DEMOCRACY ASSESSMENT:
The Basics of the International IDEA Assessment Framework

Introduction

This brochure is a basic guide to the International IDEA Democracy Assessment Framework. It is intended to be an introduction to International IDEA's methodology for assessing democracy and also as a tool for quick use by interested individuals or groups who might not have either the time or the professional background to undertake a more thorough and in-depth assessment exercise, as it is explained in IDEA's methodology volume recently published in English (David Beetham, Sarah Bracking, Iain Kearton and Stuart Weir, International IDEA Handbook on Democracy Assessment. The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2001, ISBN 90-411-1727-X). Ideally, a group of assessors using this leaflet in a given country would be better equipped if one or several of them had access to the methodology volume, which is only available in English for the time being. But we hope this brief guide will be a useful starting point.

Why conduct democracy assessments?

With the widespread establishment or re-establishment of democratic forms of government in all regions in the 1990s has come a desire to assess how well they are doing, and how much progress has in fact been made. What are the key problems faced by recently established democracies? Can some aspects of the democratic process be more easily introduced and become rooted than others and, if so, which ones? What are the distinctive features of democratic development in individual countries? Such questions are given added urgency by a common perception among electorates that their democratic arrangements have not delivered nearly as much as they have promised, and that the global triumph of democratic norms has not been matched by comparable changes in governmental practice.

   A similar feeling of disillusionment with the political process has also been prevalent in longer-established democracies, as evidenced by declining electoral turnouts,

declining membership of political parties, and other indicators. Governments often appear to be more concerned with presentation than performance, and to be remote from citizens' daily concerns. In various countries people have come to feel that many of the decisions that matter for the quality of their lives are no longer within the competence of the elected government, but have escaped beyond the borders of the nation-state, to international organiz ations, transnational companies, or the imperatives of globalisation and international markets.

It is in this context of a general commitment to the norms of democracy, but of worries about their practical realisation, that the idea of democracy assessment should be located. This idea involves a systematic assessment by its own citizens of a country's political life in order to answer the questions: how democratic is it in practice? In which areas is it satisfactory from a democratic point of view, and what features should be a cause for concern? How far have we progressed, and what remains still to be done? How can we improve on what we have already achieved? Such an assessment can serve a number of purposes. From the perspective of a country's citizens it can:

• serve to raise public awareness about what democracy involves, and public debate about what standards of performance people should expect from their government;
• provide systematic evidence to substantiate popular concerns about how they are governed, and set these in perspective by identifying both strengths and weaknesses;
• contribute to public debate about ongoing reform, and help to identify priorities for a reform programme;
• provide an instrument for assessing how effectively reforms are working out in practice.

In all these ways a democracy assessment, through its publication and dissemination, can make a contribution to a country's democratic advance, whether in developed, developing or transitional democracies.

From a more comparative perspective, democracy assessments can also:
• serve to highlight common problems shared by a number of countries;
• help identify what is distinctive about a given country's situation or democratic institutions, by comparison with others;
• bring to light examples of good practice or innovative problem-solving.

What is distinctive about International IDEA's assessment framework and method?
With the world-wide expansion of democracy in the 1990s, and its promotion by international institutions, there have been many attempts to assess its progress. International IDEA's assessment framework and method has aroused widespread interest because of a number of distinctive features, which are exemplified in this assessment report. These distinctive features can be summarised as follows:

clarity of principles:

rather than offering an arbitrary check-list of items, the method derives the institutions and criteria for assessment in a systematic manner from basic democratic principles and values.

comprehensiveness of framework

the framework provides the most comprehensive overview of the essential features of democracy, while encouraging a differentiated assessment of strengths and weaknesses in each area, rather than aggregating them into a single conclusion or numerical 'score'.

flexibility of assessment

within a common framework of analysis, country assessors are able to determine their own standards and comparators for assessing progress or the lack of it, and their own selection of appropriate evidence, according to their country's specific situation.

country ownership of the assessment process

a basic assumption is that the right people to assess a country's democracy are its own citizens, rather than outsiders sitting in judgement upon it; and that any assessment should facilitate wider public involvement and debate.

range of use

old as well as new democracies can and should be subject to a similar framework and method of assessment.

Democratic principles and mediating values

Democracy is usually defined as a set of governmental institutions or processes, but people rarely stop to think what it is that makes these institutions democratic. Thus, when these institutions are used, as they frequently are, for undemocratic purposes, the automatic association of them with democracy simply results in democracy itself being given a bad name. The assessment framework being used here starts from the proposition that democracy should be defined in the first instance by its basic principles or values. It is these that make particular institutional arrangements democratic, and they provide the litmus test of how democratic they are in practice.

What are these principles? They are twofold: popular control over public decision making and decision makers; and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control. Insofar as these principles are embodied in governing arrangements we can call them 'democratic'. These are the principles that democrats in all times and places have struggled for: to make popular control over public decisions both more effective and

more inclusive; to remove an elite monopoly over decision making and its benefits; and to overcome obstacles such as those of gender, ethnicity, religion, language, class, wealth, etc., to the equal exercise of citizenship rights. Democracy is thus not an all-or-nothing affair, but a matter of degree - of the degree to which the people can exercise a controlling influence over public policy and policy makers, enjoy equal treatment at their hands, and have their voices heard equally.

These principles are broad and strong ones, but they require to be specified more precisely in the context of a system of representative government, in which the people assign to others the right to decide public policy on their behalf. So we need to identify a set of mediating values, through which these two principles are realised in practice. These are the values of participation, authorisation, representativeness, accountability, transparency, responsiveness and solidarity. It is from these values that the familiar institutions of representative government derive their democratic character, and it is these values that can in turn be used to assess how democratically they actually work in practice. So, for example, it is through their participation in the electoral process that the people authorise politicians to act on their behalf, and that they choose a representative assembly, which they can hold accountable through the sanction of future electoral dismissal. These values are what make elections democratic. Yet we also need to ask of any given electoral system or process: how much popular participation does it actually encourage? How directly and effectively does it authorise government? How representative an assembly of the citizen body does it produce and how equally are votes treated in practice? How credible is the accountability of an elected government to the people through the sanction of future dismissal?

It is this two-way relationship between values and institutions that gives the democracy assessment process its intellectual foundation and validity. The relationship is illustrated diagrammatically in the accompanying table. The first column of the table lists the main mediating values that derive from our two democratic principles. The second column sets out what is required for these values to be made effective. The third column lists the typical institutions through which these requirements can be met in a system of representative government. Together they build up the main features of what is to be assessed, and the criteria by which that assessment is to be made.

Basic principles and mediating values:

POPULAR CONTROL over public decisions and decision makers

EQUALITY of respect and voice between citizens in the exercise of that control

Below we set out the full assessment framework with its search questions covering every aspect of democracy. It begins with the rights of the citizen, then deals with the representativeness and accountability of government and the different aspects of civil society, and concludes with the international dimensions of democracy. The questions for investigation are all framed in the comparative mode (How much? How far? etc.), in line with our conviction that democracy is a question of degree, not an all-or-nothing situation, which you either have or do not have.

Mediating values	Requirements	Institutional means of realisation
Participation	• rights to participate • capacities/resources to participate • agencies for participation • participatory culture	• civil and political rights system • economic and social rights • elections, parties, NGOs • education for citizenship
Authorisation	• validation of constitution • choice of officeholders/programmes • control of elected over non-elected executive personnel	• referenda • free and fair elections • systems of subordination to elected officials
Representation	• legislature representative of main currents of popular opinion • all public insitutions representative of social composition of electorate	• electoral and party system • anti-discrimination laws • affirmative action policies
Accountability	• clear lines of accountability, legal, financial, political, to ensure effective and honest performance civil service and judical integrity	• rule of law, separation of powers • independent auditing process • legally enforceable standards • strong parliamentary scrutiny powers
Transparency	• government open to legislative and public scrutiny	• freedom of info. legislation • independent media
Responsiveness	• accessibility of government to electors and diffrent sections of public opinion in policy formation, implementation and service delivery	• systematic and open procedures of public consultation • effective legal redress • local government close to people
Solidarity	• tolerance of diversity at home • support for democratic governments and popular democratic struggles abroad	• civic and human rights education • international human rights law • UN and other agencies • International NGOs

ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK:
The Full List of Search Questions

I. Citizenship, Law and Rights

1.0 NATIONHOOD AND CITIZENSHIP

Is there public agreement on a common citizenship without discrimination?

1.1 How inclusive is the political nation and state citizenship of all who live within the territory?

1.2 To what extent are cultural differences acknowledged, and how well are minorities protected?

1.3 How much consensus is there on state boundaries and constitutional arrangements?

1.4 To what extent do constitutional and political arrangements enable major societal divisions to be moderated or reconciled?

1.5 How impartial and inclusive are the procedures for amending the constitution?

1.6 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

2.0 THE RULE OF LAW AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Are state and society consistently subject to the law?

2.1 To what extent is the rule of law operative throughout the territory?

2.2 To what extent are all public officials subject to the rule of law and to transparent rules in the performance of their functions?

2.3 How independent are the courts and the judiciary from the executive, and how free are they from all kinds of interference?

2.4 How equal and secure is the access of citizens to justice, to due process and to redress in the event of maladministration?

2.5 To what extent do the criminal justice and penal systems observe due rules of impartial and equitable treatment in their operations?

2.6 How much confidence do people have in the legal system to deliver fair and effective justice?

2.7 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

3.0 CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

Are civil and political rights equally guaranteed for all?

3.1 How free are all people from physical violation of their person, and from fear of it?

3.2 How effective and equal is the protection of the freedoms of movement, expression, association and assembly?

3.3 How secure is the freedom for all to practise their own religion, language or culture?

3.4 How free from harassment and intimidation are individuals and groups working to improve human rights?

3.5 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

4.0 ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

Are economic and social rights equally guaranteed for all?

4.1 To what extent is access to work or social security available to all, without discrimination?

4.2 How effectively are the basic necessities of life guaranteed, including adequate food, shelter and clean water?

4.3 To what extent is the health of the population protected, in all spheres and stages of life?

4.4 How extensive and inclusive is the right to education, including education in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship?

4.5 How free are trade unions and other work-related associations to organise and represent their members' interests?

4.6 How rigorous and transparent are the rules on corporate governance, and how effectively are corporations regulated in the public interest?

4.7 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

II. Representative and Accountable Government

5.0 FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

Do elections give the people control over governments and their policies?

5.1 To what extent is appointment to governmental and legislative office determined by popular competitive election, and how frequently do elections lead to change in the governing parties or personnel?

5.2 How inclusive and accessible for all citizens are the registration and voting procedures, how independent are they of government and party control, and how free from intimidation and abuse?

5.3 How fair are the procedures for the registration of candidates and parties, and to what

extent is there fair access for them to the media and other means of communication with the voters?

5.4 How effective a range of choice does the electoral and party system allow the voters, how equally do their votes count, and how closely does the composition of the legislature and the selection of the executive reflect the choices they make?

5.5 To what extent does the legislature reflect the social composition of the electorate?

5.6 To what extent do the political forces in and outside the country accept the electorate votes and the election results?

5.7 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

6.0 democratic role of political parties

Does the party system assist the working of democracy?

6.1 How freely are parties able to form, recruit members and campaign for office?

6.2 How effective is the party system in forming and sustaining governments in office?

6.3 How free are opposition or non-governing parties to organise within the legislature, and how effectively do they contribute to government accountability?

6.4 How fair and effective are the rules governing party discipline in the legislature?

6.5 To what extent are parties effective membership organisations, and how far are members able to influence party policy and candidate selection?

6.6 To what extent does the system of party financing prevent the subordination of parties to special interests?

6.7 To what extent do parties cross ethnic, religious and linguistic divisions?

6.8 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

7.0 government effectiveness and accountability

Is government accountable to the people and their representatives?

7.1 To what extent is the elected government able to influence or control those matters that are important to the lives of its people, and how well is it informed, organised and resourced to do so?

7.2 How much public confidence is there in the effectiveness of government and its political leadership?

7.3 How effective and open to scrutiny is the control exercised by elected leaders and their ministers over their administrative staff and other executive agencies?

7.4 How extensive and effective are the powers of the legislature to initiate, scrutinise and amend legislation?

7.5 How extensive and effective are the powers of the legislature to scrutinise the executive and hold it to account?

7.6 How rigorous are the procedures for approval and supervision of taxation and public expenditure?

7.7 How comprehensive and effective is legislation giving citizens the right of access to government information?

7.8 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

8.0 CIVILIAN CONTROL OF THE MILITARY AND POLICE

Are the military and police forces under civilian control?

8.1 How effective is civilian control over the armed forces, and how free is political life from military involvement?

8.2 How publicly accountable are the police and security services for their activities?

8.3 To what extent does the composition of the army, police and security services reflect the social composition of society at large?

8.4 How free is the country from the operation of paramilitary units, private armies, warlordism and criminal mafias?

8.5 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

9.0 MINIMIZING CORRUPTION

Are public officials free from corruption?

9.1 How effective is the separation of public office, elected and unelected, from party advantage and the personal business and family interests of office holders?

9.2 How effective are the arrangements for protecting office holders and the public from involvement in bribery?

9.3 To what extent do the rules and procedures for financing elections, candidates and elected representatives prevent their subordination to sectional interests?

9.4 To what extent is the influence of powerful corporations and business interests over public policy kept in check, and how free are they from involvement in corruption, including overseas?

9.5 How much confidence do people have that public officials and public services are free from corruption?

9.6 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

III. Civil Society and Popular Participation

10.0 THE MEDIA IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Do the media operate in a way that sustains democratic values?

10.1 How independent are the media from government, how pluralistic is their ownership, and how free are they from subordination to foreign governments or multinational companies?

10.2 How representative are the media of different opinions and how accessible are they to different sections of society?

10.3 How effective are the media and other independent bodies in investigating government and powerful corporations?

10.4 How free are journalists from restrictive laws, harassment and intimidation?

10.5 How free are private citizens from intrusion and harassment by the media?

10.6 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

11.0 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Is there full citizen participation in public life?

11.1 How extensive is the range of voluntary associations, citizen groups, social movements etc. and how independent are they from government?

11.2 How extensive is citizen participation in voluntary associations and self-management organisations, and in other voluntary public activity?

11.3 To what extent do women participate in political life and public office at all levels?

11.4 How equal is access for all social groups to public office, and how fairly are they represented within it?

11.5 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

12.0 GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVENESS

Is government responsive to the concerns of its citizens?

12.1 How open and systematic are the procedures for public consultation on government policy and legislation, and how equal is the access for relevant interests to government?

12.2 How accessible are elected representatives to their constituents?

12.3 How accessible and reliable are public services for those who need them, and how systematic is consultation with users over service delivery?

12.4 How much confidence do people have in the ability of government to solve the main problems confronting society, and in their own ability to influence it?

12.5 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

13.0 DECENTRALISATION

Are decisions made at a level of government that is most appropriate for the people affected?

13.1 How independent are the sub-central tiers of government from the centre, and how far do they have the powers and resources to carry out their responsibilities?

13.2 How far are these levels of government subject to free and fair electoral authorisation, and to the criteria of openness, accountability and responsiveness in their operation?

13.3 How extensive is the co-operation of government at the most local level with relevant partners, associations and communities in the formation and implementation of policy, and in service provision?

13.4 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of priority and public support do they have?

IV. Democracy beyond the state

14.0 INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Are the country's external relations conducted in accordance with democratic norms, and is it itself free from external subordination?

14.1 How free is the governance of the country from subordination to external agencies, economic, cultural or political?

14.2 To what extent are government relations with external donors based on principles of partnership and transparency?

14.3 To what extent does the government support UN human rights treaties and respect international law?

14.4 To what extent does the government respect its international obligations in its treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, and how free from arbitrary discrimination is its immigration policy?

14.5 How consistent is the government in its support for human rights and democracy abroad?

14.6 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

Democracy Assessment Questionnaire: An Example

To answer all the above questions fully would require a panel of assessors with a wide range of expertise, such as we have drawn on in each of the countries surveyed in the International IDEA pilot study. However, a simpler 'do-it-yourself' method is to answer the question's section by section according to a grid format in which you are invited to grade your answers by degree. Even this simpler format assumes a certain level of political interest and information. Consulting with some basic sources such as legal and political texts, reports from domestic human rights organisations and ombudspersons, main newspaper archives, etc., is also recommended. You will find that all the questions are framed in such a way that, the higher the score, the better the situation is presumed to be from a democratic point of view.

2.0 THE RULE OF LAW AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Are state and society consistently subject to the law?

2.1 To what extent is the rule of law operative throughout the territory?

2.2 To what extent are all public officials subject to the rule of law and to transparent rules in the

performance of their functions?

2.3 How independent are the courts and the judiciary from the executive, and how free are they from all kinds of interference?

2.4 How equal and secure is the access of citizens to justice, to due process and to redress in the event of maladministration?

2.5 To what extent do the criminal justice and penal systems observe due rules of impartial and equitable treatment in their operations?

2.6 How much confidence do people have in the legal system to deliver fair and effective justice?

2.7 What measures, if any, are being taken to remedy publicly identified problems in this field, and what degree of political priority and public support do they have?

You are invited to tick one of the boxes in answer to each question in the accompanying list. The classifications are:

VH = very high
H   = high
M   = middling or ambiguous
L   = low
VL = very low

As an example, under question 2.1, if you consider that there are serious abrogations of the rule of law, for example, the existence of areas or groups above or beyond the reach of the law, or outside its protection in your country, then you might tick "L" or "low" for your assessment of the degree to which the rule of law is operative.

The numbering of the boxes corresponds to the relevant questions on the lists. For each section, you are then asked to specify what you consider a) the best feature, and b) the most serious problem in your country from a democratic point of view; then c) to suggest what you think might be done to improve this problem.

	VH	H	M	L	VL
2.1					
2.2					
2.3					
2.4					
2.5					
2.6					

Best feature _____

Most Problem _____

Suggested improvement _____

The example covers section 2 of the framework only, but you can repeat the exercise for each of the sections in turn.