

Democracy and Human Development

Séverine Deneulin

Some of you might expect that my talk will be a full detailed empirical study of the linkages between democracy and human development. I am afraid that I will not talk about these linkages for a variety of reasons which I hope will become clear at the end of this talk. What I would like to do is to sketch some tools of analysis which will help to clarify the complexities of the relationship between democracy and human development. I will start with the recent awareness of the ‘political’ dimension of development. I will then discuss the concept of ‘democracy’, and other related concepts such as ‘participation’ and ‘governance’. I will also examine the different values of democracy. As democracy is inextricably linked to the demands of equality, ‘one person one equal voice’, I will analyze the extent to which democratic practice is often, if not always, disrupted by power inequality. I will pay special attention to how freedom in the market sphere affects freedom in the political sphere, and how this in turn affects prospects for human development policies. The fifth section overviews some ‘solutions’, if these can be called ‘solutions’, for overcoming the disruptive power of inequality on democratic practice. A certain degree of equality is not the only requirement of democratic practice, minds ready to receive and practice democracy is also a requirement. The concluding section briefly discusses the problems related to ‘democratic transition’ and the importance of ‘education for citizenship’.

1. Politicizing development

Let me first begin by quoting the words of the former administrator the UNDP, Mark Malloch-Brown, in the foreword of the *Human Development Report 2002*: ‘This *Report* is first and foremost about the idea that politics is as important to successful development as economics. Sustained poverty reduction requires equitable growth – but it also requires that poor people have political power. And the best way to achieve that in a manner consistent with human development objectives is by building strong and deep forms of democratic governance at all levels of society.’ (UNDP, 2002, p. v). One could say that the UNDP recognizes here a state of the obvious for many. There is indeed no way human rights can be secured other than through a country’s political process. There is no other way but through its political process that a country can devote more public resources to primary health care.

Even if the conception of development as a political process might appear as blatantly self-evident, it has not always been as evident in the history of development thinking. An anthropological study conducted by James Ferguson on development work in Lesotho during the 1980s highlighted the de-politicized context in which development initiatives were conducted. Poverty, he argued, was seen as

something which required technical action from ‘experts’ attached to the government, but was not seen as a political problem, to be resolved through politics and conflicting interests. His study had even led him to conclude that development was an ‘anti-politics machine’ which depoliticised everything it touched’ (Ferguson, 1990, p. xiv), with the disastrous consequences we know. Politics, along with history, had been swept aside from development, and the state had become a ‘machinery [which] had policies, but no politics’ (pp. 65-6). Ferguson understood ‘politics’ as the control of government action by certain groups and interests.

The human development approach takes fully into account the political nature of development policies. As Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen note in their book *India: Development and Participation*, the translation of economic opportunities into social opportunities is an ‘inescapable political process’ (p. 323). It is one thing to focus on ‘what should be done’ to make policies conducive to human development outcomes. It is another to make it happen through the political process. If undertaking human development policies was simply due to what ‘human development experts’ thought should be done, the world would probably be different today! This renewed interest for the political dimension of development has led to a renewed interest for ‘democracy’ in development.

2. Definitions and terminology

a) Democracy

As we all know, democracy means in Ancient Greek ‘rule by the people’. It is now universally accepted that democracy requires more than elections and majority rule. In addition to the exercise of basic political rights like the right to vote and the holding of free and fair elections, democracy involves (Drèze and Sen, 2002, p. 24):

- Respect for legal entitlements;
- Respect for the right to free expression (and uncensored media);
- The right to associate freely and hold public discussions;
- The right to organize political movements of protests.

Drèze and Sen contrast the *practice* of democracy with its *ideal*. The latter gathers together the conditions for perfect democratic practice in the form, for example, of the formal exercise of political and civic rights, the full participation of people in matters that affect their lives, an accountable and transparent government and an equitable distribution of power (2002, p. 347). Democratic practice, defined according to the actual practice of these democratic ideals in a given society, critically depends on a large array of factors. These include:

- The extent of political participation (like election turnouts, the number of political parties, and the number of people who present themselves in elections); (Egypt might have elections, but people do not have much choice in electing someone else than Mubarak)
- The awareness of the public of matters of policy decision-making and policy implications (like full information on the social consequences of a certain policy decision); (We can think here of the debate around the Free Trade Areas of Latin America, ALCA, and the misinformation about the virtues of free trade)
- The vigour of the opposition to the ruling political party; (and a technique for dictators to come to power is to precisely eliminate opposition parties such as the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe)
- The nature of popular organizations (regarding the extent of non-corrupt practices and the education or personality of an organization leader); (the charismatic personality of Lech Walesa contributed to the success of Solidarnosc in Poland)
- The distribution of power in the country (such as the power of the ruling elite to hold back socially progressive reforms).

b) Participation

Democracy is not the only term which has become central to contemporary development thinking. Participation is another word which now permeates all development discourses. In a review of participation in development, James Blackburn calls participation the ‘sacred cow’ of international organisations (1998, p. 2). He defines it as the ‘commitment to help create the conditions which can lead to a significant empowerment of those who at present have little control over the forces that condition their lives’ (p. 3). The World Bank defines participation as ‘a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them’ (2001, p. 3). The World Bank’s view on participation has essentially emphasized its instrumental role in poverty reduction: ‘The ultimate aim [of participation] is increased accountability, transparency and efficiency of these governance structures in promoting development and reducing poverty’ (p. 5). If the people who participate in decision-making are the poor, they are assumed to make decisions that better reflect, and hence most positively affect, their values and priorities. The most popular participatory initiative is probably the much praised Participatory Budget in Porto Alegre in Brazil. How democracy and participation are linked is another debate in which would be too broad to discuss here.

c) Governance

In addition to democracy and participation, there is another term very much in fashion in development thinking, and that is ‘governance’. The *Human Development Report 2002* defines ‘effective governance’ as a ‘set of principles and core values that allow poor people to gain power through participation while protecting them from arbitrary, unaccountable actions in their lives by governments, multinational corporations and other forces. That means ensuring that institutions and power are structured and distributed in a way that gives real voice and space to poor people and creates mechanisms through which the powerful can be held accountable for their actions.’ (p.vi) The *Report* highlights the following key institutions of democratic governance (p. 4):

- A system of representation with well-functioning political parties and interest associations;
- An electoral system that guarantees free and fair elections as well as universal suffrage;
- A system of checks and balances based on the separation of powers, with independent judicial and legislative branches;
- A vibrant civil society, able to monitor government and private business – and provide alternative forms of political participation;
- A free, independent media;
- Effective civilian control over the military and other security forces.

d) Measuring democracy

In order to understand the linkages between democracy and human development, there has been a tendency to measure democracy along some indicators, run a regression on variables such as economic growth, or even life expectancy or infant mortality, and then establish correlations between these variables. Obviously, measuring democracy can be a very delicate exercise, as one can never ascribe a number to something that is quintessentially qualitative. Indicators of democracy are always proxies, and by no means should we reduce democracy to a set of indicators. Nonetheless, indicators of democracy are very useful to make inter-country comparisons. Freedom House (www.freedomhouse.org) is the most famous source of indicators of democracy. Another source is the World Bank Institute which published last year governance indicators for 209 countries for the period 1996-2004. The table below shows some indicators for some countries of our mock National Human Development Reports.

	Voice and Accountability^a	Political Stability^b	Government Effectiveness^c	Regulatory Quality^d	Rule of Law^e	Control of Corruption^f
Bolivia	47.1	28.6	29.8	53.7	37.2	25.1
Egypt	20.9	25.2	49.0	27.1	54.1	51.2
Myanmar	0	12.1	2.9	0.5	2.9	1.0
United Kingdom	94.2	71.4	94.2	94.1	93.7	94.6

Source: http://info.worldbank.org/governance/kkz2004/mc_countries.asp (Kaufmann D., A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi 2005: Governance Matters IV: Governance Indicators for 1996-2004)

- a. *Voice and Accountability*: political, civil and human rights
- b. *Political Instability and Violence*: likelihood of violent threats to, changes in, government, including terrorism
- c. *Government Effectiveness*: competence of the bureaucracy and the quality of public service delivery
- d. *Regulatory Burden*: incidence of market-unfriendly policies
- e. *Rule of Law*: quality of contract enforcement, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence
- f. *Control of Corruption*: exercise of public power for private gain, including both petty and grand corruption and state capture

In a special report on democracy in Latin America, the UNDP computed the Electoral Democracy Index, which is a composite index gathering data about the right to vote, free and clean elections and elections as a means of gaining access to public office (http://www.undp.org/democracy_report_latin_america).

After describing what ‘democracy’ is, we have yet to answer the question as to why democracy is so important for the human development approach? Is it because it is likely to yield better ‘human development results’ such as improved educational and health outcomes for the poor?

3. The value of democratic practice

a) Intrinsic

Within the human development paradigm, people are considered as active subjects of their own destiny and not passive spoon-fed patients of social welfare institutions. Development rests on ‘the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world’ (Sen, 1999b, p. 18). Such ability ‘to do something not only for oneself but also for other members of the society’ is ‘one of the elementary freedoms that people have reason to value, [...] even among people who lead very deprived lives in material terms’ (Drèze and Sen, 1995, p. 106). Participation in designing the rules of the institutions which govern people’s lives is thus an intrinsic component of human dignity. The practice of democracy is a good in itself, whatever its outcome.

b) Instrumental

Democratic practice is not only valuable for its own sake, but also for instrumental reasons. Given the open-endedness and the multi-dimensionality of human well-being, the practice of democracy enables to specify the dimensions of human well-being which are worth being promoted. The ‘role of public discussion and interactions in the emergence of shared values and commitments’ (Sen, 1999b, p. 253) is essential in specifying a society’s underlying values and in choosing the ends of policies. Sen gives the example of an indigenous community which had to choose between ‘a traditional way of life’ and ‘escaping grinding poverty’ (1999b, p. 31): the decision should depend on the underlying social concerns and values that people who form the community express through public discussion. The role of

democratic practice also extends to the choices of the means that will bring about the chosen priorities, and hence to the kind of policies required to promote the chosen ends. We can probably single out two privileged democratic practices in which this can be done. On the one hand, public debate through the media is a very important way for discussing the ends that public policies should promote and the means through which these ends are achieved. I think particularly of the public debate currently going on in the UK about the curtailing of civil and political rights under the Terrorist Act. Another powerful democratic practice is that of public protest, such as for example protests against the controversial building of a dam, or the controversial privatisation of public services.

c) Constructive

A third value of democratic practice is its constructive role in value formation. It clarifies and constructs a society's values and priorities, such as for example a society built around the value of tolerance or social equity. One could object that the values democratic practice is building might not be desirable, such as racism. What is to be done if a racist party which wants to close borders to immigrants comes to power? Or what is to be done if the Muslim Brotherhood were to win democratic elections in Egypt? The tension between 'procedure vs. substance' is a difficult one, and cannot be resolved. Is democratic practice always a good thing, whatever its outcome? Maybe we can leave that for the discussion afterwards. There is however one thing that we can say for the moment: that for democratic practice to lead to desirable outcomes from the perspective of human development, the requirement of a minimum level of equality needs to be fulfilled, for 'a fair distribution of power is a basic requirement of democracy' (Drèze and Sen 2002, p. 353).

4. Power and inequality

The *Human Development Report 2002* has underlined very well that 'imbalances in resources and political power often subvert the principle of one person, one voice' (p.4). It notes especially the problems of businesses financing political campaigns and other corporate influence on politics, of corruption and abuses of power. We only have to think of the lobby of the petrol industry on US government and its effect on environmental policies. Because of these disruptive influences, democratic practice is no guarantee for social justice. And I quote here again the *Report*: 'Much is known about how to promote equitable development that benefits poor people: widening access to credit, reforming land ownership, investing in basic social services for all, promoting the informal sector, following sound macroeconomic policies. But too often such policies are not adopted because of systematic biases that protect the interests of elites.' (p. 59) And we come back to our earlier point, with so much research by 'development experts'

on poverty reduction, surely there should have been much more progress in human development had development not been a political process!

In their book *India: Participation and Development*, Drèze and Sen write that economic and social inequality ‘gives disproportionate power to those who command crucial resources such as income, education and influential connections’ (p. 28). This has much to do with a relationship which has been little explored so far in the literature on human development, namely the relationship between the freedom to participate in market economic exchange and the freedom to participate in the life of the political community.

Among the capabilities that people have reason to choose and value, Amartya Sen ranges not only the fundamental capability to shape one’s own destiny by political participation, but also the fundamental capability to participate in markets: ‘We have good reasons to buy and sell, to exchange, and to seek lives that can flourish on the basis of transactions. To deny that freedom in general would be in itself a major failing of society’ (1999b, p. 12). And he goes on saying that people should have the fundamental ‘right to interact economically with each other’, and that failing to grant that right would be a significant ‘social loss’ (1999b, p. 26).

Although freedom to pursue market transactions is a fundamental right, and a right which may lead to efficiency results, it may also result in greater inequalities. This is why Sen advocates that freedoms in markets should *always* go hand in hand with freedoms in other institutions so that corrective measures can be taken. He proposes that the remedy to correct the unfreedoms that market freedoms might generate ‘has to lie in more freedom—including that of public discussion and participatory political decisions’ (1999b, p. 123). The world is full with examples of policies taken on the basis of the freedoms of the market sphere without a corresponding freedom in the political sphere. For example, in some countries, social security reforms have been taken on the basis of the interests of the financial sector without public debate. The right of the most powerful to pursue exchange in financial markets has not been corrected by the right of the poor to be a political actor and advance their interests through public debate.

If freedoms in the market sphere are not corrected by freedoms in the political sphere (such as public protests), there is a danger that socio-economic inequalities and political inequalities reinforce each other. If those who are economically marginalized have less political weight than others, then it is most likely that those who have more political weight will orient policies towards consequences that are favourable to them. Can democracy then ever be the means of social change in a context of inequality?

Drèze and Sen have insisted that the presence of inequalities cannot justify authoritarian regimes. Even if a perfectly benevolent dictator would provide all the fundamental human freedoms (so that nobody would be lacking food, shelter, health, education, etc.), it would deprive people from having their

say in the organization of the community in which they live. This would violate an important aspect of human well-being. Cuba is the most obvious example. This is why they conclude that the *only* route that can be taken to promote human well-being is enhancing the political power of the unprivileged, so that they can exercise their political freedom on the same equality basis as the more privileged (2002, p. 376).

Drèze and Sen propose two ways for enhancing the political power of the underprivileged (2002, p. 29). Firstly, the capability of the underprivileged for self-assertion must be enhanced through offering incentives for them to organize in political organizations through which they will gain sufficient power to counteract the power of the privileged. Secondly, a sense of solidarity must be created between the most privileged and the underprivileged (e.g. intellectuals and higher social classes speaking on behalf of the underprivileged and defending their interests). But the question remains how to bring about this self-assertion of the less privileged and this sense of solidarity between social classes. Maybe I can leave you to imagine ways of bringing these two factors about in your own country?

5. Democratic deliberation

From our discussion above, it is obvious that democracy is not practised in a vacuum without any rules or pre-conditions. Democratic practice could be compared to a piece of music. It is important that musicians know how to read music, and how to play notes on their respective instrument. Without following these rules, it is very difficult for a piece of music to be played. Similarly for democracy. It is difficult for democracy to function properly without following certain codes of behaviour and rules of the game.

One of these rules is what we can call the rule of a certain endowment of ‘political functioning’, that is, ‘the capability for full and effective use of political opportunities and liberties in deliberation’ (Bohman, 1997, p. 325). If citizens are below a certain threshold level of adequate political functioning, they lack the skills necessary to engage into public deliberation, and will therefore not be able to participate and influence the outcome of the deliberation. Conversely, if some citizens are above a certain upper threshold level of adequate public functioning, they will have too much power in influencing the deliberation outcome.

The idea of adequate public functioning requires a considerable level of *cognitive and communicative skills*, which ensures that nobody is below or above a threshold. Among these skills, one finds (Crocker, 2006): (i) the skill of initiating public dialogue or making proposals about an issue; (ii) the ability to engage in argument and counter-argument; (iii) skills in framing and reframing a debate; (iv) an ability for persuasive but not manipulative rhetoric. This requires a strong educational system guaranteeing equal educational opportunities, with adequate public spending. Participants who are lacking

these cognitive and communicative skills, even though they are formally and physically included in the democratic game, will most likely be excluded from it.

This leads me to another rule of the democratic game, that of inclusiveness. This does not mean only to include everybody in a discussion but to ensure that the person included is equipped with an adequate level of political functioning and adequate cognitive and communicative capacities to advance their claims, so that ‘the silence [of the uneducated] is [not] turned into consent by the more powerful deliberators who are able to ignore them’ (Bohman, 1997, p. 333). Education for the democratic game is thus crucial for a healthy democracy, and for democratic decisions to be conducive to human development outcomes. Including the poor in the decision-making process means giving them the adequate skills so that they can enter the deliberate game on an equal basis as others.

6. Concluding remarks

I compared earlier democratic practice to playing a piece of music. Musicians ought to practice for the piece of music to be played in harmony, and so for democracy. A country does not suddenly wakes up ‘democratic’. People need to ‘practice’ democracy through certain behaviours and habits. As Laurence Whitehead once remarked with regard to the transition from authoritarian rule: ‘It is one thing to design democratic institutions, quite another to educate or persuade citizens to live by democratic precepts’ (Whitehead, 2002, p. 89). The *Human Development Report* 2002 mentioned the long legacy of military rule, highlighting the fact that ‘old habits die hard’. How to build democracy in countries which have little known democracy in the past? What to do with the case of Haiti? Or Congo and Zimbabwe? One of the key factors in democracy building is that of ‘education for democracy’ or ‘education for citizenship’. If education is key for building democracy, and if democracy plays a key instrumental role for promoting human well-being, such as better educational services, where do we start? Will democracy be then a permanent utopia for countries in which the majority of the population doesn’t have access to basic educational skills? As Sen puts it, ‘A country does not have to be deemed fit for democracy; rather, it has to become fit through democracy.’ (1999a, p. 4.)

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