

HD INSIGHTS

HDR Networks September 2007 Issue 12



What does a human development approach say about democracy?

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Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that, "(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country; (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures." The right to self-determination is indeed a fundamental human right. But the human development approach tells a more complex story than holding free and fair elections with universal suffrage.

Why aren't elections enough?

A country may hold periodic free and fair elections, but then silence public dissent by forbidding demonstrations against the elected government's policies. This could hardly be classified as a democratic government which is responsive to the will of the people. In addition to elections, democracy requires the respect of basic civil and political rights, such as the right to free expression and uncensored media, the right to free assembly and to hold public discussions, and the right to organize political movements of protests (Drèze and Sen, 2002, p. 24). Democracy also requires a set of well-functioning institutions that provide systems of accountability and checks and balances, including an independent media and judicial apparatus, and a civilian-controlled military force (UNDP, 2002, p. 4). What is the point of elections if the military intervenes afterwards to put its own people in government? What if the main TV channel only broadcasts the views of one political party? What if people are so disillusioned with politics that only a small proportion of the electorate vote? If democracy is government of, by and for the people, many more factors have to be taken into account than the periodic holding of free and fair elections.

What is the human development case for democracy?

Winston Churchill is reported to have said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried. Is democracy then the only option by default? A human development approach identifies three arguments in support of democracy (Sen, 1999). First, respecting human dignity involves considering people as active subjects of their own destiny, however materially poor they might be. Being able to participate in decisions that affect one's life is an intrinsic component of human wellbeing. Second, democracy is instrumental in promoting other components of people's wellbeing. If a government fails to provide adequate health care to all, political participation of those who are left out, or representation of their voices, is crucial to reform social services provision. Amartya Sen has famously argued that famines are caused by the irresponsiveness of governments to people's claims rather than by food shortages. Democracy is also instrumental in deciding on policy priorities and choices, given limited resources and financial constraints on promoting all dimensions of human development. The third reason is the constructive role democracy plays in value formation. It clarifies and constructs a society's values and priorities, for example a society built around

the value of tolerance or social equity.

What are the policy implications?

Democratic institutions function best when minimum conditions of equality are fulfilled. The HDR 2002 has underlined 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. Because of these disruptive influences, democratic practice is no guarantee for social justice. A human development approach to democracy requires a full analysis of the distribution of power in the country. Who holds most of the economic resources? How are these groups influencing the political process, through e.g. the financing of political parties? Who are the elites? What is their influence in holding back social reforms? Do economic groups control the media? Do all citizens, whatever their social and economic status, have equal access to legal protection?

The human development approach proposes at least three policies to make democracy function on a more equal basis and increase the political power of the socially and economically marginalized. Firstly, the capability of the underprivileged for self-assertion must be enhanced through offering incentives for them to organize in political organizations. Secondly, a sense of solidarity must be created between the most privileged and the underprivileged with intellectuals and higher social classes speaking on behalf of the underprivileged and defending their interests (Drèze and Sen, 2002, p. 376). Thirdly, the capability of people to function politically and participate in public reasoning should be promoted through adequate educational policies that focus on such areas as critical reasoning and argumentative skills (Nussbaum 2006).

Some general sources:

1. Drèze, Jean and Amartya Sen (2002), *India: Development and Participation*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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2. Human Development and Capability Association (2006), 'Public Debate and Human Development', *Maitreyee: Newsletter of the Association*, issue 4, February.

[Click here](#)

3. Nussbaum, Martha (2006), 'Education and Democratic Citizenship: Capabilities and Quality Education', *Journal of Human Development* 7(3), pp. 385-95.

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4. Sen, Amartya (1999), 'Democracy as Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy*, 10(3): 3-17.

[Click here](#)

5. UNDP (2002), *Human Development Report: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, New York: Oxford University Press.

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6. UNDP Democratic Governance web-site.

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