

Plenary Session 1 Making Democracy Work

Ken Wollack: Moderator Ken Wollack, President of NDI, noted that many caught up in the euphoria of democracy's Third Wave assumed that since the challenges facing the poor were rooted in non-democratic political systems, that democratic rule would necessarily lead to policies and programs addressing those concerns. They assumed that democratic incentives and safeguards would allow citizens to reward public officials who acted in the public interest and hold accountable those who failed, and that democratic states would deliver public goods, taking the concerns of the poor and marginalized into account. That new democracies did not guarantee economic opportunities for all should not have come as a surprise. Those who work to promote democracy now realize that making democracy work is the challenge for the next generation of democracy programs.

It remains difficult in many newly democratic countries to combat the legacies of political exclusion. Reform-minded governments often inherit governing structures with few channels of popular access, and the poor suffer this dearth of access most sharply. For the poor, the years of political exclusion often harden into resignation, apathy, or fatalism. Overcoming this legacy requires training on skills for collective action and advocacy, and also assisting political institutions to work better to improve the quality of life for citizens.

With no way to express their concerns, the poor often take to the streets – a place poorly suited for effectively discussing issues or formulating policies. They may also vote for populist leaders who promise easy answers but eventually move against the foundations of representative democracy.

“Making democracy work” means making existing political systems more democratic by (1) increasing government responsiveness to citizens at all levels, (2) removing obstacles to effective political participation, (3) reducing distortions in a democratic system caused by corruption and ‘state capture’ and (4) developing an educated electorate that has access to information regarding policy-choices and trade-offs. It also means developing complementary partnerships between economic growth and democracy promotion organizations.

Alejandro Toledo: Former Peruvian President Toledo noted how difficult it is to bring down a dictatorship with a monopoly on political and military power and which controls the media. His political fight in Peru was not easy, but the struggle was not his alone. A combination of civil society (especially indigenous people) and students effectively challenged those in power.

Political democracy is vital – people must be free to express what they believe. But for political democracy to be sustainable, for leaders to recapture the faith in democracy, democracy must be responsive to peoples' needs. We need to make democracy work. A recent study by the UN showed that 54% of Latin Americans preferred an authoritarian

government to a democratic one if it provided jobs and hope for the future. Such statistics emphasize the importance of democracy delivering.

Under Toledo's presidency, Peru's economy did grow. He inherited an economy in recession – it is now growing by 8% a year. Inflation has fallen to 1.5%, and the fiscal deficit is below 0.2%. He was also able to open markets in China. Nevertheless, a trickle-down economic theory is not sufficient for a transition country where citizen expectations are great. Government is responsible to monitor the economy, and to respond to the needs of the poor, women, etc. Good economic performance is important, but if wealth is not distributed fairly, people lose faith in their government. The institutions of democracy must also be strong, and must be made to work for the poor.

Roland Rich: UNDEF Director Roland Rich asked what civil society can do to make democracy work. He argued that activism is not enough, that for civil society to be effective it must develop skills and expertise similar to those of the executive and legislative branches. Civil society must understand legislative agendas, how their system of government works, and how to work with it. Civil society should know what legislation and regulations are being developed and promulgated, and should know how to read national budgets. Civil society levels of expertise and knowledge must increase. He concluded that he has seen such expertise developing in civil society, and that he is witnessing an evolution of well-reasoned policy ideas within civil society.

Ayo Obe: WMD Steering Committee chair Ayo Obe stated that when a dictatorship fails (as it did in Nigeria), one resorts to democracy. But how can one ensure that democracy delivers? Nigeria's new democracy finds itself having to establish and build the institutions of democracy, and at the same learn to make democracy deliver in peoples' lives. A recurring refrain in Nigeria is that "I can't eat democracy." Democracy must deliver.

What can civil society do? It must make those in power accountable - even if they were elected through a flawed system, as was the case in Nigeria's most recent elections. Those in office must be held to democratic accountability standards. The recent effort to make government accountable for problems with the public power supply is a case in point. Nigeria was suffering regular power outages when the nation transitioned to civilian rule – and these outages continue. The Assembly is now making inquiries to determine how funds for public power were spent, and the President says that he intends to answer for the promises made in 1999. Civil society pressure on the executive and legislature has raised the levels accountability.

Through civic education and other behind the scenes activities, civil society has made it clear that it is entitled to question government performance and the actions of elected leaders – even those elected through flawed systems. Such actions help to ensure that democracy delivers.