly focused on the broader and overarching concept of 'open societies', within which support to democracy and human rights is located. The connection between stability, strong democratic institutions, open markets, good governance and prosperity was first made by David Cameron in 2009, when he argued that "Countries are pulled out of poverty by a golden thread that starts with the absence of war and the presence of good governance, property rights and the rule of law, effective public services and strong civil institutions, free and fair trade, and open markets" (Cameron, 2009). The concept also guided the UK's position in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) negotiations. Ahead of the UK's Group of Seven (G7) presidency in 2021, the then foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, committed to promoting an open societies mission based around free trade, and democracy and human rights. However, questions remain around whether free trade is seen as a right in and of itself, whether the open societies framework is designed to reflect global or British values, and the extent to which democracy and human rights can be traded off against other goals under the open societies framework, such as conflict resolution and economic growth. Although the UK tends to see democracy and human rights in a similar way to other donors, the open societies framing is distinctive, as development partners tend not to subsume these ideals under other overarching concepts.

There are a number of indices that can be used to measure the quality of democracy and human rights, largely based on expert assessments of how countries are performing in key areas. These indices are not uncontroversial, however, and should be used in conjunction with nationally representative surveys of public opinion to ensure that respect for political rights and civil liberties is understood from both the 'top down' and the 'bottom up'. At present, the greatest challenges for evaluating the impact of democracy support and human rights assistance on the overall quality of democracy and human rights are the lack of consistency in the way that individual democracy support and human rights projects and programmes are evaluated, the fact that these are often mainstreamed into other programmes and therefore hard to capture, the limited number of meta-evaluations of donor activities in this area, and the inconsistent coding of aid disbursements by donors in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) database.

## 1.2 Recent trends in democracy and human rights

However democracy and human rights are measured, it is clear that there has been a significant decline in political freedoms and civil liberties over the last decade. We are currently in the 16th year of a global democratic



recession, and as of 2021 eight out of ten citizens live in a country that is ‘unfree’ or only ‘partly free’. While this trend has been global, the extent of the decline has varied considerably. According to Freedom House, over the last 16 years backsliding has been most pronounced in Eurasia, Africa and the Middle East, with a more modest decline in Europe and the Americas. Meanwhile, focusing on the last ten years, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) notes that democratic decline by population-weighted measures “is especially evident in Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean” (V-Dem, 2022).

A review of the literature shows that researchers have identified at least ten factors that are driving the decline of democracy: pronounced inequalities, socio-economic disruption, democratic complacency, rising populism, growing political polarisation, state capture, military coups, authoritarian support and learning, emboldened autocrats and, most recently, the impact of COVID-19. The combination of these factors that is most significant to the process of democratic decline varies markedly across countries (Diamond, 2021). Issues such as democratic complacency are particularly significant in established democracies but are less relevant in countries that have never enjoyed high-quality democracy, as in much of the Middle East, Africa and Eurasia. Meanwhile, the ability of increasingly emboldened authoritarian leaders to learn from one another’s experiences is especially relevant in countries that have already experienced authoritarian rule or are quickly moving towards it. In turn, variation in the most important drivers of democratic decline both between and within regions has led to a consensus that it is essential to start analysis and policy design by identifying the specific set of factors that are most influential in a given context (Laws and Marquette, 2018; see **Section 7.3**).

These ten drivers of democratic decline have given rise to three further processes that can be understood as both manifestations of democratic decline and developments that contribute to autocratisation: restrictions on civic space, restrictions on freedom of speech and the media, and electoral manipulation. These processes are facilitated by democratic backsliding, but also create new conditions that weaken democratic forces with profound implications for the prospects for democracy in the future. Despite this worrying picture, there are significant opportunities to strengthen democracy and human rights over the next five years. The most notable of these are: strong popular support for democracy in many non-democratic and backsliding countries; the fact that democratic institutions continue to function in some countries that have recently started backsliding; shifting social attitudes that are becoming more supportive of women’s rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex and other (LGBTQI+) rights – even in challenging environments; and the changing international context, which presents an opportunity to use the war in Ukraine as a springboard to launch a new global compact to defend democracy and human rights, but also generates fresh challenges.

### 1.3 Approaches to democracy support and human rights assistance

Approaches to democracy aid vary considerably between donors, as does commitment to democracy aid itself. Democracy aid represents a significant proportion of total official development assistance (ODA) at an average of 10% among OECD countries, but this is significantly higher for northern European countries such as Norway (21%), Denmark (26%) and Sweden (30%). The UK currently lags significantly behind these leaders in the field. One of the most striking features of the current global portfolio of assistance in this area is the relatively low proportion of funds given to electoral assistance. Although international donors have often been criticised for focusing too much on the holding of multi-party elections as the hallmark of democracy, total ODA for electoral assistance fell by more than half between 2010 and 2020, declining from 6% of governance ODA to just 1% over the same period.

Approaches to human rights assistance also vary considerably. Over the last 15 years there has been an important trend of mainstreaming a focus on human rights within developmental assistance, with human rights-based approaches becoming increasingly common during this period. This approach has been adopted by organisations such as the UN, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and some European donors, but has yet to be taken up by the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

### 1.4 ‘What works’ and ‘what doesn’t work’

Assessing ‘what works’ and ‘what doesn’t work’ is complicated by limited data and systematic reviews of donor programming. As a result, the evidence base is considerably stronger with reference to the overall effect of

developmental and democracy aid than the impact of more specific details such as the design of particular programmes. The evidence suggests that democracy aid increases the quality of democracy and respect for human rights, and is significantly more effective at this than general developmental assistance. For its part, developmental assistance is more likely to strengthen democracy and human rights when it is provided by donors who are themselves democratic and when the political settlement in the country receiving the aid is broader and more inclusive.

More broadly, developmental assistance appears to exacerbate existing conditions – in other words, it is most likely to have positive effects in countries that are already moving towards democracy, and most likely to have negative effects in countries that are moving towards authoritarianism, effectively exacerbating existing democratisation or autocratisation trends. This does not necessarily mean that donors should disengage from more authoritarian contexts, not least because the evidence base is still growing and large-n quantitative studies look at average figures and do not evaluate the impact of specific programmes, which may still have a positive effect. It does, however, suggest that donors may need to look for alternative strategies in these contexts.

When it comes to democracy aid specifically, the ability of aid donors to leverage political influence and the balance of funds directed towards state actors as opposed to non-governmental organisations appears to be important. The capacity of the recipient state to make good use of aid directed at the state, and to implement planned improvements, is also significant. Other things being equal, states with higher capacity can make best use of aid resources, while channelling a significant proportion of democracy assistance through non-state actors and applying political leverage can help to increase the prospects for positive democratic change.

Democracy aid is also found to be most effective when targeted at one-party states or poor-quality multi-party systems, and less effective when targeted at liberal democracies and military regimes. This may be because aid is most effective when it is given to a government that is more inclusive and subject to greater accountability but has less impact on liberal democracies simply because there is less scope for improvement in these systems. Donor engagement in this area is most likely to be successful when there is general agreement among key international actors on the value of strengthening democracy, and a higher number of donors provide democracy aid, creating choice for local actors.

One particularly important implication of these findings is that aid disbursements alone are unlikely to be sufficient to halt the current trend of democratic backsliding. Instead, aid will likely need to be complemented with carefully designed diplomatic interventions. Combining democracy aid and diplomacy can have three positive effects: enhancing the impact of other democracy support activities, reducing aid diversion, and increasing the cost of democratic backsliding to governments, making autocratisation less attractive. However, this kind of aid conditionality brings with it significant risks and does not work well in all conditions, which makes it a complex strategy to deploy. There is also evidence that diplomatic intervention can backfire, and so must be designed carefully, taking into account the political context and the incentives of key actors in a flexible approach that allows for adaptive learning and management. Diplomatic pressure is most likely to be effective when: the international community is united and speaks with one voice, relevant communities are fully consulted before any action is taken, threats of aid withdrawal or sanctions are credible, and intervention is designed in such a way that the government cannot manipulate it to its own advantage by portraying the intervention as an infringement of sovereignty by malign foreign powers.

## 2. Introduction

This literature review provides evidence to inform ICAI's review of the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's approach to supporting democracy and human rights. In line with this, the overall aim of the literature review is to assess what is known about:

- How aid support to democracy and human rights is provided.
- 'What works' and 'what doesn't work' in the area of democracy and human rights support.
- How current approaches might be amended in light of this evidence.

## Research questions

The literature review addresses the following questions.

Number	Question
<i>Definitional issues</i>	
1	How are democracy and human rights usually defined in the context of development assistance and diplomacy?
2	Is there consensus on definitional issues? Are there major differences (such as between institutions, legal standards, principles, values)? What are the controversies about?
3	How does the UK government define democracy and human rights in the context of development assistance, how has this evolved over time (including efforts to bring development and diplomacy together – such as in relation to open societies), and how does it compare to similar development partners?
4	What are the main issues in relation to the quality of data to measure and compare democracy and human rights events and trends over time and between countries? Are some international datasets more reliable and more widely accepted?
<i>Global trends in the extent of democracy and human rights</i>	
5	What are global trends on democracy and civil and political rights?
6	Is it possible to identify global trends in other human rights? If yes, what are the main ones?
7	What are the major global and regional threats to democracy and human rights and how have these changed since 2015?
8	What are the major opportunities for stronger democracy and human rights and how have these changed since 2015?
<i>Approaches to democracy and human rights assistance</i>	
9	What is the global portfolio of assistance to democracy and human rights?
10	To what extent do approaches to development assistance for democracy and human rights explicitly focus on and include the experiences and voices of rights-holders?
11	Is there a distinct ‘diplomacy’ approach to promoting democracy and human rights?
<i>What is known in terms of ‘what works’ and ‘what doesn’t work’ in responding to democracy and human rights threats through development policy and assistance?</i>	
12	What does the evidence say about ‘what works’ in terms of development assistance programming?
13	Are there patterns of common approaches/themes best suited to different contexts?
14	What does the evidence say about ‘what works’ in terms of assistance beyond individual democracy and human rights programmes?
15	What are some of the main weaknesses of the most common approaches based on lessons learned?
16	Based on the above, what are the gaps in terms of knowing ‘what works’ to promote and protect democracy and human rights?

## Evidence base

This literature review has considered English-language work published over the last ten years. Key sources include peer-reviewed academic work in political science, development studies, and international relations, think tank reports, donor evaluations and reports, analyses written by non-governmental organisations, and policies and documents produced by donor governments and multilateral international agencies and organisations. Data are drawn from a wide range of democracy and human rights indices, including but not limited to Freedom House, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, the Social and Economic Rights Fulfilment (SERF) Index and the CIVICUS Monitor.

An inclusive and expansive approach was adopted to put together the bibliography, including Google searches using key terms to avoid being overly reliant on the epistemic networks of the authorial team. In total, over 250 sources/datasets are referenced.

## The structure and design of the literature review

The literature review is divided into seven sections, including the key findings and introduction. The third section considers how democracy and human rights are defined and measured, and the extent of consensus on these issues. The fourth section tracks global trends in democracy and human rights, with a particular emphasis on the period from 2015 to 2022. The fifth section presents ten threats to democracy and human rights, processes that contribute to autocratisation and, separately, opportunities to build stronger democracy and human rights protection. The sixth section reviews the global portfolio of support to democracy and human rights, using OECD DAC data and considering variation both over time and between countries. Finally, the seventh section evaluates the effectiveness of these strategies, drawing together the most recent evidence on ‘what works’ and ‘what doesn’t work’ in responding to democracy and human rights threats, and identifying areas in which common practice diverges from what should be best practice.

## Limitations and knowledge gaps

One of the main challenges in evaluating the impact of democracy aid and human rights assistance is that there have been relatively few studies of the overall effectiveness of such approaches. In relation to democracy, there has been a tendency not to disaggregate the specific effects of democracy aid, as opposed to general development assistance, on the quality of democracy. When it comes to human rights, the literature does not tend to measure and contrast approaches to promoting inclusion and non-discrimination, such as targeted programming as compared to mainstreaming these approaches in other sectors. Most notably, relatively few donors have conducted meta-level studies of their democracy and human rights efforts. The literature review also suffers from the lack of research conducted on how to engage with authoritarian regimes and autocratising episodes, both in terms of what specific democracy and human rights programmes might be required in these contexts, and in terms of how to ‘do no harm’ when providing development aid and support to authoritarian governments. Taken together, these knowledge gaps limit our ability to identify how the effectiveness of democracy aid varies across different modalities, contexts and project designs.

## 3. Defining and measuring democracy and human rights

Democracy is a notoriously difficult concept to define. It is often referred to as an “essentially contested concept” because it is the subject of complex moral debate which cannot simply be resolved through careful reasoning, or by reference to a common standard or index (Gallie, 1955). This gives rise to significant controversies about which countries are the most democratic, and exactly what kind of democracy should be realised through development assistance and diplomacy. A minimalist definition of democracy focuses solely on a government that is elected through credible elections as opposed to sustained through force. A ‘broader’ or ‘thicker’ definition of liberal democracy would usually reference measures designed to prevent the abuse of power and enable meaningful citizen participation in decision making (Ulbricht, 2018), such as institutional checks and balances and a codified and respected set of rights and liberties.

In the context of development assistance and diplomacy, the concept of democracy is usually considered in terms of the quality and independence of representative institutions and respect for a set of civil liberties and political rights (Kurki, 2010). High-quality democratic institutions are generally thought to be those that embody key principles of participation, accountability and transparency (Schmidt and Wood, 2019). Civil liberties that are particularly likely to be emphasised include freedom of speech, movement and association. Political rights that are particularly likely to be emphasised are the right to vote and equal treatment under the law. Institutions that are particularly likely to be emphasised include free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, a free media, a legislature capable of checking the executive, and a vibrant civil society (SIDA, 2021). In short, Western donors typically advocate for a liberal understanding of democracy that is associated with a focus on individual rights and political competition, rather than, for example, group rights and more collective and consensual forms of decision making (Youngs, 2015).

Human rights are generally understood in the context of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and the international human rights system, which includes legally binding conventions such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). It is important to note that these agreements envisage a number of different but mutually reinforcing types of rights, including civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights. Human rights-based approaches also emphasise a set of core principles, which underline that development cooperation should be guided by goals of universality, indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, participation, and accountability (UN, 2003). While human rights-based approaches are premised on the interdependence and indivisibility of this set of rights (OECD and World Bank, 2016), the rights and liberties that are particularly likely to be emphasised in donor programming on democracy aid include the right to life, protection from slavery, torture, or degrading treatment, the right to liberty and security, freedom of speech, assembly, belief, expression and religion, gender equality and protection from discrimination.

### 3.1 Areas of consensus and disagreement

There is considerable consensus among international donors over the core features of a democratic government. Most development partners involved in democracy support activities agree with the core features included in the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, which sets out the legal basis for the principles of democracy in international law. The Covenant includes a description of a "democratic society" in which individuals have the right to vote in periodic elections to choose the government, embedded within a broader set of rights and liberties as summarised above (Joyner, 1999). In other words, there are few governments involved in providing development assistance and democracy support that do not recognise the importance of regular elections contested between political parties, a free civil society and media, and a set of political rights and civil liberties enshrined in a constitution protected by an independent judiciary (Carothers, 2010; Wetzel and Orbie, 2015).

There remains controversy, however, over exactly which aspects of democracy are most central and important to the concept (Bridoux and Kurki, 2015), and in particular the fact that Western donors typically assert the value of one specific version of democracy – liberal democracy – over others (Youngs, 2015). This debate has important implications for how the quality of democracy is measured and assessed (see **Section 3.3**). A further area of potential disagreement relates to the extent to which democracy can be said to exist wherever credible elections are held (Steele et al., 2021), a conceptualisation that privileges the role of political institutions, or can only be said to be present when there is a high degree of media freedom, an independent judiciary, and strong civil society. This approach tends to place a much greater emphasis on civil and political rights and the position of minorities (Carothers, 2009).

There is considerable consensus when it comes to the question of what counts as human rights, based on the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the international human rights system, as set out above. However, while pro-democracy states tend to agree on the vast majority of rights that should be protected, there are two main sources of variation:

1. The legacy of the Cold War, when Western states tended to emphasise civil and political rights and Soviet-aligned states tended to emphasise economic and social rights (Marks, 2009; Donnelly and



Whelan, 2020). One consequence of this legacy is that some Western states, such as the UK, remain reluctant to support an expanded list of human rights in practice. Some commentators argue, for example, that Western governments have been more cautious about recognising what are often called third-generation rights (Council of Europe, 2020), such as the right to development and to a healthy environment.

2. Which human rights donors prioritise in practice, with development agencies tending to be more supportive of economic and social rights associated with poverty reduction initiatives and foreign ministries more likely to focus on civil and political rights.

There are also differences in the way that economic rights are understood. European social democracies tend to envisage citizens as having certain 'positive' economic rights, such as the right to a certain standard of living. Meanwhile, governments that emphasise economic liberalism, such as the US, are more likely to emphasise 'negative' economic rights, such as the recognition of private property rights.

Moving beyond pro-democracy donors, there is a consistent debate about how universal human rights and the desire for democratic government can be said to be (McFarland, 2015). In parts of the world such as Africa and Asia, democracy is sometimes critiqued as a 'Western import' – especially by authoritarian regimes seeking to discredit pro-democracy campaigners in their own country (Cheeseman and Sishuwa, 2020). One reason for this is that Western states have typically sought to promote a particular version of democracy, which emphasises liberal values and economic approaches that are often seen to be in tension with the way that 'non-Western' societies have historically operated (Youngs, 2015). This has led some critics to view democracy promotion through what Wolff and Wurm (2011: 89) have called a "materialist" perspective, which emphasises that it only takes place when it is seen to advance the national interests of the relevant donor, and what they refer to as a "critical" perspective, which sees democracy as a hegemonic project designed to legitimise the current distribution of global power.

Similarly, while most states have signed up to most international conventions, the extent to which they are actively seeking to implement these commitments varies because of the presence of: 1) the resources available to realise economic, social and cultural rights for all; 2) authoritarian and democratically elected governments which violate rights in order to retain political control (Xu, 2021); and 3) contradictory social norms (Cislaghi et al., 2020). This is particularly true of rights that appear to sit in tension with established norms in parts of the Global South, such as the prohibition of child marriage, gender equality, and rights and protections for the LGBTIQ+ community (Ibrahim, 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2017), which are much less likely to be explicitly protected in international human rights covenants, not least because social and political attitudes towards these rights were very different in the 1940s-1960s period when they were first drafted.

## 3.2 How the UK government defines democracy and human rights

The UK government typically follows a liberal definition of democracy and human rights as outlined in **Sections 1** and **1.1**. However, it is not always clear exactly how it conceptualises these terms in the context of foreign policy and development assistance. In recent years, the UK government increasingly focused on the broader and overarching concept of 'open societies', within which support to democracy and human rights was usually located. The *Global Britain in a competitive age: the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy* (Cabinet Office, 2021) policy paper states that the UK government's "first goal is to support open societies and defend human rights, as a force for good in the world". To achieve this goal, the paper commits the UK government to be "more active in creating a world in which open societies and economies can flourish, shaping the open international order of the future – championing free trade and global cooperation, tackling conflict and instability, and standing up for democracy and human rights".

As this summary suggests, democracy and human rights are regularly considered to be features of a fully realised open society, echoing the use of the term "democratic society" in the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, while clearly, if implicitly, ignoring important parts of the International Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Giving evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee in October 2020, the then foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, identified "a 'three-pillar freedom agenda' for the UK's foreign policy: defending media freedoms, the freedom of religion and belief, and imposing Magnitsky sanctions on those who constrain

freedoms” (Gaston, 2020). He also committed the UK’s G7 presidency to promoting an open societies mission – based around free trade, and democracy and human rights.

There were four main areas of uncertainty regarding the UK government’s conceptualisation of open societies at this point however, where democracy and human rights were concerned. First, it was unclear whether the right to free trade was conceptualised as a kind of human right in and of itself, and the extent to which free trade was essential to realise an open society. Second, there was some ambiguity as to whether the values underpinning the UK’s commitment to open societies were understood to be distinctive ‘British values’ as opposed to global standards to which the UK government wished to commit itself (Sharp, 2020). Third, it was not always clear whether democracy is viewed as one component of an open society or is fundamental to it. Can, for example, democracy be traded off against other imperatives set out in the *Integrated review*, such as conflict reduction and free trade, or are democracy and human rights – which are said to be universal and inalienable – so important that they always trump other priorities?

Finally, a number of actors including the Welsh government (Antoniw and Hutt, 2020) raised questions about the commitment of the UK government to support human rights at home and abroad following the move by Dominic Raab, the then deputy prime minister and secretary of state for justice, to abolish the UK’s Human Rights Act – which domesticated the European Convention on Human Rights into British law. The proposed new Bill of Rights, which would have explicitly given UK courts the right to diverge from the European Court of Human Rights (Liberty, 2022; Webber, 2022), includes a clause that prevents UK courts from adopting new interpretations of Convention rights that impose positive obligations, and limits the application of human rights law abroad (Raj, 2022). Representatives of the Welsh government stated that the Bill is “part of a concerted effort to dilute the rights of the people of Wales and the UK” and is intended to “undermine the Convention by increasing the rights of UK Ministers and reducing the power of UK courts, as well as the European Court of Human Rights, to enforce the rule of law and hold Ministers to account” (Antoniw and Hutt, 2020). However, the Liz Truss government seemed to have reconsidered the Bill of Rights and, as of January 2023, a second reading had still not been scheduled, making it unlikely for the Bill to be adopted by the current government (Allegretti 2022; United Kingdom 2022).

Historically, the UK’s liberal definition of democracy and human rights has been similar to other Western development partners. It is worth noting, however, that the Department for International Development (DFID) often emphasised related concepts such as accountability and empowerment much more than democracy itself (DFID, 2011a). This stands in contrast to Nordic donors such as SIDA that have talked much more explicitly about democracy and devoted a greater proportion of their aid to democracy aid (see **Section 6**). The emphasis on open societies moved the UK further away from mainstream donor framings of foreign policy which do not tend to subsume democracy and human rights under other concepts.

Since late 2021, however, it appears that the “open societies” framing has been abandoned. In December of that year, the then foreign secretary, Liz Truss, did not adopt the ‘open societies’ framing. Her ambition to build a ‘network of liberty’ based on strengthening ties between like-minded free-market economies, went even further, and blurred the distinction between political and economic freedoms, placing greater emphasis on broader concepts such as ‘freedom’, which was mentioned 17 times in the speech that introduced the approach, than democracy, which was mentioned just three times (Truss, 2021). Further changes occurred as a result of first the rise of Liz Truss to the position of Prime Minister on 6 September 2022, and second her resignation on 25 October 2022 and subsequent replacement by Rishi Sunak. Under Sunak, the new foreign secretary James Cleverly set out a new approach to creating a ‘network of partnerships’ in a major speech on 12 December 2022. During the speech, Cleverly did not mention democracy, human rights or open societies objectives. Meanwhile in a human rights statement on the same day, he no longer used ‘open societies’ as an umbrella term (Cleverly, 2022a and 2022b).

Taken together, the significant and often sudden shifts in the way that the UK government approaches democracy and human rights over the past decade indicate an unstable and inconsistent policy landscape, which has in turn has often raised doubts as to how central these goals are to UK foreign policy (Menocal 2020).

### 3.3 Challenges in measuring democracy and human rights comparatively and over time

#### Challenges in measuring democracy

The main issue regarding the quality of data to measure and compare democracy is less about how to measure the strength of democratic institutions and procedures, and more related to disagreement over how different aspects of democracy should be weighted. While some indices such as Freedom House (see below) adopt a relatively narrow focus on liberal aspects of democracy (Erk and Veenendaal, 2014), others, such as the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, also include measures that try and track actual levels of political inclusion and participation. V-Dem also enables users to measure the quality of democracy along different dimensions, rather than imposing a single framework, including electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian democracy.

A second issue is that most indices are based on expert assessment – they are formed by asking an often relatively small number of experts to score a particular institution or respect for a certain political right or civil liberty. This increases the risk that they may be subject to ‘group think’ among academic epistemic communities. Newer datasets such as V-Dem have sought to resolve these issues by using a larger and broader pool of experts and asking them to record how confident they are about each judgment they make, but this does not get around the problem that there are some issues, such as the lived experience of particular sub-groups, about which most experts are likely to have less direct knowledge.

For this reason, some consider it to be best practice to compare the ‘top-down’ expert assessments provided by these indices to the ‘bottom-up’ assessments provided by citizens through regional ‘barometers’ (Bratton et al., 2005). These measures can provide important information on how democratic the public believes their country to be, and the extent to which they experience human rights abuses such as political violence. Significantly, recent research suggests that there is typically a very high correlation between expert assessments and citizen assessments (Logan and Mattes, 2012) – which in general lends credibility to both measures. However, there are outliers, such as Venezuela under Hugo Chavez, where citizens have at times evaluated their country as a democracy despite external evaluations that it was becoming authoritarian (Lagos, 2001). The main international datasets for measuring democracy are listed below:

- **Freedom House.** An expert assessment of the level of freedom of almost every country in the world in terms of civil liberties and political rights, done on an annual basis, that categorises countries based on whether they are ‘free’, ‘partly free’ or ‘unfree’.
- **V-Dem.** An expert assessment of the quality of democracy in almost every country in the world based on a wide range of indicators for five different indices of democracy (participatory, consensual, majoritarian, deliberative and egalitarian) including the independence of institutions and substantive political inclusion and participation.
- **Bertelsmann Transformation Index.** An expert assessment of the degree of political and economic transformation of all ‘developing and transition’ countries with more than two million inhabitants, which includes a Status of Political Transformation Index that categorises countries based on whether they are consolidating democracies; defective democracies; highly defective democracies; moderate autocracies; or hard-line autocracies.
- **Democracy Index.** An expert assessment prepared by the Economist Intelligence Unit that is similar to the UN’s Human Development Index but focuses on political institutions, categorising almost every country in the world based on whether they are full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, or authoritarian regimes.
- **Eurobarometer/Asiabarometer/Afrobarometer/Latinobarómetro.** Assessments of the quality of democracy in particular countries based on nationally representative surveys of popular opinion for the majority of countries in specific regions covered by a ‘barometer’ research project.
- **Polity Index.** Expert assessment of 167 countries that uses six component measures – which capture how the executive is recruited, the constitutional constraints it faces, and the quality of popular participation –



to categorise countries based on whether they are a full democracy, democracy, open anocracy, closed anocracy, autocracy, or a failed or occupied state.

Historically, Freedom House and the Polity Index were often used by development practitioners and academic researchers, partly because they were among the few comprehensive datasets available. This has not been without controversy, however, as Freedom House receives the majority of its funding from the US government and has been criticised for idealising US-style democracy and for being overly critical of the country's international rivals, such as Russia (Tsygankov and Parker, 2015). Meanwhile, the Polity Index has faced criticism for the way in which "some categories of the components on competition (PARCOMP) and regulation of political participation (PARREG) were defined with explicit reference to conflict", which, it has been argued, led to misleading analysis of the Polity III database (Boese, 2019).

Partly for these reasons, researchers and practitioners are increasingly using the V-Dem database, founded in 2014. V-Dem also provides significantly more data and specificity than Freedom House, and enables users to compare levels of democracy in terms of five main principles or lenses: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy. V-Dem has also provided a way of classifying countries, the Regimes of the World Index. However, because this index is not simply composed of a sliding scale of the scores for its various components of democracy and instead relies on the use of a decision tree to separate countries based on whether or not they exhibit key features, it has not been adopted by all researchers.

## Challenges in measuring human rights

The most prominent human rights organisations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, release regular reports on the state of human rights in individual countries and globally, but do not turn these qualitative assessments into global datasets that make it easy to track trends over time. At present, the main international datasets for measuring respect for human rights are therefore the following:

- **State of the World.** A human rights portal created by V-Dem, the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI), the SERF Index, and the Universal Rights Group, a relatively new think tank, to strengthen the measurement of human rights. State of the World currently covers economic social and cultural rights from 2007 to 2017.
- **CIVICUS Monitor.** A ratings system based on coding CIVICUS researchers' narrative reports that categorises countries on the basis of whether civic space is: open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed, or closed. Civic space is understood to exist when a state protects its citizens and fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions.
- **SERF Index.** An index that monitors state fulfilment of economic and social rights, such as education, housing and food. The core index covers around 80 countries, with the component rights indices covering around 180.
- **Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) SDG Indicators.** The OHCHR maps the ratification of human rights treaties (although without tracking actual implementation), and monitors some of the SDGs from a human rights perspective.
- **The Human Freedom Index.** Expert assessment of human freedom by the Cato Institute, which employs 76 indicators, including personal, civic and economic freedoms, to rank almost every country in the world in terms of the average level of freedom.
- **Minorities at Risk.** A research programme based at the University of Maryland that analyses the status and conflicts of politically active communal groups in countries with a population of 500,000 or more. The original Minorities at Risk database contains data on 284 politically active ethnic groups.
- **Specific rights indicators.** There are also a number of indicators of specific rights that are collected by a variety of organisations and provide important insights into certain areas, albeit on a partial basis, including the UN Gender Inequality Index, Global Slavery Index, International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, Sexual Orientation Laws, the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law Index, the KidsRights Index, the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Indicators, and the work done by HerAtlas on monitoring the right to education for girls and women.

When it comes to human rights, there are four main challenges. The first is that democracy indices overwhelmingly focus on civil and political rights, to the exclusion of economic, social and cultural rights. This therefore means there is a risk that using indices such as Freedom House as a proxy for the quality of human rights generates a partial, and potentially misleading, picture. The second challenge is how to measure economic, social and cultural rights in a way that does not simply reduce them to economic indicators (such as the overall level of poverty or employment) and instead reflects the ability of citizens – and of different groups of citizens – to exercise these rights in practice.

The third major challenge is that there are differences in how economic rights are framed. While rights indicators such as the UN Gender Inequality Index, HerAtlas and the State of the World data often focus on positive economic rights, in other words, the ability of individuals to achieve a certain standard of living or to do dignified work, American-based rights indices such as the Human Freedom Index, or the Index of Economic Freedom put together by the Heritage Foundation, tend to focus on negative economic rights in terms of the absence of government intervention in the economy. This is sometimes controversial, not least because the framing of human rights in this negative sense is often seen to be inherently connected to the efforts of these organisations to advocate for conservative public policy (Pineda et al., 2019), putting free markets on an equal footing with selecting governments through elections.

The final challenge that is distinctive to measuring human rights abuses is that it is often hard to generate reliable data on the world's most repressive regimes precisely because authoritarian systems often impose strict censorship measures. Measures of conflict and political violence such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, for example, are often heavily reliant on media reports, which may not exist, or be hard to verify, in authoritarian contexts.

One challenge that applies to both democracy aid and human rights assistance is that the codes that are used to generate the DAC database have at times been inconsistently or non-systematically applied. For example, in explaining the timeframe of their study on who benefits from aid for trade, Hühne et al, (2014: 1277) note that “We do not use data for earlier years as the reporting of donors on sector-specific aid was incomplete”. There are also types of aid disbursement that can be considered to fall into a number of different categories simultaneously. A project to build cohesion between rival communities, for example, can be viewed as a conflict resolution programme, a way of protecting the rights of women and vulnerable groups, and a strategy for ensuring that elections can be held without incident.

## 4. Global trends in the extent of democracy and human rights

Although there is considerable debate over the extent and causes of the trend, there is broad consensus that the quality of democracy and respect for political rights and civil liberties have declined since 2015. Following a period of debate in which some scholars argued that the notion of a democratic recession was a “myth” (Levitsky and Way, 2015), there has been growing agreement that the quality of democracy has declined (Diamond, 2021) and a shift in focus to trying to calculate “how much” (Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg, 2017: 162), to the extent that a recent review article could conclude that “The increased incidence of democratic backsliding has been met with a similar increase in scholarly interest” (Waldner and Lust, 2018: 106).

This consensus is largely driven by the clarity of the trends identified by the main democracy ratings indices. We are currently in the 16th year of a global democratic recession (Freedom House, 2022), which means that every year the number of countries moving away from democracy (in other words, towards authoritarianism) has been greater than the number of countries moving towards democracy. According to Freedom House, 2005 was the last year in which the number of countries that improved their performance on democracy exceeded the number that became more authoritarian. What is perhaps most worrying is that the number of countries experiencing a decline has increased from an average of 59 between 2005 and 2011 to an average of 65 over the last decade. The overall impact of this trend on the civil and political rights enjoyed by citizens has been profound. As of 2021, eight out of ten citizens live in a country that was only ‘partly free’ or ‘unfree’ (Freedom House, 2022).

As this overview suggests, the trend of democratic decline has also become increasingly inclusive of different world regions. There has been a decline in respect for almost every kind of civil and political right and the quality of democratic institutions in almost every continent. If we look at the data collected by Freedom House – which recognises seven main categories comprising the electoral process, political pluralism and participation, functioning of government, freedom of expression and belief, associational and organisational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights – the only exceptions to this rule are personal autonomy and individual rights, which improved in Eurasia, the electoral process, which improved in the Middle East and Asia Pacific, and political pluralism and participation, which improved in the Asia-Pacific region.

It is important to note, however, that the extent of the decline has varied considerably. According to Freedom House, over the last 16 years backsliding has been most pronounced in Eurasia, Africa and the Middle East, with a more modest decline in Europe and the Americas. Meanwhile, focusing on the last ten years, V-Dem notes that democratic decline by population-weighted measures “is especially evident in Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean” (V-Dem, 2022).

One consequence of this trend is that we are now back to 1989 levels of democracy, that is, the third wave of democratisation following the end of the Cold War. The number of liberal democracies in the world peaked at 42 in 2012 and has now fallen to 34 – home to just 13% of the world population (V-Dem, 2022), which in part reflects the fact that the V-Dem index downgraded India to an “electoral autocracy” (Freedom House and the Democracy Index have also downgraded India, but did not go quite as far as V-Dem, rating it a “partially free democracy” and a “flawed democracy” respectively). Meanwhile, the proportion of the world living in “autocratising” countries has increased from 5% in 2011 to 36% in 2021 (V-Dem, 2022). Similarly, the number of countries “threatening freedom of expression” has increased from five to 35 over the same period.

## 4.1 Human rights trends

One of the main challenges with tracking human rights is that, in contrast to the large and growing number of democracy ratings indices, there are very few attempts to track human rights systematically and in great depth on a global scale. In general, democracy indices capture civil and political rights, but not the broader range of rights set out in **Section 3**.

The human rights indices that do exist suggest that the declining quality of democracy has had a significant and negative impact on rights and liberties. According to the CIVICUS Monitor, “year after year, there is significantly less space for people to exercise fundamental freedoms” (CIVICUS, 2021). More specifically, the 2021 report from CIVICUS included significant country downgrades for Poland, Singapore, Nicaragua, Jordan and South Africa, with 13 countries being given worse ratings and only one improving. Overall, CIVICUS now estimates that nine out of ten people live in countries where civic freedoms are severely restricted.

The HRMI Rights Tracker also records major and deepening challenges facing indigenous communities. The 2022 Rights Tracker suggests that indigenous peoples are at greater risk of a range of rights violations in 23 countries including Nepal, Mexico, the US and Venezuela. This includes rights such as the right to education, with particularly high levels of concern expressed by the experts surveyed in Australia and Brazil, and freedom from torture (Yegorov-Crate, 2022).

There has also been a deterioration in what are sometimes called ‘personal forms of freedom’, such as the right to participate in a same-sex relationship and to be free from genital mutilation. While some of these ‘personal freedoms’ are often included under civil and political rights, such as the right to practice one’s religion, this is not always the case for other rights such as freedom from female genital mutilation or the right to change gender, which are issues that rose to global prominence after the foundational human rights conventions had come into existence. Between 2015 and 2019, global freedom to engage in same-sex relationships fell slightly from 7.32 to 7.30, while freedom from genital mutilation fell from 9.39 to 9.25 and freedom of religion declined from 7.92 to 7.86 (Cato Institute, 2022). This evidence suggests that the decline in democracy and political rights set out above has also had implications for a much broader range of personal freedoms.

More broadly, tracking 76 indicators including personal, civic and economic freedoms, the Cato Institute estimates that the global average of human freedom, on a 1-10 scale, was 7.12 in 2021, a decrease of 0.01 from 2020, with “82 jurisdictions decreasing their ratings and 67 improving” (Cato Institute, 2022). Put another way, “fully 83 percent of the global population lives in jurisdictions that have seen a fall in human freedom since 2008” (Cato Institute, 2022).

The highest levels of freedom were recorded in North America, Western Europe and Oceania, with the lowest levels in the Middle East, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. This pattern is particularly true of freedoms specifically related to women. It is important to note that the data collected on freedoms by organisations such as the Cato Institute typically have a two-year lag, and so the latest scores are based on data collected for 2019. This means that any recent deterioration (or improvement) in relation to human rights will not be captured until future reports.

## 5. Major threats to democracy and human rights

A review of the literature shows that researchers have identified at least ten themes driving the decline of democracy: pronounced inequalities, socio-economic disruption, democratic complacency, rising populism, growing political polarisation, state capture, military coups, mutual support and lesson learning within the community of authoritarian states, emboldened autocrats and, most recently, the impact of COVID-19. The combination of these factors that is most significant to the process of democratic decline varies markedly across countries (Diamond, 2021). Most obviously, the risk that citizens and leaders become complacent about the value and vulnerability of democracy is only significant in established democracies. It does not apply in less democratic contexts such as large parts of the Middle East, Africa and Eurasia, which have never experienced high-quality democracy. In these regions, the collapse of authoritarian systems of government resulted in ‘stalled’ transitions and political systems that held multi-party elections but in a broadly authoritarian context, or in the case of some Middle Eastern states, which do not hold multi-party polls at all. These authoritarian and “competitive-authoritarian” (Levitsky and Way, 2002) regimes never achieved high levels of democracy and so some researchers have questioned whether it makes sense to talk of “democracy backsliding” (Cianetti and Healey, 2021). In such contexts, it may be more accurate to speak of the consolidation of authoritarian rule.

Similarly, while the risk posed by autocrats becoming increasingly emboldened is a significant driver of democratic backsliding in established autocracies, it does less to explain relatively small declines in democracy in a number of European and North American states. The same is true of the ability of authoritarian leaders to learn from and support one another. A number of other factors also have a varied impact. This is clearly the case for military coups, which are far more likely to take place in sub-Saharan Africa than other regions (Elischer, 2017), and within Africa are far more likely to occur in countries with a history of military intervention in politics. Meanwhile, the potential for state institutions to be captured by private forces is highest where political institutions are already weaker, for example in neo-patrimonial contexts (Herrman, 2010; Pitcher, Moran and Johnson, 2009). Partly as a result, there is a strong consensus that it is essential to start all analysis and policy design by identifying the specific set of factors that are most influential in a given context (Laws and Marquette, 2018; see **Section 7.3**).

While a number of these factors have remained roughly the same since 2015, such as pronounced inequalities, socio-economic disruption, democratic complacency and rising polarisation, others become a bigger threat the longer the global democratic recession goes on. These include rising populism, emboldened authoritarian leaders, and the capacity of authoritarian regimes to share effective strategies, advisors, and resources.

1. **Pronounced inequalities.** A degree of social equality has long been thought to be beneficial to democratic consolidation, as demonstrated by the work of Alexis de Tocqueville (1838). Some of the founding fathers of US were concerned that democracy would be rendered unstable by vast inequalities in wealth, and used this to justify attaching property requirements to the right to vote (Mioni, 2002). In doing so, they effectively prioritised stability over citizens’ political rights – and given that property ownership was largely in white hands, also over racial equality – but the intuition that economic inequality renders democracy vulnerable continues to this day. Evidence that inequality is



growing for more than 70% of the global population (UN, 2020) has led to concern that poorer citizens are less able to participate fully in politics (Hacker and Pierson, 2010) – for example by running for president – and also that declining class mobility has fostered growing frustration with democratic rule (Pew Research Center, 2020). Karl has argued (2000: 150), for example, that “Gross economic disparities greatly contributed to Latin America’s past democratic failures and, despite the current complacency regarding democracy’s third wave, they are likely to do so again”. In many countries, rising vertical inequality between individuals has gone hand in hand with rising horizontal group-based inequalities between different regions or ethnic/racial communities. This process has tended to reinforce – and hence highlight – regional and racial disparities in wealth and power, and where political institutions are weak has been shown to increase the risk of political instability (Stewart, 2016). More broadly, the combination of vertical and horizontal inequalities threatens to undermine the legitimacy of democratic systems in the eyes of those who believe they are not adequately represented by them, as demonstrated by the rise of movements such as #BlackLivesMatter. The challenge posed by horizontal inequalities is often argued to be particularly pronounced in parts of the Global South where political alliances are shaped by ethnic and religious identities, and therefore winner-takes-all politics can lead to economic exclusion along communal lines (Mueller, 2011).

2. **Socio-economic disruption caused by globalisation.** The challenge posed by rising inequality has been exacerbated by what Diamond (2019) calls “the crisis of globalization”. The consequences of the push for free trade and the expansion of largely unregulated financial markets – leading to global financial crises – which is often argued to have made it harder for governments to protect their citizens from economic harm such as unemployment, led to a greater influx of migrants and hence higher levels of ethnic diversity, and thus created the conditions for the emergence of populist leaders. However, a number of aspects of this argument require further nuance, not least in comparatively wealthy Western states in which governments retain considerable ability to mediate the impact of global trends on citizens (Weiss, 1998). Sobolewska and Ford (2020) show that greater volatility and polarisation in UK politics has been driven by new divisions over immigration, identity and diversity, but also point out that this was not an inevitable process and that it was the choices made by political parties that mobilised these divisions into politics. This point is important, because while rising ‘nativist’ responses are often explained on the basis of rising migration (Bergmann, 2020), in reality the correlation between levels of in-migration and anti-foreigner rhetoric and policy is often weak, partly because public perceptions of and attitudes to globalisation and migration are shaped by the ability and willingness of leaders to politicise these issues (Mudde, 2012; see also **point 5** below).
3. **Democratic complacency.** According to David Runciman (2018), it is a mistake to assume that democracies die with a big bang and one momentous event, such as a military coup. Instead, he argues that in many cases democracy is gradually eroded from the inside out. One factor making this possible is that, having enjoyed relative democratic stability, both political leaders and citizens in more established democracies may be less conscious of the advantages of democratic government and more relaxed about the risks of democratic rollback, leading to dangerous complacency. This can give rise to higher levels of complacency and political disengagement, while also encouraging citizens to discount the risks of supporting more radical populist leaders who promise to transform the political system. Other scholars have emphasised the fact that this complacency can be seen in the way that powerful democratic states have responded to threats to democracy both at home and abroad (Diamond, 2020).
4. **Rising populism.** The combination of socio-economic challenges, democratic complacency and pronounced inequality has created a facilitative environment for opportunist politicians to mobilise support using illiberal language and strategies (Carpenter, 2017; Klaas, 2017; Löffmann, 2019). It is important not to exaggerate the significance of this trend, as there were only 17 populists in power in 2021, a figure that has fallen since 2010 (Meyer, 2021: 7), and the term ‘populist’ is often applied with insufficient care and attention (Paget, 2021). Nonetheless, the emergence of right-wing populist leaders in the US (Donald Trump), Hungary (Viktor Orbán), Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro) and India (Narendra Modi) means that the global decline in democracy is often seen as having been exacerbated by the rise of populist presidents and prime ministers (Mudde, 2016; Kuyper and Moffitt, 2020). Populist

leaders are seen to represent a particular threat to human rights, given their tendency to exacerbate social tensions, undermine checks and balances, and reject or challenge international conventions and institutions (Neuman et al., 2020; Neuman, 2020).

5. **Growing political polarisation, and a decline in levels of tolerance and mutual acceptance.** Especially in the US and European states that have witnessed the rise of populist leaders, there appears to have been a decline in political tolerance. Key features of this process including rising political polarisation and declining respect for the legitimacy of constructive opposition, leading to the adoption of increasingly extreme – and often undemocratic – strategies to hold on to power at all costs (Ziblatt and Levitsky, 2018). One consequence of this is a decline in agreement on basic political facts between supporters of rival parties, something that is often argued to have been driven by the combination of the ‘echo chambers’ created by social media (Cinelli et al., 2021) and an increase in unregulated or more highly politicised forms of traditional media (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Significantly, a systematic review of the literature on social media and political polarisation by Kubin and von Sikorski concludes that “All experiments found that social media can further ideologically polarize people” (2021: 198). There are a growing number of studies of polarisation, including the US, South and Southeast Asia (Carothers and O’Donohue, 2020) and other regions. In a large-n cross-national study conducted using V-Dem data, Somer, McCoy and Luke (2021: 945) find that “polarization is associated with deterioration in democratic quality, including democratic elements of electoral authoritarian regimes, and that sustained severe levels of polarization have the most deleterious effects”.
6. **State capture.** One of the concepts that has been increasingly invoked in the literature to explain the weakening of democratic checks and balances and the extension of central government control of the wider political system is state capture (Peter et al., 2018; Renwick, 2018; Pavlović, 2021). Although the concept is not always tightly defined, state capture refers to the takeover of key democratic, administrative, security and financial institutions either by the ruling party or by distinct groups within society that are connected to the ruling party (Croucamp, 2019). This control is then used to undermine accountability, retain power, manage or silence dissenting voices, and serve the interests of those in power to the detriment of the public (Cheeseman, 2020). In some cases, such as South Africa, state capture is seen to be particularly closely associated with growing corruption and hence to have negative economic consequences as well as political ones (Hassan, 2018; Peter et al., 2018). Similar concerns have been identified in other regions, including in Latin America where the debate has focused more on the ability of economic elites and associated business groups to exert undue influence over the state (Crabtree and Durand, 2017).
7. **The return of coups.** In 2021, there were six coups, a record for the 21st century and a significant increase on the average of 1.2 per year. This is perhaps the most regionally specific trend of the last five years, as all but one of these coups took place in West Africa (the exception was Myanmar). This reflects a worrying trend in sub-Saharan Africa, which has seen 73% of all coups since 1993 (Elischer, 2017). Since 2017, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Sudan and Zimbabwe have all seen civilian leaders forcibly removed from power, and a number of other countries have undergone failed coup attempts, including the Central African Republic and Guinea-Bissau.
8. **Authoritarian support and learning.** There is considerable evidence of mutual support, networking and lesson learning between different authoritarian regimes (Hall and Ambrosio, 2017), such as the adoption of very similar legislation on non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cybersecurity and social media that has increased the ability of governments to keep the population under surveillance and silence criticism (Glasius et al., 2020). The question of whether authoritarian powers are actively involved in promoting authoritarianism abroad, in the same way that some pro-democracy countries have engaged in democracy support activities, is more controversial (Tansey, 2016). While Russia and China provide considerable financial and logistical support to partners that are already authoritarian, and so help to sustain repressive regimes – something that rhetorically ‘pro-democratic states’ often also do, most notably in the case of countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Meintjes, 2018) – it is less clear that they have been systematically engaged in an active strategy that is designed to turn democratic governments into authoritarian ones. China for example, has historically forged strong

partnerships with a wide range of governments in Africa, Asia and Latin America, both democratic and authoritarian – although it does expect states that it financially supports not to recognise Taiwan and to support China’s position on important votes at the UN (Piccone, 2018; Ndzendze, 2022). This may have changed over the last five years, however, as China has adopted a more rigid and ambitious foreign policy under President Xi, and Russian foreign policy has become increasingly aggressive and expansionary under President Vladimir Putin – not least with the invasion of Ukraine and the explicit attempt to overthrow an elected civilian government. Diamond (2020: 37-38) argues, for example, that “Each of these authoritarian projects to bend global norms, expectations and institutions away from democracy has relied principally on a form of influence known as ‘sharp power’, because of the razor-like way it cuts with precision into the fabric of other societies”. He further notes that “While Russia and China have been the principle (sic) deployers, other authoritarian states (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and occasionally smaller ones like Azerbaijan) have also used these covert, intimidating, and corrupting techniques to gain influence and undermine liberal democratic values”. Similarly, Wigell (2021: 49) argues that we have entered a new era of challenges to democracy that he describes as “hybrid interference”, in which the “cornerstones of Western democracy – state restraint, pluralism, free media, and economic openness – provide openings for authoritarian actors to interfere in democratic society through a host of covert, non-military means calibrated to undermine their internal cohesion and accelerate political polarization”. Against this backdrop, it is important to keep in mind that the growing number of authoritarian states means that they increasingly represent a majority of regional and international organisations, making it easier to protect one another from international criticism and sanctions. In some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, a majority of countries represented in regional decision-making bodies that are supposedly responsible for upholding governance standards are not themselves “free” (Freedom House, 2021) or “electoral democracies” (V-Dem, 2021). Authoritarian states are also actively engaged in creating regional spaces in which they can pursue foreign policy goals. Consequently, there is evidence that “regional organizations founded and dominated by autocracies” – including the Commonwealth of Independent States (Russia), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (China), Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (Venezuela), and Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia) – play an important role “in preserving and promoting autocracy” (Libman and Obydenkova, 2018: 151).

9. **Emboldened autocrats.** The perception that European and North American leaders are consumed with their own political crises – most recently Brexit in Europe and the controversy surrounding the 2020 presidential election in the US – has created the impression that pro-democracy states lack the capacity and/or the interest to make high-profile interventions in defence of democracy abroad (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018; Carothers, 2018). Authoritarian leaders have also taken advantage of democratic controversies in Western states (Rocha Menocal, 2022), including breaches of democratic principles by the executive (Lady Hale and Lord Reed, 2019), to evidence accusations that such governments act hypocritically or inconsistently when they seek to promote democracy and human rights abroad (Hamilton, 2019; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody, 2021). This has led to governments and societies in the Global South increasingly questioning the ideological hegemony of European and North American states much more openly and powerfully than in the 1990s and – together with the growing number of ‘non-traditional’ international partners available – has resulted in states diversifying their foreign relations. Along with the growing number of authoritarian states around the world, this has emboldened authoritarian leaders to face down international criticism following flawed elections or corruption scandals, as in Belarus and Uganda.
10. **The impact of COVID-19.** In addition to exacerbating inequality and poverty, the pandemic has been associated with a deterioration in civil liberties related to the enforcement of social distancing measures such as curfews and lockdowns. Between the beginning of the pandemic and July 2021, V-Dem tracked “violations of democratic standards in relation to COVID-19 measures in 144 countries” (V-Dem, 2021: 1). Moderate violations were particularly common in Africa and Central Asia, with major violations most likely to take place in Latin America, the Middle East and South and East Asia. While some of these violations were short-term and related to the heavy-handed attempts of governments to impose curfews and prevent newspapers from reporting on pandemic-related deaths, others

involved granting governments greater powers to deal with emergencies. Where these measures did not feature ‘sunset’ clauses, as in Hungary, or new measures were introduced to enable the government to subject the population to more effective surveillance, as in Israel, the negative impact of these changes is likely to be sustained.

These factors have given rise to three further processes that can be understood as both manifestations of democratic decline and developments that contribute to autocratisation. In other words, restrictions on civic space, restrictions on freedom of speech and the media, and electoral manipulation are facilitated by democratic backsliding, but also create new conditions that weaken democratic forces with profound implications for the prospects for democracy in the future. While these processes have been identified in a range of states including established democracies, they have been particularly pronounced in countries that were already competitive-authoritarian.

1. **Restrictions on civic space.** The last 15 years have seen an acceleration in the introduction of anti-NGO legislation that has significantly constrained the activities of pro-democracy organisations (Chaudhry, 2022), in particular by limiting the proportion of funding that NGOs can secure from outside the country (Smidt et al., 2021). This “global assault on NGOs” has been ongoing since the early 2000s but arguably reached “crisis point” in 2019, curbing important human rights work (Amnesty International, 2019). That year, 50 countries had either introduced anti-NGO laws or had plans to introduce them. Such restrictions, and the large fines that can typically be imposed on organisations deemed to have flouted the rules, have intimidated and weakened civil society in many regions, undermining both the scrutiny of government activities and the representation of citizens’ interests (Chaudhry, 2022). It is important to note, however, that these efforts were not always successful, and in countries such as Kenya and Kyrgyzstan “domestic campaigns organized by broad alliances of local CSOs” successfully resisted the introduction of “anti-NGO” legislation (Berger-Kern et al., 2021: 84).
2. **Restrictions on freedom of speech and the media.** A parallel trend has seen growing restrictions placed on media houses and journalists, with rising levels of censorship and intimidation. The World Press Freedom Index produced by Reporters Without Borders rated press freedom as “very bad” in a record number of 28 countries in 2022, and identified no “good” cases at all in Africa, Asia-Pacific or the Middle East. At the same time, Freedom House noted that global internet freedom fell in 2021 for the 11th consecutive year. While recognising the need for technology companies and regulators to respond to growing concerns that social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp are being used to spread hate speech, the Freedom on the Net report for 2021 concluded that “With a few positive exceptions, the push to regulate the tech industry, which stems in some cases from genuine problems like online harassment and manipulative market practices, is being exploited to subdue free expression and gain greater access to private data” (Freedom House, 2021: 3). These more general restrictions on press and online freedom have gone hand in hand with targeted attacks on journalists by a number of different actors including governments and businesses and individuals engaged in criminal and corrupt activities. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2022), almost 1,500 journalists have been killed since 1991. Of the 45 journalists killed in 2021, it has already been confirmed that at least 28 were murdered in direct retaliation for their work (International Press Institute, 2022). Reporters Without Borders argues that professional journalists have also been sidelined by “a globalised and unregulated online information space that encourages fake news and propaganda” (2022).
3. **Electoral manipulation.** The leaders of competitive-authoritarian political systems have proved to be adept at employing a range of traditional and innovative strategies (Schedler, 2002; Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009), including manipulating the information environment and using digital technology (Morgan, 2018; Garnett and James, 2020), to ensure that they do not lose elections. Globally, between 70 and 75% of elections a year are won by the ruling party, and in the Middle East, Africa and Eurasia this figure is considerably higher (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018: 246). This has both prevented democratic consolidation (Levitsky and Way, 2002), and enabled governments in many countries to limit or reverse the growth of opposition parties (Yuong, 2020; Riaz and Parvez, 2021). In turn, popular



frustration with repeatedly poor quality and controversial polls threatens to undermine support for democratic government, most notably in the relatively young democracies of sub-Saharan Africa (Bratton and Bhoojdhur, 2019).

As already noted above, it is important to recognise that there are different processes of democratic decline taking place in different regions, and in different countries within the same region, with very different drivers. What counts as the most significant threat therefore depends on the specific context one is looking at, with each context requiring a different set of developmental and diplomatic interventions. A one-size-fits-all approach is therefore likely to be ineffective and represent poor value for money. Instead, there is broad consensus within the literature that future democracy support programming will need to pay careful attention to the specific political conditions on the ground (Cheeseman and Dodsworth, 2019b).

## 5.1 Major opportunities to build stronger democracy and human rights protection

There is consensus within the literature on democratisation and democratic backsliding that turning around 16 years of democratic decline will be a long-term undertaking, not least because following the imposition of tighter restrictions on civil society groups and the media, the core building blocks of a democratic revival are weaker than in the past (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). Recent publications by academics, think tanks and policy centres identify four major opportunities for building stronger democracy and human rights, although it is important to note that there is not always complete agreement about how feasible and effective each ‘opportunity’ is in reality. These opportunities are largely the same as they were in 2015, with the exception of the changing international context and the potential to galvanise renewed democracy support activities in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine:

1. **Popular support for democracy is resilient.** Research conducted using the regional barometers of public opinion finds that in many, though not all, parts of the world, public support for democratic government remains resilient, despite growing frustration with the performance of elected governments. “Most South Asians believe that democracy is suitable for their country and prefer democracy over authoritarianism” (deSouza et al., 2008). Similarly, “Nationally representative surveys carried out by the Afrobarometer group between 2016 and 2018 in thirty-five countries find that strong majorities prefer democracy to any other form of government in every state surveyed except for the small monarchy of Eswatini” (Cheeseman and Sishuwa, 2021: 719). This is particularly important, according to Christopher Claassen (2019: 118), because public support for democracy has “a positive effect on subsequent democratic change”, and “Support is, moreover, more robustly linked with the endurance of democracy than its emergence in the first place”. Claassen’s conclusions raise the question of how public support for democracy can be sustained, especially in the face of sustained critiques from populist and other leaders. Eisen et al. (2019: 9) argue that one answer is that “Moving forward, democracy must be shown to work”. In other words, there needs to be a clear strategy to demonstrate to citizens that democracy is in their own best interest, whether they are most concerned about the economy, their security, or their rights. This point is reflected by V-Dem’s recent campaign entitled “The Case for Democracy”, which aims to “actively outline and promote the socio-economic and security benefits inherent in a more democratic world”.<sup>1</sup> This is necessary, to discourage further democratic backsliding “in the present era of ‘fake news’ which is often generated by and in support of autocratization” (Alizada et al., 2022: 2).
2. **Institutions have yet to be fully eroded in some countries.** In *The democracy playbook: preventing and reversing democratic backsliding*, Eisen et al. (2019) argue that especially in some of the European states where democratic backsliding has not yet led to the emergence of authoritarian regimes, democratic institutions still operate, albeit under increasing pressure. In turn, “The ability of political opposition and civil society to operate gives pro-democracy actors an urgent window of opportunity to push back on illiberal activity before it becomes further entrenched, and in turn, more difficult to

<sup>1</sup> See the campaign website at: <https://www.v-dem.net/casefordemocracy.html>.

undo” (Eisen et al., 2019: 9). This point could be extended beyond Europe to recent cases of backsliding in other parts of the world.

3. **Shifting social attitudes.** Research conducted by the Pew Research Center suggests that the younger generation holds more supportive views of women’s and LGBTQI+ rights in many – but not all – countries. This has led to growing acceptance of homosexuality even in countries that remain conservative and largely against the principle of respecting human rights for all. The proportion of people saying that homosexuality should be accepted increased from 1% in 2009 to 14% in 2019 in Kenya, 15% in 2009 to 37% in 2019 in India, and 25% to 44% in South Korea over the same period (Pew, 2020). Thus, despite the willingness and ability of some authoritarian leaders to use attacks on the LGBTQI+ community to bolster support among hardline elements of their regime (Brown and Fisher, 2022), there are growing opportunities to strengthen even some of the most controversial human rights – though the potential for authoritarian leaders to manipulate international intervention in these areas means that engagement needs to be particularly well designed and sensitive to local context (see below).
4. **Changing international context.** According to Leininger and Lindberg (2022), “If there is a silver lining to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine, it is that leaders in democracies have woken up”. More specifically, “A global power’s military invasion of a democracy is a demonstration to democracies worldwide that autocracies are a danger to peace and are not to be trusted in international cooperation”. In response, European leaders appear to have established a new-found determination to undertake united action in defence of Ukrainian sovereignty and democracy. This has included a compromise deal on one of the most challenging issues, banning Russian oil imports. The war is therefore both an “appalling conflict” and a “moment of opportunity” (Smith, 2020). However, there are a number of challenges to seizing this opportunity. One is that “with a few shining exceptions” the call from Ukrainian democracy to stand up “did not resonate strongly, even among its self-declared leaders in the Global South, like India and South Africa. Sovereignty and territorial integrity took center stage, and too often, the invasion was seen as just another standoff between Russia and the West” (Leffler, 2022). Another is that the invasion, and the resulting search for alternative sources of oil, could encourage European and North American powers to weaken their commitment to democracy “as geopolitical calculations take center stage” (Godfrey and Youngs, 2022).

These opportunities are substantial but they are also nascent and will only be realised if there is concerted international mobilisation to bolster them.

## 6. Approaches to democracy and human rights assistance

The global portfolio of assistance to democracy and human rights has remained fairly consistent since 2015. Of the funding spent on the six OECD DAC input sector codes under review, the vast majority is targeted at democratic participation and civil society (\$197 million in 2020), followed by human rights (\$87 million) and, for most of the last five years, the media and free flow of information (\$60 million). Funding for women’s rights organisations has generally been at around \$40 million a year for the last five years, but experienced a dramatic increase from 2019 to 2020 to become the third-largest sector in democracy aid for the first time. Significantly less funding is directed at elections (\$14 million in 2020) and political parties (\$6.4 million).

In addition to an increase in funding for women’s rights organisations, there was a gradual increase in funding for democratic participation between 2017 and 2020, and for human rights between 2016 and 2019. There was also a small increase in media funding, with incremental improvements from 2015 to 2019. Perhaps the most striking thing about this pattern is that the total spend on democracy and human rights aid barely increased over this period, despite growing recognition of the negative consequences of a global democratic recession.<sup>2</sup>

The UK’s democracy and human rights portfolio deviates from this broader pattern. Most obviously, the media sector represents the single biggest area of spend, at £515 million between 2015 and 2020 because the cost of the

<sup>2</sup> Analysis using data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) input sector codes used to classify official development assistance spending by official donors, [link](#).

BBC World Service is included under this heading (£427 million). If the World Service is removed, the media sector becomes the fifth UK area of spend, while it is currently the fourth when we look at OECD countries as a whole. The UK tends to spend the least money on legislatures and political parties (£48 million) than any other category although over the period the UK is still the third highest OECD DAC contributor on legislatures and political parties. The UK is also the third largest funder of electoral assistance, fourth for women's rights organisations, and sixth for democratic participation and civil society and for human rights.<sup>3</sup>

While the distribution of overall democracy and human rights aid has remained relatively consistent, there are some trends in expenditure on some of the smaller sectors that are worth highlighting. The most notable of these is that, despite growing evidence of electoral manipulation (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018) and the impact of this on popular support for democracy, funding for elections has declined since 2015. This may reflect a growing reluctance by donors to fund elections in highly problematic authoritarian settings where they are less likely to generate legitimate and stable government.

From a peak of almost \$782 million in 2010, electoral assistance fell to under \$300 million in 2020. One reason for this trend is that the peaks in 2005 and 2010 were largely driven by exceptionally high expenditure in isolated cases (DAC Network on Governance, 2022: 2). In 2005, \$333 million was spent on Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2010, \$320 million was spent in Afghanistan and Sudan. It is worth noting, however, that even when these exceptional expenditures are removed, there is a clear decline between 2014 and 2020, during which time total electoral assistance almost halved. This decline has occurred not only in terms of total ODA, but also in terms of the proportion of governance ODA spend on electoral assistance (DAC Network on Governance, 2022). From a recent high of 6% in 2010, spending on elections fell to just 1% in 2020, with a decline from 3% to 1% in the last five years alone. While the UK remains one of the biggest funders of electoral assistance, its expenditure in this area reflects the broader OECD pattern. UK expenditure in this sector peaked in 2009 and 2019, reflecting the broader pattern among the top five donors, and in line with the general trend, but trended downwards from 2009 to 2020, despite a one-year increase in 2019.

## 6.1 The relationship between democracy and human rights programming

Many international donors see democracy and human rights as two sides of the same coin, not least because they tend to focus on political rights and civil liberties, which are central to the working definition of democratic government. Thus, the Democracy, Human Rights and Governance programme of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) focuses on:

- Democratic governance – building open, responsive and accountable institutions.
- Participation and inclusion – ensuring that all have the opportunity to participate politically.
- Free and fair elections, transparency and accountability – promoting open political competition.
- Civil society and independent media – promoting citizens' civic and political rights.
- Justice and security – strengthening justice and security institutions and the rule of law.
- Human rights and non-discrimination – supporting efforts to prevent human rights abuses.
- Countering resurgent authoritarian influence – strengthening democratic and institutional resilience (USAID, 2022a).

SIDA's thematic areas similarly bring together democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. Likewise, the UK government's emphasis on open societies underlines how the right of all citizens to vote in elections is critical for realising democracy, along with a variety of rights and freedoms including gender equality, freedom of expression, and social inclusion (Cabinet Office, 2021). However, although democracy and human rights are often closely connected in donor statements and literature, this does not mean that they are always addressed through a common framework and set of programmes. A human rights-based approach has been adopted by SIDA and a growing number of European donors (see **Section 6.3**; OECD and World Bank, 2016), but has yet to be taken up by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Partly as a result, there remains a tendency for donors to operate separate democracy and human rights policies and strategies rather than integrate them into one

<sup>3</sup> Analysis using the UK government's Statistics in Development annual figures, [link](#).

common approach. This is also true of the rule of law, which is often argued to underpin democracy, accountability and civil and political rights (O'Donnell, 2004), but is often treated as a separate thematic area.

One area in which democratic and human rights concerns come together naturally is in social accountability initiatives and the wider inclusion agenda – which are related to the principle of non-discrimination that is key to many human rights-based approaches – but these areas lie beyond the scope of this literature review.

## **6.2 To what extent do these approaches pay attention to the needs and desires of rights-holders, and in particular of communities and groups which are often unable to exercise their rights in practice?**

Approaches to developmental assistance for democracy and human rights feature a strong emphasis on the experiences of rights-holders and often include a focus on how to expand political rights and civil liberties. The three largest sub-sectors of democracy aid in 2020 were women's rights organisations, human rights, and democracy and participation, which typically includes a focus on promoting inclusive political participation. It is worth noting that funding of rights-focused programming and projects designed to improve the position of minorities and historically marginalised groups is significantly greater than that devoted to many political institutions. For example, in 2020, the overall aid allocation to women's rights organisations and human rights was roughly 8.5 times larger than the allocation to elections, legislatures and political parties combined. This in part reflects the fact that there is more scope for running large-scale projects on civil society groups and marginalised communities, which are often numerous and easy to access, than on political parties and legislatures.

Over the last 20 years there has also been a considerable focus on gender mainstreaming in development policy. For many donors, such as the former Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK government, this has been a long process that was accelerated by the growing focus on gender equality following the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 (Watkins, 2004), and then the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. DFID's *Vision for women and girls* (2011b) and *Strategic vision for gender equality* (2018), for example, sought to put women's and girls' rights at the centre of its international policy. A number of donors, including the UK and the US, have also begun to place a stronger emphasis on LGBTQI+ rights and the rights of people with disabilities, including over the last five years, although recent research has suggested that the UK spends less than was previously thought on LGBTQI+ issues (Crawford, 2022).

There has been an important trend of mainstreaming a focus on human rights within developmental assistance more broadly, with human rights-based approaches to development becoming increasingly common over the last 15 years. This approach, which gained prominence in the early 2000s, typically has three core elements (OECD and World Bank, 2016: xx):

- The relationship between development cooperation, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and international human rights instruments.
- The relevance for development programming of human rights standards (such as the right to education, specific labour rights) and principles derived from these instruments (such as equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, accountability, and the rule of law).
- The contribution that development cooperation can make to building the capacities of 'duty-bearers' and 'rights-holders' to realise and claim rights.

The growing synergy between human rights-based approaches and traditional development work can be seen in the SDGs, which are "viewed to have captured human rights considerations and principles to a far greater extent than had the MDGs" (OECD and World Bank, 2016: xxi). In practice, the integration of human rights has taken place in a variety of ways, with increasing attempts to integrate or mainstream a human rights approach throughout the design of country programmes and global initiatives. This has included "a more strategic use of human rights, influencing how situations are analysed, how objectives are set, and how aid is provided" (OECD and World Bank, 2016: xxiii).



Many human rights-based approaches also take into account socio-economically marginalised and disadvantaged groups. A review of the Danish human rights-based approaches, for example, has concluded that it “enabled the MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] to more systematically consider other human rights standards beyond civil, political and women’s rights early on in the policy and programming cycle. This includes a number of innovations to promote social, economic and cultural rights through sectoral programming” (Piron and Sano, 2016). Meanwhile at the EU level, the 2012 Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy was followed by the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, which was adopted by the Council in 2015 and reaffirmed “the EU’s commitment to mainstreaming human rights across all policies and ... to intensify efforts to promote social and economic rights” (OECD and World Bank, 2016). This is particularly significant given the fact that inequality is found to be one of the drivers of democratic decline.

Despite this, however, it is not always clear how far these approaches centre the beliefs and desires of the members of these communities themselves. The allocation of donor funds and broad design of developmental policy is still decided centrally, and there are often limited mechanisms through which local and national organisations representing women, socio-economically disadvantaged groups, people with disabilities and the LGBTIQ+ community can shape these decisions (Northey, 2019; Brown, 2022). Indeed, a recurring theme in the critique of donor engagement in these areas is that, even when donor programming aims to empower these communities, it does not always treat their preferences and ideas as central, as discussed below. International donors and financial institutions have often been criticised for undermining aspects of domestic accountability and the influence of civil society groups by agreeing important aspects of economic and development policy with the executive and ministries in a way that effectively locks national parliament and civil society groups out of the decision-making process (Whitfield, 2005). For example, Northey (2019: 196) describes how in North Africa donor programmes have frequently “resulted in a lack of autonomy for local actors”. Meanwhile, Birkuk (2014: 469) points out that “some African LGBT groups have spoken out against tying aid packages to LGBT rights, suggesting that conditional aid not only reinforces the argument that sexuality is a western construct but also distracts attention from the intersectional and structural oppressions that affect all Africans”.

These critiques, and growing concern about the marginalisation of voices from the Global South within the aid sector more broadly, have led to calls for the decolonisation of both international donor relationships and the way that international NGOs and other aid and humanitarian modalities operate (Aloudat and Khan, 2022). Such arguments typically advocate for a number of reforms to ensure that “decision-making is in the hands of the people directly impacted by aid and development programs” (Byatnal, 2021). These typically include empowering local civil society groups to make decisions over development priorities rather than simply acting as ‘implementing partners’, finding ways to bypass existing professional and capital-based NGOs that may not fully reflect the positions of marginalised communities and social movements, ensuring strong local leadership in programmes, combatting institutionalised racism within the aid sector (Byatnal, 2021), reducing knowledge and power imbalances between the north and the south, and changing the language and tone of aid discussions to be less paternalistic (Kertman, 2021). In April 2022, for example, USAID committed itself to “its commitment to localization and shifting more leadership, ownership, decision making, and implementation to the local people and institutions who possess the capability, connectedness, and credibility to drive change in their own countries and communities” (USAID, 2022b). Significantly, many of those who advocate decolonisation emphasise the benefits that this could have for international development given “the inherent benefits and value-added provided by national and local actors, namely that they are better placed to respond to crises and provide for community needs, and better able to build resilience to future crises” (Peace Direct, 2021).

### **6.3 Tensions between democracy and developmental objectives, and diplomatic attempts to promote democracy and human rights**

There are two main tensions between democracy and developmental approaches. The first relates to whether donors should prioritise development goals over democracy goals, and hinges in large part on the questions about whether authoritarian forms of government might have advantages in certain contexts (Foa, 2018), in part because democratisation can lead to considerable political and economic disruption that can generate challenges for development in the short term (Mansfield and Snyder, 2008; Masaki and van de Walle, 2016;

Christensen, Nguyen and Sexton, 2019). This is a particularly significant tension, because in cases where international donors prioritise development above democracy, they have been critiqued for helping to sustain authoritarian governments in power (Hagmann and Reyntjens, 2016). The second concerns the best strategy to advance democracy, and whether this can be done by advancing development in general, or requires a targeted focus on democracy aid. Thomas Carothers (1999) influentially outlined two different ways of operating in the democracy support sector, each of which reflects a different “theory of change” about how democracy advances: the developmental approach and the political approach.

The developmental approach adopts a broad conceptualisation of democracy that incorporates ideas of justice, equality and inclusion, and understands democratisation as a long-term incremental process that is underpinned by gradual progress in a wide variety of political and socio-economic areas. The political approach is typically much narrower, with a greater focus on providing support for key political institutions and for pro-democracy activists and leaders. It sees democratisation as a battleground between pro- and anti-democratic forces, and seeks to tilt the balance in favour of the former. According to Carothers (2009), European democracy assistance has typically followed the developmental approach, adopting a more long-term focus based on building a well-functioning and inclusive state (Youngs, 2003). By contrast, US democracy assistance has traditionally adopted a more political approach that has focused on interventions designed to empower national democrats to win short-term struggles, and in so doing catalysing broader democratic reform.

One area where these differences can be viewed is in donor response to military coups that remove civilian governments from power. The US automatically imposes restrictions on countries that have experienced a coup, effectively rendering illegal certain kinds of assistance to non-civilian governments that have come to power through unconstitutional means (Arieff, Lawson and Chessier, 2022). Other donors, such as France, do not automatically enforce restrictions in the event of a coup.

While this distinction is heuristically useful, it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which donor actions are regimented along these lines in practice. As Carothers notes, all donors blend developmental and political approaches to democracy promotion, and so the real question is which approach they emphasise more. This point is borne out by the OECD DAC data, which reveal that the tendency to spend less on elections, legislatures and parties (a ‘political’ approach) than other areas such as human rights and women’s rights organisations (a more developmental approach) is almost universal. Moreover, while the US has often been the donor that has spent the most on elections, it is also the donor that has seen the greatest decline in its spending in this area, from over \$300 million in 2010 to just over \$50 million in 2020, when its spending on elections was surpassed by the EU for the first time since 2008.

Diplomatic differences in the approach of the US/UK and other European states also appear to have diminished over the last five years. With notable exceptions such as Russia and Venezuela, the UK and the US have been less likely to adopt a high-profile public position in opposition to democratic backsliding (Carothers, 2018). This was most striking during the presidency of Donald Trump in the US, when democracy was downgraded as a foreign policy goal and Trump went out of his way to form strong ties with key ‘autocratising’ figures such as President Bolsonaro of Brazil and President Erdogan of Turkey (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018). As a result, the emphasis on diplomatic strategies to promote democracy declined considerably for much of the past decade.

An unrelated but nonetheless parallel trend has occurred in terms of the language used to describe the work of organisations such as the National Democratic Institute and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which have by and large stopped talking about ‘democracy promotion’ (Carothers, 2020) – a term that has connotations of democracy being externally engineered by the international community – in favour of democracy support or democracy strengthening (see, for example, Godfrey and Youngs, 2021). The latter terms are intended to convey the idea that democracy aid is meant to contribute to an existing democratic disposition, for example among the public and civil society groups, and to empower rather than create pro-democratic movements. More recently there has been a further shift, with some prominent figures calling for a greater emphasis on ‘democracy protection’ (Leininger and Lindberg, 2022) in light of the trends described above, and the emerging evidence – described in detail in the next section – that preventing democratic backsliding in

countries already moving towards authoritarianism may require different strategies to strengthening democracy in countries that are moving towards political liberalisation.

## 7. ‘What works’ and ‘what doesn’t work’ in responding to democracy and human rights threats through development policy and assistance

### 7.1 ‘What works’ and ‘what doesn’t work’ to promote democracy

The literature has yet to reach a consensus regarding the overall effect of foreign aid more broadly, and democracy aid more specifically, on the quality of democracy around the world. However, the most comprehensive systematic review of the quantitative literature on the relationship between aid and democracy concludes that:

1. Democracy aid generally supports rather than hinders democracy building around the world.
2. Democracy aid is more likely to contribute positively to democracy than developmental aid.
3. Aid modalities do appear to matter, but the evidence is limited.
4. The domestic political environment within recipient states conditions how effective aid ultimately is (Gisselquist et al., 2021: 2).

The strength of the relationship between aid and democracy is weaker for overall development assistance than for democracy aid. Of the 64 studies that have looked at the impact of developmental assistance, 39 (61%) found that such aid had a “modest positive impact on the democracy outcome”, while 30 found that it actually had a negative impact (47%) (Gisselquist et al., 2021: 14). This negative relationship may be explained by the way in which “total developmental aid distribution props up dictators” (Gisselquist et al., 2021: 14). Many of the studies in the review found that general development aid can have both positive and negative effects depending on the modalities of its distribution and the context of recipient states. In other words, how overall aid is delivered has significant consequences for the quality of democracy and human rights in partner countries – it is not only the design of democracy aid that matters. Recent research has highlighted three key observations regarding overall development aid in this respect, although it is important to note that the evidence base for these more specific arguments is slim and further research is needed.

1. **Donor disposition and leverage matters.** The impact of aid appears to be conditional on the political leverage of donors. According to Matiz and Schenoni (2018: 36), foreign aid is most likely to weaken autocratic regimes when democratic donors have the capability to “back conditionality with effective political pressure”.
2. **Development aid has the most positive effects on democracy in inclusive political settlements.** The nature of the political settlement in the recipient country is significant, with inclusive and large distributional coalitions more likely to oversee an increase in the quality of democracy (Wright, 2009).
3. **Aid exaggerates existing conditions.** The impact of development aid appears to be most positive in countries that are already more democratic, and most negative in countries that are firmly authoritarian, exacerbating existing democratisation/autocratisation trends (Nielsen and Nielson, 2010).

The impact of targeted democracy aid on the quality of democracy is considerably stronger and more positive than the effect of general developmental assistance, as one would expect. Of the 36 studies that tested this relationship, 26 (72%) identified a positive relationship, while only nine (8%) observed a significantly negative relationship (Gisselquist et al., 2021: 15). More specifically, research has found that democracy aid can reduce authoritarian tendencies (Nieto-Matiz and Schenoni, 2020), stabilise party systems – and so facilitate accountability (Dietrich and Wright, 2015) – while improving election quality (Haass, 2019).

The dramatic difference in the impact of development aid and democracy aid demonstrates the importance of not relying on overall aid levels to strengthen democracy and human rights, and instead of increasing the proportion of funds specifically dedicated to democracy support within the aid budget. As with developmental

assistance, the effectiveness of democracy aid is shaped by a number of conditions. Again, however, the evidence base for many of these more specific points is limited and further research is required.

1. **Regime type matters.** When provided to authoritarian regimes, democracy aid appears to be more effective when provided to one-party states and in contexts in which a political transition means there is no existing regime (Lührmann et al., 2018). It seems to be less effective when provided to military regimes, closed (that is, particularly restrictive) autocracies and liberal democracies (Cornell, 2013). One possible explanation of this finding is that aid is most likely to be effective when given to a government that is more inclusive and subject to greater accountability – in other words, not in military regimes and closed autocracies – but also has less effect on liberal democracies simply because there is less scope for improvement.
2. **State capacity is significant.** Democracy aid appears to have the greatest positive effect in countries with greater state capacity, in large part because these states are more likely to be able to absorb and track aid funds, and to implement relevant projects (Gisselquist et al., 2021).
3. **Coordination is important, but so is choice.** There is considerable evidence that when the international community is split in its objectives, governments feel less pressure to implement democratic reforms (Cheeseman, 2015; Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018). This does not mean, however, that it is better to have a smaller number of donors active in a given country. Instead, a multiplicity of donors has been shown to have positive benefits when they share a common interest in strengthening the quality of democracy. Recent research by Ziaja (2020: 433) finds that “A country’s democracy improves when it receives democracy aid from more donor countries”. He argues that this “creates a ‘marketplace for idea support’, which increases the viability of the resulting institutions”, and prevents “the imposition of an institutional blueprint, designed in advance and not adapted to the needs of the recipient society”.

Other recent studies that look at democracy aid provided by a specific actor affirm these broadly positive conclusions. Finkel, Pérez-Liñán and Seligson (2007) perform one of the most comprehensive studies of USAID’s democracy assistance programmes, concluding that on average these have the effect of empowering individuals and strengthening civil society and democratic institutions, leading to positive impacts on democracy. Similarly, Gafuri’s (2021: 1) review of EU-led democracy assistance to 128 states concludes that the “EU’s democracy assistance positively impacts democracy levels of recipient countries”. Reflecting prior qualitative research that has emphasised the extent of the political leverage and economic linkages between democracy aid providers and recipient states as central to the success of democracy support (Levitsky and Way, 2011), the study also concludes that EU democracy promotions are more effective in regions geographically closer to the EU, partly because of the added incentive of potential EU accession (Gafuri, 2021: 12).

There have been relatively few meta-analyses of entire democracy aid and human rights assistance programmes, which hampers our ability to assess the impact of the various strategies adopted by different donors in the round. One of the most comprehensive reviews was carried out as part of SIDA’s ‘drive for democracy’, and the commissioning of a rigorous assessment of the efficacy of SIDA democracy support programming. The review concluded that:

1. **Aid should be targeted at core democratic areas.** Democracy aid is most effective when it is targeted at essential components of democracy such as civil society and a free media. “A 10 per cent increase in aid to support democratic participation and civil society, the media and free flow of information, and human rights over a five year period is associated with increases of 0.09, 0.19, and 0.21 points [on a 0-1 scale] in the scores of V-Dem’s indices of freedom of association, freedom of expression and alternative sources of information, and human rights and civil liberties” (Niño-Zarazúa et al., 2020: 36).
2. **The type of recipient matters.** While some forms of democracy aid are naturally targeted at states, such as the provision of technical expertise to the electoral commission, the distribution of aid via non-state actors can be particularly effective because it “may mitigate the risk of regime capture of these resources” (Niño-Zarazúa et al., 2020: 24).



Finally, it is important to note that the substantive effect of democracy aid is often modest (Finkel, Pérez-Liñán and Seligson, 2007). This is not surprising – the quality of democracy is shaped by a wide range of factors in which domestic conditions have typically been found to be more significant than international ones (Levitsky and Way, 2006; Cheeseman, 2015). Democracy aid increases the prospects of democratic outcomes, and to this extent represents a worthwhile investment, but needs to be deployed in conjunction with other strategies to enhance its impact (see **Sections 7.3** and **7.4**).

## Regional variations

Given the limited number of studies, it is not feasible to analyse the impact of aid by region robustly. However, the SIDA-funded systematic review does consider the impact of overall aid to two of the regions that have been most frequently researched: Africa and the former Soviet Union. It tentatively concludes that research on these regions finds “largely positive, or conditionally positive, outcomes” (Gisselquist et al., 2021: 18). Ten of 13 studies found that aid had a positive impact in Africa (four found a negative relationship, and three found no relationship), as did five of the seven studies of the former Soviet Union (although three studies recorded some negative effects).

## ‘What works’ in specific sectors

Donor evaluations of programming in specific sectors, and academic commentaries on these processes, also provide important insights into what works within specific sectors.

- **Women’s political participation.** There is strong evidence that the introduction of gender quotas for election to the legislature and similar bodies can have a transformative effect on the proportion of women in these institutions (Tripp and Kang, 2008; Dahlerup, 2020). This does not guarantee that women have a “substantive impact on politics or a reduction in structural and gender inequalities in the short run” (Norad, 2010: xiii). However, there is growing evidence that it generates a number of long-term benefits. While having more women in the legislature does not necessarily lead to the reform of particularly sensitive issues such as legislation on abortion and gender-based violence, it has been shown to have a positive impact on the policies that legislatures enact, most notably increasing government expenditure on healthcare (Clayton and Zetterberg, 2018; Cowper-Coles, 2020). There is also evidence that short-term opposition to gender quotas and the women members of parliament that they generate may reduce over time. One study of a political system in which the constituencies reserved for women candidates rotate between different constituencies found that, in seats reserved for women for two legislative terms, the number of women candidates elected after the restriction was removed more than doubled, from 4.8% in never-reserved seats to 10.1% in twice-reserved seats, suggesting that the temporary shift to women-only elections breaks down barriers and establishes new precedents (Beaman et al., 2019). Both when it comes to the adoption of such measures and in terms of addressing other issues such as structural gender inequalities, success has been found to be driven by “long-term commitment, agenda ownership, having men on board and adaption to the local context” (Norad, 2010: xiii).
- **Media.** There has been a considerable international focus on strengthening media in two main respects: first, improving communication for development, so that the media sector plays a role in informing the public and improving outcomes in areas such as healthcare; and second, the development of the media sector so that it provides the balanced and high-quality information that citizens need to be able to hold governments to account. Donor interventions to strengthen media freedom have been found to have less effect when they target one specific need or issue, such as investigative journalism training schemes, rather than focus on all key aspects of the media environment. Because a free and effective media requires both skilled and professional journalists and a supportive media environment, programmes are most likely to be successful when they simultaneously address: “the regulatory framework ensuring media pluralism; the establishment of national agencies responsible for implementing and enforcing the regulatory framework; progressive liberalisation of media including an increasing number of radio, print, TV and multimedia players; and the enforcement of the right to information and freedom of expression” (Norad, 2010). This is especially the case in highly authoritarian contexts and humanitarian crises, where “interventions in only one sphere of the media environment will have limited results, and could even be counterproductive (for example, providing equipment to unprofessional media only in polarised or fragile

environments without the necessary training in ethics and journalism skills may have a negative boomerang effect)” (SDC, 2021). In contexts in which it is particularly dangerous for the media to operate, strengthening networks and trust between journalists and between the media and political parties can help to effect small changes in the media environment, but larger change is only likely to come about when donors “use the windows of opportunity opened by general legal reforms and the promotion of the rule of law to improve the specific laws and institutions regulating the media sector”. In worst-case scenarios, it is possible to improve access to information by supporting “media in exile (for example, Myanmar, Burundi, Iran, Eritrea), offering alternatives when one cannot work from inside the country” (SDC, 2021), although these gains are likely to be limited and may not be sustainable in the long term. Evidence collected by BBC Media Action (2020) suggests that a further issue limiting the effectiveness of existing media engagement is the lack of consistent and reliable resources available for public interest journalism. Although donors regularly run media projects in individual countries that help to finance the preparation and publication of public interest articles for a short time, no global fund currently exists to offer such support on a sustained basis.

- Parties and representation.** Political parties are particularly challenging institutions to fund given that they are inherently politicised, which represents a major challenge to democracy support efforts as they have been identified as the “weakest link” in new democracies (Carothers, 2006). Donor evaluations suggest that this is one of the most challenging areas in which to work, with significant change requiring continuous engagement over a long period of time (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). Efforts that solely focus on working with individual parties or working to strengthen the overall party system have been found to be less effective than those that simultaneously operate at both levels (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015: 16), as change at one level supports and entrenches change at the other. Supporting opposition parties can be particularly challenging, not least due to the risk that international support will enable the government to depict opposition leaders as being the agents of foreign powers and therefore a threat to national sovereignty (Carothers, 2006). This means that there may be advantages to party-party engagement (often called sister party engagement, and done in the UK through the Westminster Foundation of Democracy) in particularly repressive and difficult contexts, because operating in this way – as opposed to through official government ministries and national-level aid programmes – can reduce the salience of the intervention. However, there are also limits to this approach, most notably that parties in donor countries may struggle to find a suitable party to partner with, especially if they are committed to doing so on the basis of ideological fit. Additionally, there is a tendency for support to become focused on winning elections rather than on the broader goal of strengthening democracy, and different parties in donor countries can end up supporting rival parties abroad, effectively competing against one another (Cheeseman and Dodsworth, 2021). Supporting opposition political parties is particularly challenging in authoritarian and backsliding countries. A recent review of programmes designed to strengthen opposition parties in challenging contexts (Quack, 2019) finds that these have tended to be most successful when they focus on building opposition unity (Beardsworth, 2016), fostering dialogue with moderate elements of the ruling party (Buckles, 2017) – and thus reducing the risk of potential backlash – and organising and mobilising party activists both inside and outside the party to enable it to better endure state repression (Vintagen, 2017).
- Legislative support.** Legislative assistance is designed to empower legislative bodies in both presidential and parliamentary systems to become more efficient, effective and democratic. “The activities focus on the three basic functions of a legislature: (a) representation of the people; (b) oversight of the public sector; and (c) law-making (UNDP, 2000). Historically, donor support to parliaments suffered from relatively small budgets and “unclear objectives, inappropriate techniques and uneven results”, leaving them “disappointing in terms of impact and effectiveness” (Power, 2008: 2). One reason for this was that donors adopted rather technical approaches such as capacity building initiatives that saw investments in computers, audio equipment and staff training, in order to avoid being drawn into domestic political processes and therefore insulate themselves from accusations of infringing on sovereignty. The failure to take fully into account domestic politics and the vested interests of key actors, and to focus attention on shaping the balance of power within legislatures to enhance scrutiny of government policy, meant that there was often very little return for these investments in terms of either political accountability or the

quality of legislation. Over the last ten years, “considerable agreement amongst donors that the weakness of previous assistance efforts lay in their failure to understand and adapt to the local political context” led to greater efforts to “shape the behaviour of different political actors” (Power, 2008: 2). There is growing consensus that, to be effective, “Successful parliamentary support initiatives, therefore, need to be led strongly and consensually by the ‘family’ of stakeholders surrounding a parliament” (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014). Ideally, this should include “government and opposition parties, leadership and backbenchers, and members and staff” as well as “citizens and civil society stakeholders that engage with parliament” (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014). This helps to explain why a number of different evaluations have concluded that legislative strengthening programmes are most effective when they are connected to work in other areas, such as political party support programmes and civil society support programmes (USAID, 2015; Cheeseman and Dodsworth, 2017). This can help to build a set of more durable relationships, which is particularly important given that “Success or failure is a function of whether the provider of assistance can establish and sustain a critical measure of trust with the key representatives of the recipient institution” (Barkan, as quoted in USAID, 2015: 4). However, donor programmes continued to be hampered by a number of challenging features that are inherent to legislatures, most notably that they are “more sensitive to changes in political leadership than other forms of assistance” (Power, 2008: 5). The changing composition of a parliament after an election can both lead to the emergence of a different government and see key reformers and champions of change lose their seats. It is therefore particularly important for donors to try and build support for legislative reforms both inside and outside of the legislature, and among both current and aspiring members of parliament (USAID, 2015).

- **Electoral support.** Electoral assistance refers to the provision of “legal, operational, and logistical support to electoral laws, procedures, and institutions” (Herbert, 2021: 10). Such programmes can cover an extremely broad range of areas, as almost all parts of a country’s political system and society can impact on electoral quality, including “administration; the review and reform of constitutional principles; voter registration; media training; civic education; engagement of underrepresented groups; and electoral security” (Herbert, 2021: 3). One of the main criticisms of international electoral assistance following the third wave of democratisation was that it tended to be delivered in a rushed manner that treated elections as one-off events rather than as long-term processes, “without adequate planning and preparation for complex logistical tasks such as preparing accurate electoral registers and mobilizing citizens through civic education, and with bottlenecks, waste, and inefficiencies arising from the sudden influx of development aid” (Norris, 2017: 37). As a result, there has been a growing consensus over the last 15 years that there is a need to adopt an “electoral cycle” approach that does not simply focus on the campaign period and immediate aftermath of voting, but rather aims to strengthen key institutions and processes, in some cases across multiple elections (Laanela, Alihodžic, Spinelli and Wolf, 2021). The advantages of this approach are that it better reflects the fact that elections are often manipulated well ahead of election day (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018) and it reduces the risk that support to democratic institutions is cut shortly after elections are held, leading to the sudden loss of institutional capacity and memory that then needs to be rebuilt ahead of the next polls. “The development and implementation of the Electoral Cycle Approach represents a critical shift in international electoral assistance from short-term, event-based support to longer-term comprehensive assistance with increased focus on sustainability, i.e. through capacity development, of assistance efforts” (Bargiacchi, Bakken, Guerin and Godinho Gomes, 2011: 4). DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) committed to adopting an electoral cycle approach in 2010, noting that engaging strategically in supporting elections means “planning a multi-annual engagement across the whole electoral cycle, with attention not just to the organisation of a specific election but to the long-term development of the electoral system and other democratic and accountability institutions” (DFID and FCO, 2010: 4). However, both within the UK and more broadly the ability of donors to plan across electoral cycles remains hampered by domestic funding processes, which rarely allocate budgets for longer than five years at a time (Laanela, Alihodžic, Spinelli and Wolf, 2021). A further challenge is that donors are often reluctant to become heavily involved in one of the most important moments in the electoral cycle, the results transmission process, because it is particularly sensitive and the fallout from failed interventions can be particularly challenging to manage. This has significant implications for the overall impact of electoral assistance, because flawed or controversial

results transmission and counting processes “ultimately undermine the credibility of the election”, reducing gains in other areas (DDP, 2018: 15). One emerging area of debate is whether the best way to provide electoral assistance is through bilateral channels or via multilateral bodies and multi-donor basket funds. “While almost all bilateral donors also carry out some work in this area, ‘almost all major electoral support programmes are provided jointly with international partners’” (Herbert, 2021: 2, citing (DFID, 2014: 5). In most cases, “these electoral basket funds are managed by UNDP, whose global mandate as a UN agency helps it to engage in what can be a sensitive political arena. In a few instances, basket funds are managed by other bilateral donors or by non-governmental organisations” (ICAI, 2012: 3). As a result, “Between 2007 and 2014 the United Nations (UN) assisted more than one-third of all national elections worldwide” (Lührmann, 2019: 181). The strength of this approach is that it enables donors to pool resources and mitigate the risk associated with supporting high-profile political processes. Questions have been raised, however, about the impact of UN-led electoral assistance. In particular, the UN is often seen to work closely with host governments and therefore to be unwilling or unable to be explicitly critical of undemocratic practices. According to the most recent study by Lührmann, when assistance is provided in contexts where elites have decided to prioritise electoral credibility, it has a “medium-term impact on democratization”. However, “if regime elites undermine electoral freedom and fairness – as in Sudan (2010) – such positive effects are unlikely”. Moreover, “in such contexts, the involvement of the UN may legitimize authoritarian practices” (Lührmann, 2019: 181). The risk of the UN – or other organisations involved in electoral assistance – “becoming a fig leaf for a deeply flawed voting exercise” is a perennial issue in this sector, but can be reduced by making “political advisability” – in other words, a credible commitment to reform among political elites – “a firmer prerequisite to allocate UNEA [United Nations Electoral Assistance]” (Lührmann, 2019: 192).

- **Civic space.** Closing civic space is one of the most problematic manifestations of the recent decline in democracy (Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2019). However, it is also one of the most difficult issues for donors to address, because there is some evidence that the introduction of anti-NGO legislation, which seeks to impose new regulations on NGOs and limit the amount of funding they can secure from outside the country, may be partly triggered by significant increases in donor funding to civil society groups in the preceding years (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2018c). This suggests that rather than strengthening NGOs, rapid and poorly thought-out increases in donor funding for pro-democracy and human rights bodies could exacerbate the problem. One of the main vulnerabilities of civic groups working on democracy and human rights in authoritarian or backsliding contexts is that their domestic legitimacy is called into question by allegations – typically made by members of the ruling party – that they are doing the work of external powers which are seeking to undermine national sovereignty (Buyse, 2018). The challenges facing international donors help to explain why “Attempts by local CSOs and external actors to counter this trend of shrinking civic spaces have been mostly unsuccessful” (Berger-Kern, Hetz, Wagner and Wolff, 2021: 84). More broadly, Brechenmacher and Carothers (2019: ii) identify a number of factors limiting the international response, including: lack of conceptual and strategic clarity; countervailing interests and the failure of many donors to “prioritize closing civic space in their foreign policy agendas”; the fact that civic space is also closing in many established democracies, undermining the credibility of criticisms of shrinking space abroad; the insufficient funds so far devoted to the issue; and the tendency of donors to work in silos. Examples of successful resistance in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan suggest a number of important lessons for future international engagement in this area. In both cases, successful resistance “was based on domestic campaigns organized by broad alliances of local CSOs, which were able to draw on pre-existing mobilizing structures and put forward a socioeconomic narrative to lobby against civic space restrictions” (Berger-Kern, Hetz, Wagner and Wolff, 2021: 84). This narrative can be particularly effective in political systems where members of parliament are directly elected on a constituency basis, because this makes it possible to rally support for protecting civic space among MPs who are worried that their constituents might lose out if NGO funding is reduced in their area (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2018c). Significantly, it was important to the success of these efforts that international donors did not attempt to lead these campaigns from the front, but rather supported domestic efforts while applying pressure to the government behind the scenes (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2018c). Longer-term strategies to reduce the vulnerability of NGOs include strengthening the domestic roots and funding bases of pro-



democracy and human rights groups, enhancing their political and economic sustainability (USAID, 2018). This is extremely challenging, however, in authoritarian contexts – especially where poverty levels are high and hence domestic funding sources are limited. Moving forwards, Brechenmacher and Carothers (2019: ii-iii) make six recommendations about how to better defend civic space: “develop a strategic framework that links civic space to other key foreign policy challenges”; improve foreign policy alignment by “issuing specific guidance on defending civic space” and “integrating the issue into diplomatic training and senior leadership briefings”; avoid setting negative precedents at home; bolster coordination between transnational actors, “investing in new platforms or tools for information sharing and institutional learning”; adjust funding practices to balance “support for long-term institution-building and catalytic funding”; and anticipate new opportunities and threats.

## 7.2 ‘What works’ and ‘what doesn’t work’ to promote human rights

There have been far fewer academic studies of the efficacy of human rights programming than of developmental aid and democracy aid, which represents a significant knowledge gap and limits what can be said with confidence in this literature review. This challenge is particularly significant when it comes to human rights-based approaches, which are relatively new and so have a limited evidence base. However, early experiences suggest the following lessons:

1. Indirect and direct approaches can work, but come with different risks. Direct and explicit approaches to identifying rights violations and at-risk groups are best at maintaining a focus on human rights, but can be controversial with recipient governments. By contrast, it has been possible to integrate human rights principles without such a direct and explicit approach, which has been the case with some international financial institutions. However, this approach also generates risks, most notably the “‘rhetorical repackaging’ that occurs when the distinction between the use of operational principles that might be tangentially related to human rights and interventions specifically grounded in the human rights framework is blurred” (OECD and World Bank, 2016: xxiv).
2. A human rights-based approach can boost poverty reduction. Human rights-based approaches can focus attention on the structural roots of poverty, encouraging donors and partners to tackle the deeper causes of inequality and hardship rather than simply focusing on alleviation, while demanding greater attention be paid to underlying power relations (OECD and World Bank, 2016: xxiv). This is important in designing appropriate policies in responses to the SDGs.
3. Human rights-based approaches can generate positive feedback mechanisms. A human rights-based approach can actually have a positive effect on the effectiveness of developmental aid more broadly, “in particular through the explicit recognition of aid’s political dimensions and its focus on institutions and accountability” (OECD and World Bank, 2016: xxiv).
4. Human rights-based approaches work best when they factor in local context. The very different contexts in which human rights work takes place, and the significance of domestic context for what is feasible and effective, mean that it is especially important to be flexible and design programmes to take into account local power dynamics. According to an evaluation of SIDA work in this area, “adaptive capacity and working with context is important given the political nature of human rights realities, and how they affect all development and governance processes” (Alffram et al., 2020).

There is also growing evidence that human rights-based approaches can have benefits for the wider governance agenda and the promotion of democracy. A human rights-based approach emphasises the importance of both ‘duty-bearers’ (leaders and government officials) and ‘rights-holders’ (citizens). In turn, this encourages a stronger focus on “the importance of state-citizen linkages that call for building the capacity of states to deliver on human rights commitments and the capacity of citizens to claim their entitlements” (OECD and World Bank, 2016: xxiv). One positive by-product of this process is that it “highlights the need for free, informed, and meaningful participation that can be institutionalized” to both donors and domestic civil society groups and governments.

### 7.3 Problem-based approaches, adaptive management and thinking and working politically

There is growing evidence of the value of ‘thinking and working politically’ (TWP) in the area of developmental assistance (Laws and Marquette, 2018). This has arisen due to a growing number of critiques of the idea that development is mainly a technical challenge, and hence that development failures can be overcome through improvements in technical design and delivery. Against this, a large number of researchers from a remarkably broad range of disciplines have shown that most development failures are actually rooted in domestic politics (Leftwich, 1994; Ferguson, 1994; Dasandi et al., 2019). In short, development programmes are unlikely to be successful if they do not align with, or manage to change, the interests and incentives of the bureaucrats, politicians, businessmen and officials whose support – or at least acquiescence – is required for their implementation (Craney et al., 2022). Failure to recognise this foundational point can mean that well-intentioned and generously funded projects, such as investments in anti-corruption commissions that have no capacity to operate independently of the government, or training schemes for party leaders on the importance of gender balance in parliament that do not take into account the formal and informal norms governing candidate selection, have little or no impact. As Stefan Dercon, the then chief economist of DFID, put it in 2013, “Politics is too important for development in general to be left to political scientists and governance advisors only – we all need to think about it when we act” (as quoted in Akmeemana, 2015).

Given this, many practitioners suggest that the development industry should become more politically savvy in the way that it identifies key opportunities and obstacles. It is important to note that this does not simply refer to merging diplomatic and aid approaches to promoting democracy, but represents a specific approach to undertaking development work. TWP approaches are based around three main pillars: “strong political analysis, insight and understanding; detailed appreciation of, and response to, the local context; and, flexibility and adaptability in program design and implementation” (TWP, n.d.). TWP has now ‘entered the lexicon’, with strong participation in the evolution of the approach in the UK since the creation of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice in 2013. A number of similar approaches with a strong focus on adaptive management, such as problem-driven iterative adaption, have gained ground, combining an emphasis on political analysis and insight with a clear recognition of the importance of continually learning from experience and feeding back key lessons into programme design and strategy (Hernandez et al., 2019).

When it comes to strengthening democracy, TWP means recognising that “what matters most are the power dynamics at play: what the obstacles to democratic reform and potential agents for and against change might be” (Rocha Menocal and Sharp, 2022). Having identified “why things work the way they do”, such an approach would begin by building trust between key stakeholders at different levels to build bridges and open space for reform, before “working through local reform champions who are the drivers of change” (Rocha Menocal and Sharp, 2022). It would also be based on the recognition that authoritarian practices are often deeply rooted and therefore take considerable time to overturn, and hence that achieving democratic goals is likely to require “staying the course in the long road” (Rocha Menocal and Sharp, 2022).

While the TWP approach promises to strengthen existing strategies, it has yet to be mainstreamed into either traditional developmental assistance or democracy aid. There are a number of reasons for this, including that the “organisational culture and ‘DNA’” of formal government departments tends to limit their interest and ability to adopt TWP processes, the fact that TWP has struggled to make inroads into sector-specific programmes, and the hard reality that many “Diplomatic colleagues remain unimpressed with TWP” (Teskey, 2021: 16) – partly due to misunderstandings about how it operates, and partly because they assume it is something that they are already doing on a daily basis. Nonetheless, the evidence base for the impact of TWP approaches remains relatively limited (Laws and Marquette, 2018).

This is unfortunate because democracy and human rights aid, being a particularly sensitive area in which political blockages are very likely to be prevalent, is especially likely to benefit from TWP insights such as the importance of assessing the incentives facing key actors, identifying veto players, and building pro-reform coalitions. According to a SIDA review of the effectiveness of its own human rights-based approach (HRBA):

“When Sida staff and co-operation partners are particularly effective in applying the HRBA – most notably in contexts where human rights are more constrained – it is related to an understanding of the political economy conditions of context, the ability in practice to adapt work and programming to locally grounded choices about what is possible in the protection and realisation of human rights, and to operate in politically informed ways. This requires deep country knowledge, technical and political knowledge, investment in long-term relationships” (Alffram et al., 2020: 39-40).

The slow take-up of TWP-type approaches may accelerate as evidence about the effectiveness of TWP approaches is more widely shared. A recent review of 20 years of UK governance programmes in Nigeria found that they had contributed to changes in governance (including in relation to civil society, media and parliaments) and service delivery, and attributed this partly to the programme’s politically savvy approaches, based on political economy analysis, trust building between donors and their counterparts, and identifying specific issues around which to build coalitions (Piron et al., 2021). Similarly, reviewing a wide range of reports and literature, Tom Aston (2022) concludes that while adaptive management is not a magic bullet, “there is now a large body of evidence that merits policymakers’ consideration” and “the case for adaptive management is certainly defensible”.

TWP approaches have also been shown to have positive effects beyond donor governments. Research by Christian Aid Ireland (2022: 8) found that among the organisation’s partners, 72% said that adaptive management was one of the best approaches to programme management they had used, while 28% said that it was one of the most useful. In particular, “partner organisations reported enormous benefit in being freed from obligations to ‘stay the course’ even when their original objectives or strategies had been rendered obsolete by context changes”.

This consistent, if limited, evidence suggests that greater adoption of TWP approaches could have beneficial effects in a variety of sectors. As Teskey notes, however, this is unlikely to change until TWP approaches are “incentivised by donors at the procurement and design stages, then enabled at delivery” (Teskey, 2021: 16).

## 7.4 Diplomacy and non-aid instruments

Diplomacy is generally seen by development partners to be a valuable complement to individual democracy and human rights programmes, in addition to having a potentially positive effect on democracy in its own right. There are a number of direct and indirect mechanisms through which diplomacy can work. First, international donors can increase the cost of democratic backsliding to a particular government, for example by revoking privileged trade arrangements or making a credible threat to take such action in the future (Dunning, 2009). Second, strong and focused diplomatic engagement can be effective in enhancing the impact of other democracy support activities, for example by maintaining civic space in which programmes designed to support civil society organisations can operate. Third, diplomatic pressure with regards to anti-corruption activities may help to reduce the risk of aid diversion. Democracy and human rights support is therefore most likely to be effective when democracy and diplomatic pressure act in tandem (Cheeseman, 2015).

There is also considerable evidence, however, that diplomatic interventions can be ineffective or even do more harm than good. This is particularly likely to be the case: when an intervention is in an area that is especially sensitive, such as the aggressive promotion of LGBTQI+ rights in a highly religious and conservative country (Onapajo and Isike, 2016; Brown, 2022); when the intervention does not build on a broader programme of longer-term activities in which the host government is invested, or use a TWP approach (Laws and Marquette, 2018); when the intervention is made by a country with a particularly complicated relationship with the recipient state, such as a former colonial power (Cheeseman et al., 2013); and when key local actors are not consulted by foreign diplomats and development partners about the best way to pursue the desired goal (Birkuk, 2014; Velasco, 2020; Brown, 2022). Partly as a result, Velasco’s (2020: 120) analysis of LGBT policy adoption across 110 non-OECD countries between 1990 and 2016 finds that exposure to transnational advocacy networks has been a more effective strategy for enhancing the effect of “LGBT norms” than leveraging foreign aid. Taking this into account, existing research suggests that diplomatic pressure is likely to be most effective when:

1. **Development partners take a long-term approach.** High-level interventions are more likely to be seen to be credible if they are part of a sustained set of programme activities that give the donor credibility in a given area (Johansson-Nogués and Rivera Escartin, 2020).
2. **Diplomatic engagement foregrounds consultation and partnership.** Long-term planning also makes it possible for development partners to establish strong relationships with key domestic groups such as civil society organisations, women's groups, human rights defenders and representatives of historically marginalised groups such as people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ individuals, and lower-income groups (Crawford et al., 2022). These relationships are critical both to enable these voices to be heard and because these groups are best placed to inform donors about how their situation can best be improved without the risk of triggering a backlash from the government or society (Birkuk, 2014; Brown, 2022).
3. **Diplomatic interventions reflect local context.** Criticism of a government or the policies of a government is more likely to hit home if it can be based on principles, values, and legal frameworks that the government itself has signed up to or recognises to be important (Laws and Marquette, 2018). The more these principles, values and frameworks are deeply rooted in the history and political culture of the relevant country, the harder it will be for governments to paint international engagement as an unwarranted infringement of sovereignty by malign foreign powers.

## 7.5 Aid conditionality and the threat of aid withdrawal

Tactics such as the imposition of democratic conditions on aid, or the withdrawal or threat of withdrawal of aid, have been consistently, if infrequently, used by development partners over the last 30 years. In the early 1990s, Paris Club donors suspended non-humanitarian support to Kenya and Malawi in a bid to force good governance reforms that included political liberalisation (Harbeson, 2016). Most recently, the EU moved to suspend aid to the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia, citing concern about the way in which he had handled the ongoing conflict in the Tigray region (Cheeseman, O'Brien-Udry and Swedlund, 2021). In some cases, aid instruments and agreements may formally include forms of aid conditionality; for example, DFID partnership principles that were associated with budget support included a human rights assessment as part of an explicit attempt to "rethink conditionality" (DFID, 2005), while the Lomé/Cotonou Agreement reached by the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States in December 2020 includes human rights conditions. However, this does not mean that conditions are always enforced. Del Biondo's study on the region (2011: 380), for example, "confirms previous findings that security interests tend to trump the EU's efforts to promote democratisation."

The effectiveness of aid conditionality continues to be a subject of considerable debate, but there is a reasonably strong consensus that the threat of aid withdrawal or the suspension of aid can be an effective tool to advance democracy and human rights under certain conditions. More specifically, a review of the recent literature conducted by Cheeseman, O'Brien-Udry and Swedlund (2021: 4-6) suggests four key lessons, which are further developed here:

1. Perceptions of consistency and consensus are critical. Some of the most important factors shaping the effectiveness of aid conditionalities where the international community is concerned are the "three Cs" – coordination, consensus and consistency (Cheeseman, O'Brien-Udry and Swedlund, 2021). Consensus and coordination matter because effective conditionality has been found to be more likely when there is broad international consensus on key goals, and donors' geopolitical objectives do not "undermine the credibility of threats to condition aid on the adoption of democratic reforms" (Dunning, 2004: 409). Consistency is significant because threats of aid withdrawal may be discounted or ignored if donors generally don't keep their promises (Swedlund, 2017). For example, Crawford and Kacarsca (2019: 194) have argued that "political conditionality as a tool for the promotion of democracy and human rights, as stated in policy rhetoric, has been replaced by its use as an instrument to promote Western security interests in line with the securitisation of development". The failure to defend democracy after having rhetorically pledged to do so can mean that international threats ring hollow, and so have less effect (Cheeseman, 2015).



2. The amount of money involved and the importance of the sector is relevant. It is intuitive that aid conditionalities are likely to gain greater traction if aid is more important to the country concerned. The level of aid 'dependency' has therefore often been used as a measure of the likely effectiveness of threats of aid withdrawal and suspension (Peiffer and Englebert, 2012). External powers are particularly likely to be able to influence domestic processes when they enjoy significant leverage over recipient governments in two complementary ways: first, through the leverage gained via the provision of aid, and second, through the mutual dependence created by high levels of economic integration, or what Levitsky and Way (2006) refer to as "linkage". According to Levitsky and Way (2006: 379), economic – and with it political and social – linkage is likely to be more important than aid leverage in securing sustained improvements. More specifically, they find that under conditions of high leverage and low linkage, "external pressure is intermittent" and unlikely to be fully effective (Levitsky and Way, 2006: 379). Given this, it is important to note that there is considerable variation in the extent of linkage between recipient states and conditionality-imposing governments. Most obviously, economic linkage is typically higher between the US and Latin America, and between European states and post-communist countries, than it is between North America and Europe and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. This suggests that "in addition to between-country variation there is likely to be significant regional variation in the efficacy of aid conditionality" (Cheeseman, O'Brien-Udry and Swedlund, 2021).
3. As with developmental and democracy aid, the type of regime matters. Like all international interventions designed to promote democracy and human rights, the impact of aid withdrawals is conditioned by domestic factors. Most notably, the extent of political competition shapes the ability of governments to ignore or reject conditionality. Repressive regimes that consistently manipulate elections and are therefore less vulnerable to shifts in popular opinion withdrawals (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018), for example, are more likely to be willing to accept the consequences of aid withdrawals, even if they cause significant hardship for citizens (Chingono, 2010). This is well demonstrated by the recent trend in anti-NGO legislation, with well over a hundred laws restricting the operations of civil society organisations enacted by non-democratic governments around the world since 2012 (Rutzen, 2015: 30; Berger-Kern et al., 2019). A classic feature of such legislation is the restriction of the amount of funding that NGOs can receive from foreign sources (Cheeseman and Dodsworth, 2019). In moving in this direction, a wide range of governments with authoritarian inclinations have demonstrated that they are willing to prioritise neutering critical voices and perceived "Western influence" (Dupuy et al., 2016) over bringing in aid money that would provide jobs and also, in many cases, sustain public services via contributions to NGOs involved in development activity. This in turn highlights the one of the great paradoxes of aid conditionality: "it is likely most effective where it is least needed" (Cheeseman, O'Brien-Udry and Swedlund, 2021).
4. Framing is critical. How the threat of aid withdrawal is framed – in other words, how it is presented and understood by donors, recipient governments and the wider population – is also important. Significantly, a number of different actors can shape how aid is perceived, including donors, recipient governments, civil society groups and the domestic and international media. This means that donors may struggle to maintain control of the narrative. Recipient states are likely to be more responsive to aid withdrawal if the loss of aid would cause them significant embarrassment. This might happen because the government has staked its reputation on rebuilding relations with international donors, for example (O'Brien-Udry, 2022). The situation is likely to be very different where governments can spin conditionalities as an illegitimate infringement on sovereignty. Under these conditions, such as when conditionalities can be presented as a neo-colonial imposition to a sympathetic population (Biruk, 2014; Brown, 2022), aid volatility may backfire and actually serve to "instil nationalistic sentiments, and consolidate [the ruling party's] grip on power" (Asongu and Nwachukwu, 2017: 201).

In short, conditionality is most likely to be effective when there is a united 'international community' that coalesces around the need for reform, the recipient state is heavily aid-dependent and integrated into a dense set of economic and political relationships with key donors, the aid contribution at stake is large, and the recipient government has staked its reputation on instigating political and economic reform. By contrast, "outside of this context, aid conditionality is far less likely to be successful" (Cheeseman, O'Brien-Udry and Swedlund, 2021: 7).

## 7.6 The main weaknesses of current approaches

Comparing the approaches set out in **Section 6** with the discussion of what the literature says about ‘what works’ in this section, six main areas of divergence emerge. These are as follows:

1. **Development aid is less effective at promoting democracy and human rights than democracy aid.** Democracy aid represents a small proportion of all development aid, in part because donors tend to assume that development aid will have a pro-democratic effect. However, development aid has often been found to have no positive impact on the quality of democracy, while quantitative studies suggest that democracy aid is effective at promoting democracy and strengthening human rights (Gisselquist et al., 2021).
2. **Aid alone is unlikely to halt democratic backsliding.** In recent years, countries such as the UK and the US have increasingly leaned on democracy aid as a means to counteract democratic backsliding, and have generally been reluctant to engage in high-profile diplomatic interventions, with some notable exceptions. However, the evidence suggests that democracy aid is less effective in countries already experiencing democratic backsliding (Nielsen and Nielson, 2010; Gisselquist et al., 2021).
3. **International unity is required to defend democracy.** Pro-democratic states have often struggled to agree a common approach to defending democracy and human rights over the last five years, with disagreement over how to handle countries such as China, Hungary, Turkey and Venezuela. However, the significance of non-aid interventions to halt democratic decline makes the unity and cohesion of development partners particularly significant, especially in the context of the growing number of authoritarian states around the world, and what Wolff has called the conflicting objectives of pro-democracy states and the “inherent tensions in the external promotion of democracy” (2014: 67).
4. **Consistency is required for effective programming.** A number of democratic governments engaged in supporting democracy and human rights abroad have been accused of violating democratic practices at home over the last five years (Rocha Menocal, 2022), while key democratic actors such as election observers have been found to apply different standards in different parts of the world (Dodsworth, 2019). In an era of more assertive authoritarian leaders, and a global population that is increasingly likely to identify and call out perceived inconsistency and hypocrisy, it has been argued that the credibility of efforts to promote democracy and human rights abroad increasingly depends on how development partners act at home as well as abroad (Carothers and Brown, 2018; Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018).
5. **Strategic, adaptive and TWP-style approaches have yet to be fully mainstreamed.** Most development programmes continue to be ‘conventional’ and to follow the same design as before the recent change of emphasis to focus on strategic and adaptive programming that places politics at the heart of its analyses. Although there is a growing recognition within the development community of the need to think and work politically in order to take into account the centrality of domestic politics to the success of aid programmes (SIDA, 2020), the full benefits of TWP-style approaches have yet to be mainstreamed and hence realised (Teskey, 2021).
6. **Efforts to promote human rights are more effective when they are mainstreamed.** There is growing evidence that mainstreaming human rights into developmental programming can be particularly effective at protecting and strengthening human rights, especially when this is combined with TWP (Alffram et al., 2020), partly because it reduces the risk of inadvertently doing harm through general aid programming. However, while the adoption of human rights-based approaches is gaining ground, some donors, including the UK government, have yet to integrate this way of working.

## 7.7 Knowledge gaps

One of the main challenges in evaluating the impact of democracy aid and human rights assistance is that there have been relatively few studies of the overall effectiveness of such approaches. Regarding democracy, there has been a tendency not to disaggregate the specific effects of democracy aid, as opposed to general development assistance, on the quality of democracy. When it comes to human rights, the literature does not tend to measure and contrast approaches to promoting inclusion and non-discrimination, such as targeted programming as

opposed to mainstreaming these approaches in other sectors. This limits our ability to identify how the effectiveness of democracy aid varies across different modalities, contexts and project designs.

This challenge is compounded by the failure of many international donors to conduct systematic reviews of their own democracy support activities. There have been large numbers of reports by implementers and donors evaluating individual programmes in individual countries, but there has been a comparative lack of:

- meta-evaluations of overall democracy aid and human rights assistance programmes
- independent evaluations conducted by external experts.

As a result, the specific lessons from each individual project or programme evaluation have rarely been combined into a systematic assessment of the kinds of approaches that are most effective or represent the greatest value for money. SIDA has broken new ground in recent years, but even the reports it has commissioned have so far tended to focus more on broader questions such as the conditions under which democracy aid is most effective, and they have yet to fully interrogate the impact of programme modalities and design. The absence of consistent data collection and systematic analysis across different types of programmes and contexts represents one of the greatest barriers to evidence-based programming.

There is also a significant knowledge gap regarding ‘what works’ when it comes to engaging with authoritarian regimes both in terms of what specific democracy and human rights programmes might be required in highly authoritarian contexts, and in terms of how to ‘do no harm’ when providing general aid and support to authoritarian governments.

Knowledge gaps in terms of the UK’s democracy aid and human rights assistance largely follow this pattern. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has consistently devoted significant resources to research through the Research and Evidence Division (RED), with in-house research analysts organised into ten research groups, and the recent creation of Arts and Humanities Research Council-Economic and Social Research Council-FCDO Knowledge Exchange Fellowships to secure stronger links between policy and cutting-edge research. FCDO’s Research for Development Outputs now lists 36,241 reports, articles, outputs, working papers and literature reviews, with 3,652 that have a primary focus on human rights.<sup>4</sup> However, while RED has commissioned research into Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA, 2021) and funded innovative research programmes such as the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, and FCDO conducts a large number of individual evaluations of specific democracy programmes and projects, FCDO has not conducted a systematic and comprehensive meta-review of the design and impact of UK democracy aid and human rights assistance in the last decade. This is reflected in the fact that only 304 outputs of the Research for Development Outputs have a primary focus on democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> Based on a search of <https://www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs> using the keywords ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’, conducted on 16 September 2022.

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