



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

# DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE (DRG) POLICY

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FOOD IS MY RIGHT;  
GOVERNMENT  
MUST HAVE TO  
TAKE LIABILITY  
TO ENSURE THAT!



# INTRODUCTION

This policy will optimize and align USAID’s investments, including those of the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Bureau, to maximize the Agency’s contribution to democratic development. Expanding the community of resilient, rights-respecting democracies and reversing nearly two decades of democratic backsliding requires bold action and adaptation, including the deployment of a more expansive and nimble set of tools that can address both new and longstanding challenges. This policy prescribes changes—what we have called “pivots”—that USAID needs to make, in collaboration with our interagency and other partners, to contribute to a sustained, global renewal of democratic governance that better delivers justice, security, and inclusive development.

Advancing democracy, human rights, and governance is in the national security interest of the United States, and is essential for achieving global development objectives. It is also an expression of deeply held U.S. values founded on the belief that all people have an inherent right to be free from repression, tyranny, and the indignity of corruption, and to shape their own destinies. While the United States has long championed DRG, these concepts—which are enshrined in international conventions and law and furthered by global compacts such as the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals—have universal resonance. Surveys have consistently shown overwhelming support for democracy and human rights in countries around the world.<sup>1</sup> This policy recognizes that while democracy is imperfect and progress is rarely linear, including in the United States, no system of government is better than representative democracy for unleashing human potential, respecting human dignity, and addressing the problems people face in their daily lives.

This policy builds on decades of USAID investment in the core pillars of democracy and governance, and partnerships with a diverse array of actors and institutions at all levels. It rests on a foundation of evidence and learning generated through cutting-edge DRG programming and USAID’s global cadre of experts and presence in more than 100 countries. This policy is rooted in the strategic approaches that preceded it, such as the 2013 DRG Strategy, which established human rights as central to USAID’s mission, and it works in alignment with all other USAID policies. It also follows the creation in 2023 of the DRG Bureau to lead the Agency’s efforts to invigorate democracy, support human rights and justice, and bolster governance. As USAID and its partners anticipate and face unprecedented threats to democracy, human rights, and accountable governance, this policy provides essential guidance for forging new partnerships, refining our tools, and modernizing our approaches.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/focus/open-society-barometer>.

# BACKGROUND

## The Case for DRG

The expansion of democracy enhances U.S. national security and bolsters a fair and open international order. Democratic systems foster global stability and economic prosperity,<sup>2</sup> and established and stable democracies do not fight wars with each other.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, well-functioning democracies are less likely than their autocratic counterparts to be sources of famine, forced migration, human trafficking, and cross-border criminal activity.<sup>4</sup>

Democratic systems have intrinsic value given their superior track record in upholding human rights and justice, respecting individual dignity, enhancing equality and inclusion, and providing spaces to productively address conflict. They also have instrumental value as a means to deliver human, economic, and environmental security benefits to citizens and communities. Evidence demonstrates that:



**Democracies significantly outperform autocracies in protecting human rights.** Democracies are far less likely to use repression against their populations, and the more inclusive the democracy (in terms of voting access, electoral representation, and legislative structure), the better the human rights protections.<sup>5</sup>



**Democracies are more likely to produce more prosperous communities.** Average GDP per capita growth has been higher in democracies than in autocracies since 1800, and democratization is associated with greater economic development.<sup>6</sup> Countries that democratized increased their GDP per capita by about 20 percent over autocracies in the 25 years following democratization.<sup>7</sup>



**Democracies deliver better public goods and services.** Democracies do a better job providing public goods and services (such as electricity, education, and health care), spend more on social protection, and have more ambitious climate policies than autocracies.<sup>8</sup> This translates into longer life expectancy, lower infant mortality rates, and fewer deaths from noncommunicable diseases for people living in democracies.<sup>9</sup>

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2 Daron Acemoglu, Suresh Naidu, Pascual Restrepo, and James A. Robinson, “Democracy Does Cause Growth,” *Journal of Political Economy*, Volume 127, Number 1 (February 2019).

3 See for example: *V-Dem Policy Brief # 30* (May 2021). <https://v-dem.net/media/publications/pb30.pdf>.

4 Catalina Perdomo and Catalina Uribe Burcher, *Protecting Politics: Deterring the Influence of Organized Crime on Local Democracy* (2016). <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/protecting-politics-deterring-the-influence-of-organized-crime-on-local-democracy.pdf>.

5 USAID, *DRG Policy Evidence Support Research Report* (September 2022). [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00ZNBD.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZNBD.pdf).

6 Carl Henrik Knutsen, *The Business Case for Democracy* (October 2020), pp. 9-10. [https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/handle/2077/66690/gupea\\_2077\\_66690\\_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/handle/2077/66690/gupea_2077_66690_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

7 Daron Acemoglu, Suresh Naidu, Pascual Restrepo, and James A. Robinson, “Democracy Does Cause Growth,” *Journal of Political Economy*, Volume 127, Number 1 (February 2019).

8 USAID, *DRG Policy Evidence Support Research Report* (September 2022). [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00ZNBD.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZNBD.pdf).

9 V-Dem Institute, *Case for Democracy Report* (March 2023). [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/34/C4DReport\\_230421.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/34/C4DReport_230421.pdf).



## Challenges

Despite its numerous advantages, democracy is facing historic headwinds. The resurgence of authoritarianism is reshaping the international order at the expense of democracy and human rights. There is growing evidence that authoritarians are working together to spread their illiberal ideology, acquire tools and tactics for repression, and dilute global support for democratic norms and institutions. Using their financial muscle and influence in multilateral bodies, Russia, the People’s Republic of China, and other authoritarian powers are promoting an alternative model of governance that relies on coercion and repression. As a result of these dynamics, the world is less hospitable to democracy than it was two decades ago.

Global freedom is also on the decline due to weaknesses internal to democracies. Governments around the world are failing to deliver the services citizens need and expect, not only in the core areas of education, health, and livelihoods, but also in terms of justice, rights, and security. This trend has coincided with widening inequality, economic hardship, debt distress, and political gridlock in many countries at the very moment citizens are looking to their leaders to address complex problems such as climate change. In the aggregate, people have not turned their back on democracy as a concept—in fact, according to a 2023 survey conducted in 30 countries, 86 percent of respondents said they want to live in a democracy.<sup>10</sup> Rather, they are dissatisfied by democracy’s poor performance in improving their lives in practice.<sup>11</sup>

The growth of transnational corruption has aggravated these dynamics, as it allows public officials to siphon off even greater shares of their country’s wealth, with devastating impacts on development and service delivery. Meanwhile, the strategic use of corruption by authoritarian governments, such as those of Russia and the People’s Republic of China, has resulted in public officials putting corrupt foreign interests above the interests of their own people. As a consequence, in many democratic countries, citizens have concluded that the system only works for the wealthy and well-connected, and frequently cite corruption as the primary driver of their discontent.

Autocratic leaders amplify such grievances in their own countries and outside their borders to reduce confidence

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10 Open Society Foundations, *Open Society Barometer* (September 2023). <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/focus/open-society-barometer>.

11 Pew Research Center, “Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety” (December 2021). <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/12/07/global-public-opinion-in-an-era-of-democratic-anxiety/>.

in democracy and tighten their grip on power. Using social media, pliant media outlets, and proxies, these actors manipulate information, spread hate speech, and create divisiveness—often scapegoating historically marginalized groups<sup>12</sup>—to promote their anti-democratic agendas. Elections are a particularly sensitive moment in which malign foreign actors try to exploit divisions within societies to secure results favorable to their interests. A certain degree of polarization in democracies is healthy because it creates political competition and offers voters choices. The danger to democracy emerges when polarization becomes toxic, fueling disillusionment and undermining respect for democratic norms and processes.<sup>13</sup>

Against this backdrop, defenders of democracy face myriad threats. Governments around the world have cracked down on freedom of expression, association, and assembly, reducing people’s ability to dissent, organize, and peacefully protest, and limiting civic organizations from registering, receiving funding, and engaging their constituencies and stakeholders. Freedom of the press—a pillar of democratic governance—has experienced a sustained assault in democracies and autocracies alike. Media in many parts of the world are undergoing what some call an “extinction event,” with outlets closing due to market, technological, and political forces. Global internet freedom has also declined over the past 12 years, with users facing draconian legal repercussions for expressing themselves online, including lengthy prison terms and in some cases, death sentences.<sup>14</sup> Anti-democratic forces increasingly use technology—a powerful tool for progress—to surveil, harass, and silence their critics, even as they seek refuge abroad. This has led to new forms of online harm, including technology-facilitated gender-based violence that disproportionately targets women and girls in the public and political spheres.

Contemporary authoritarians have become more brazen, strategic, and adaptive. Using increasingly sophisticated tactics, autocratic leaders co-opt independent institutions, weaken checks and balances, and discredit or disqualify their political challengers, while seeking to maintain the facade of electoral democracy. Elections often take place in environments devoid of meaningful political participation and competition, where opposition political parties face unlevel playing fields heavily tilted toward incumbents. Undemocratic actors have put increasing pressure on election management bodies to act in ways that undermine electoral integrity. Others have used unexpected shocks—such as pandemics, climate-related disasters, or debt crises—as justifications for repression, the consolidation of executive power, or the overthrow of elected and unelected leaders. Since 2020, West and Central Africa have experienced seven coups d’états after a period in which coups were the exception.

Finally, many of the countries in which USAID has programs are affected by fragility, conflict, and violence. Poor and malign governance both exacerbates and is exacerbated by those dynamics. Conflict makes the task of democratization exponentially more challenging by creating opportunities for corruption, intensifying polarization, and fraying the social contract. These conditions also increase the risks of atrocities, human rights violations, and other forms of repression, especially against historically marginalized populations whose inclusion in the polity is essential for the strength of democracy.

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12 “Marginalized groups” refers to a wide range of people, including, but not limited to, [youth](#), women, persons with disabilities, [LGBTQI+](#), displaced persons, migrants, [Indigenous Peoples](#), urban poor, and particular [religious](#) and ethnic groups. The use of the term “marginalized groups” in this policy does not imply that this is a monolith or that the groups are similarly situated.

13 See, for example, Milčić, Filip, *The Negative Impact of Polarization on Democracy*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (March 2021). <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/18175.pdf>.

14 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2023*. <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/Freedom-on-the-net-2023-DigitalBooklet.pdf>.

## Opportunities

Though democracy is down, it is not out—and there are reasons for optimism. Democracies have demonstrated remarkable resilience, as people around the world stand up again and again—often in the face of violence and repression—for fundamental freedoms and just societies.<sup>15</sup> There are countless examples of courageous actors and institutions serving as a bulwark against democratic decline. In fact, where autocratization has been halted or reversed, it is due to justice systems taking action against an overreaching executive, opposition movements emerging in support of democratic values, domestic election observers calling out electoral fraud and election management bodies resisting political pressure, citizens mobilizing to beat back repressive laws, and international actors willing to stand with and protect them.<sup>16</sup>

Today, people around the world are participating in civic life through social and labor movements, grassroots organizing, open-source data collection, and other forms of nonviolent collective action more than ever before in recorded history.<sup>17</sup> Collective action, often involving communities that have been historically excluded from power, is working to change policy, cultural norms, and attitudes. Collective action ranges from grassroots organizing to build political power at a local level, to mass mobilization at a national level, for example to demand an end to kleptocratic rule or protect human rights. Moreover, emerging technologies and innovative forms of participatory governance, such as popular assemblies, direct legislation, participatory community mapping and budgeting, and e-democracy, offer new opportunities for societies to reinvigorate citizen engagement.

Subnational governments—including at territorial, state, and municipal levels—continue to be sources of innovation in meeting citizens’ daily needs and resolving complex crises such as climate change. In otherwise illiberal systems, local governments have succeeded in advancing reforms, solving practical problems, and maintaining democratic culture, often in close collaboration with civil society and the private sector.

After roughly 20 years of overall ascendance, many autocracies are manifesting severe disadvantages—economic stagnation, brutal repression, and deepening isolation, among others—that attest to the inherent weaknesses of the authoritarian model. Yet the task of reversing nearly two decades of democratic backsliding will not be easy. To help in this endeavor, USAID is learning from its past and adapting its strategies going forward.

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15 Even leaders in nondemocratic and autocratic-leaning countries claim that their countries are democracies because it is a durable concept with broad appeal, and opinion polls consistently show widespread support for representative democracy—see, for example, the *Democracy Perception Index 2023*, <https://6389062.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/6389062/Canva%20images/Democracy%20Perception%20Index%202023.pdf>.

16 V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2023, Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*. [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem\\_democracyreport2023\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf).

17 Erica Chenoweth, et al., “This May Be the Largest Wave of Nonviolent Mass Movements in World History. What Comes Next?” *The Washington Post*, “Monkey Cage” blog (November 16, 2019).







# DRG POLICY GOAL

The goal of this policy is to optimize USAID’s efforts to invigorate democracy, enhance human rights and justice, and bolster governance at all levels that advances the public interest and supports the delivery of inclusive, sustainable development. This policy establishes a shared vision of democracy’s essential role in achieving development results in all sectors, and affirms the belief that other sectors have an essential role in contributing to democratic progress.

USAID’s elevation of DRG across all sectors and creation of the DRG Bureau demonstrate our commitment to ensuring that all people have agency to influence the decisions that affect their daily lives, see their basic needs and concerns addressed by those in power, and have their inherent dignity recognized and respected. To advance this aspiration, we will partner with and support reformers to nurture and sustain gains, investing more effort in democracies where political leaders are taking positive steps to deliver accountable governance and in societies that are experiencing pivotal moments of opportunity during which democratic values can take root. We will also continue to stand with those who fight for democracy, even in the most challenging circumstances. We will reinforce the transnational networks and connections that offer ideas and partnership to those on the front lines of this work.

This policy aligns with key U.S. foreign and national security policies, including the 2023 [USAID Policy Framework](#), the 2022 U.S. [National Security Strategy](#), the FY 2022-2026 [Joint Strategic Plan \(JSP\)](#) for the Department of State and USAID, the 2022 [National Defense Strategy](#), the 2021 [U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption](#), and the [2021 National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#).

“ We will work to strengthen democracy around the world because democratic governance consistently outperforms authoritarianism in protecting human dignity, leads to more prosperous and resilient societies, creates stronger and more reliable economic and security partners for the United States, and encourages a peaceful world order. ”

—U.S. National Security Strategy,  
October 2022



# PIVOTS

Since USAID published its [DRG Strategy](#) in 2013, the DRG landscape has changed dramatically. Democratic institutions remain crucial for democratic progress, often serving as the last line of defense to authoritarianism. As such, USAID will continue to support political parties, electoral commissions, legislatures, courts, national and subnational governments, and other core democratic institutions, as well as the citizens, civil society organizations, labor unions, and independent media that hold them to account. Yet, new challenges to democracy and human rights require that we adopt new approaches. This policy calls on all USAID Operating Units to make four strategic changes, or pivots, to accelerate democratic development, while embracing four important principles that underpin democracy assistance.

## Pivot I:

**Harness all of USAID’s influence and development programs to pursue democratic progress.**

*USAID will embrace a whole-of-Agency approach to democratic renewal, leveraging all of its resources, capabilities, and partnerships to drive meaningful change.*

Democratic political systems, however imperfect, are the best way to achieve peace, prosperity, and sustainable development. Therefore, in addition to continuing our core areas of democracy assistance, USAID will embrace a whole-of-Agency approach that leverages all of our resources and influence to drive improvements in DRG. For over a decade, USAID has been incorporating DRG principles of participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability throughout its programming. This type of integration will remain foundational to USAID’s approach to promoting sustainable, inclusive development, but it is insufficient given the existential challenges facing democracy, human rights, and governance today. Pivot I goes further by having other development sectors deliberately support DRG outcomes. This is a necessary, fundamental shift that will put more of USAID’s capabilities, resources, and influence to work in advancing democratic progress and produce more sustainable development outcomes overall.

Taking a whole-of-Agency approach is especially crucial where there are democratic openings. When reformers fail to deliver political and economic gains quickly, populations can grow impatient, opening the door for democracy spoilers to wrest control. In such contexts, it is imperative for USAID to mobilize assistance, across all development sectors, to help reformers demonstrate—in both the short and long term—that democracy can produce meaningful improvements in people’s lives. Expanding economic opportunity and partnering with governments to reduce bureaucratic hurdles and improve the delivery of services can be particularly powerful in boosting citizen confidence in democracy and sustaining popular support for reform.

Opportunities to improve government accountability and build democratic culture are present in all contexts; however, we must be more intentional about identifying and seizing them in closing and closed spaces. In countries experiencing democratic backsliding, USAID can leverage its considerable investments in health, education, economic growth, natural resources management, and other development sectors to shore up independent institutions and protect civic space. Such opportunities exist throughout society and at all levels—from environmental associations to teachers unions, from health ministries to supreme audit institutions—and can play an important role in checking executive abuses and overreach. Even in countries facing severe challenges to democracy, there are opportunities across all sectors to bolster pockets of reform, while ensuring that our assistance does not inadvertently contribute to corruption or prolong autocratic rule.

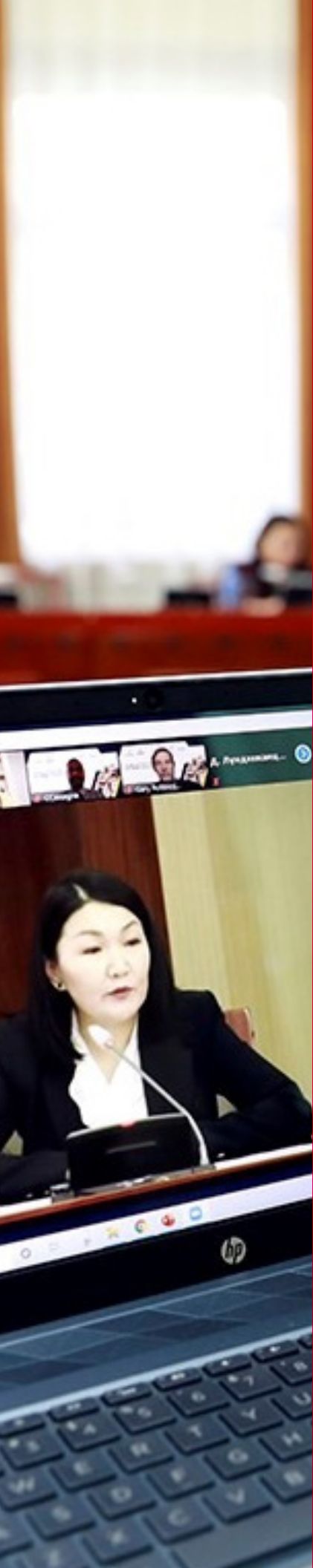


### USAID will...

Because democratic advancement cannot be achieved through programming alone, USAID will use all of the tools at our disposal—policy influence, technical expertise, convening power, diverse partnerships, strategic communications, and development diplomacy—to spur democratic renewal and foster just and free societies. In the policy arena, USAID will leverage its country-level presence and the insights derived from programming to inform interagency debates and shape policy outcomes. Topics of engagement may include revamping the U.S. bilateral relationship in response to a democratic opening, forging whole-of-government anti-corruption strategies, or contributing to sanctions deliberations. New policy postures will be amplified through our convening power—to broker consensus between disparate actors at the local level, draw in the private sector on areas of shared interest, or catalyze investment from other donors and multilateral organizations to address democratic deficits. We will cultivate new partnerships and invest in multilateral initiatives and platforms—both globally and at the country level—to galvanize collective action on shared priorities and provide connection and solidarity to democratic reformers. We will also leverage our voice, messaging, and high-level visits from senior leadership to press for policy change and strengthen our relationships with local change agents in government and civil society.

In the programming arena, USAID will more deliberately and fully link the range of its development investments (from health to climate adaptation, employment, social protection, and economic growth) to DRG improvements. Specifically, to advance this pivot, every USAID Mission should identify high-impact opportunities to promote democratic progress, utilizing all of our development assistance. This includes examining how a Mission’s entire assistance portfolio can contribute to democratic development by explicitly considering DRG principles and practices in the program design and implementation process. Missions should use analytical tools such as political economy analysis to identify stakeholders and existing power dynamics, as well as obstacles hindering reform champions, to inform assistance that maximizes accountable and democratic governance. This type of assistance should incorporate cutting-edge approaches, tools, and techniques, such as customer experience and administrative burden audits, human-centered design, and behavioral insights, to improve the delivery of services, enhance citizens’ experiences with government, and ultimately work to restore trust in democratic institutions.

Finally, to help realize Pivot I, USAID will establish a “democracy review” process to assess our overall presence and programming portfolio and make a comprehensive set of recommendations to pursue democratic progress and improve outcomes in all development sectors. While Pivot I applies to all USAID development contexts, the democracy reviews will focus on autocratic, kleptocratic, and backsliding countries where the contexts tend to be more challenging and consequential. Further details are provided in the Requirements section below.



## Pivot 2:

**Intensify the focus on norms and values that build social cohesion and cultivate democratic political culture and processes.**

*USAID will expand its efforts abroad to support democratic values, social capital, civil political discourse, information integrity,<sup>18</sup> and norms that are the linchpin of a just, resilient, and inclusive society.*

Just societies require not only democratic institutions and processes, but also adherence to democratic values and norms that make them truly democratic in practice. Political scientists have long suggested that the stability and effectiveness of democratic regimes depend in part on social cohesion<sup>19</sup> and the existence of a democratic “political culture” that is unique to that context and enjoys widespread support. Institutions only function democratically when the people within them champion and embody democratic norms—justice systems require personnel who act impartially and embrace the rule of law; labor markets function best when fundamental labor rights at work are respected by employers; public-sector institutions deliver when civil servants are honest, accessible, responsive, and accountable to citizens; electoral processes are only meaningful when incumbents allow genuine political competition and the outcome reflects the will of the voters. All of these stem from a political and social culture based on a set of beliefs, values, and norms that are locally rooted, broadly accepted, and consistently upheld, including by referring to rights enshrined in international, regional, and national law and conventions. Yet, for far too long, when designing their assistance strategies, international donors have not paid enough attention to the importance of the norms and values that shape and give meaning to democratic systems.<sup>20</sup>

Fostering a democratic political culture is particularly important as a sharp uptick in polarization has given rise to uncivil political discourse and political violence in many countries around the world. New technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), can exacerbate these trends and undermine social cohesion by making it exponentially easier to manipulate information and spread divisive narratives. Healthy political competition requires constructive behavior within agreed-upon boundaries, yet political actors increasingly violate previously accepted

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18 Information integrity refers to the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of information.

19 Social cohesion is, at a minimum, “The willingness of members of society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper.” (Dick Stanley, “What Do We Know about Social Cohesion: The Research Perspective of the Federal Government’s Social Cohesion Research Network.” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 28.1 (2003), pp. 5–17.)

20 USAID recognizes the importance of having programming that does not reinforce norms and values that are inconsistent with human dignity, or that have historically and culturally marginalized certain communities.

norms. Moreover, many elected leaders gain power through the ballot box, only to abuse their power by changing the rules to entrench their positions and weaken opposition in future elections. Building consensus among political elites and populations to accept the rules of the game, therefore, is vital for democracy—in the fullest sense of the word—to prevail.



### USAID will...

To implement this pivot, USAID will deepen its support for developing and strengthening democratic norms and values at the local and national levels, in communities and political institutions, and in formal political rules and informal practices. This emphasis on norms and values requires that USAID pay as much attention to the beliefs and habits that form a political culture as we do formal institutions, laws, and policies. For example, USAID’s [Rule of Law Policy](#) adopts a new paradigm of people-centered justice that places the person affected by the law at the core of the policies, processes, and practices that constitute justice systems. It shifts our focus from institutional performance metrics to individual outcomes and experience in line with USAID’s [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy](#). Similarly, Pivot 2 calls on USAID to put people’s experience with government and the responsiveness of public officials at the center of our engagement with institutions, including traditional governance structures. In practice, this means consistently pushing for ethical and transparent governance that is accountable, delivers on the public’s needs and expectations, and controls corruption. It also means prioritizing efforts to strengthen the social contract, such as by encouraging open and inclusive dialogues between governments and citizens and supporting participatory decision making.

In support of this pivot, USAID will also promote and preserve healthy information ecosystems that protect freedom of expression for all, encourage civil political discourse, and build resilience to information manipulation by foreign state and non-state actors abroad in tandem with our efforts to promote open, accessible, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems. We will place increased emphasis on building social trust through our programming to strengthen independent media, protect internet freedom, enhance information resilience, and safeguard election integrity. We will work with local partners and support initiatives to counter the spread of manipulated information that uses misleading narratives to discredit, silence, or harm women and girls, [LGBTQI+ persons](#), human rights defenders, anti-corruption champions, and other democratic actors. We will help partner governments communicate more effectively with the public in order to generate confidence in



democratic institutions and processes. And we will collaborate with our international partners to give more attention to these issues through bilateral, multi-stakeholder, and multilateral fora.

USAID will increase support for robust democratic political cultures through approaches that promote informed and engaged publics, such as [civic education](#).<sup>21</sup> As digital technologies change the practice of civics, USAID will expand high-quality, accessible online and online-offline-hybrid civic education programming. Programs will also reinforce cross-cutting coalitions of democratic reformers and change agents, such as social movement leaders, to overcome political polarization and rebuild societal trust.

We will conduct programming that is more grounded in local realities, culturally sensitive, attuned to [conflict dynamics](#), and aware of the current and underlying systems of power and oppression. We will promote a culture of pluralism, peace, and tolerance in diverse communities. In conflict-affected contexts, efforts to increase social cohesion and resilience in a trauma-informed manner will be particularly important. Work with political elites, including at the local level, will focus on deepening their acceptance of democratic rules of the game, such as through public peace pledges or political party codes of conduct that help set expectations of acceptable political behavior.

To improve activity design and implementation, USAID will draw on social and behavior change analysis, which is based on the principle that people are responding to their individual, sociocultural, and institutional environments, making decisions that reflect complex sets of important values. To better understand power dynamics and stakeholder incentives, USAID should expand the use of political economy, gender, and inclusive development analyses, while more rigorously applying systems thinking. Critically, USAID will ensure this work aligns with the core principles of Do No Harm and consciously look for and avoid or mitigate negative impacts. Local stakeholders, knowledge holders, and communities should be engaged as joint owners and co-creators in problem definition and solution design.

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21 There is ample evidence of positive impact from rigorous evaluations of civic education programs, but also many studies that have shown no impact. Therefore, as described in USAID's *Civic Education in the Digital Age Primer*, it is important to design evidence-based civic education programs and include impact evaluations or other robust evaluation methodologies into the design of new civic education programs.



### Pivot 3:

## Advance digital democracy by supporting rights-respecting approaches to data and technology.

*USAID will promote inclusive, rights-respecting approaches to the development, deployment, use, and governance of digital technologies and data to foster vibrant democracies and counter the rise of “digital repression.”*

Technology has transformed how people live their lives. In 2013, 36 percent of the world used the internet; by 2021, it was 63 percent.<sup>22</sup> Digital technologies, including AI, have had a tremendous impact on development, even in contexts with little to no internet connectivity, and will continue to do so at an accelerated pace. Some changes have been positive, for example, fostering economic growth, giving voice to historically marginalized communities, expanding opportunities for participation in civic and political life, improving access to information, enhancing service delivery, making health care more accessible, and strengthening systems of transparency and accountability.

At the same time, the rapid rate of technological innovation has steadily outpaced the global community’s ability to understand and prevent harm. Geolocation technologies, digital surveillance, big data, AI and machine learning, information manipulation, and spyware are powerful tools and tactics that governments can use to practice “digital repression,”<sup>23</sup> suppress dissent, and violate human rights.<sup>24</sup> In the absence of strong legal frameworks, digital literacy, and incentives for identifying and managing potential adverse impacts of technologies, digital innovations can intentionally or unintentionally lead to democratic decline and violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially for women and other historically marginalized groups.

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22 World Bank ICT Indicators Database, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS>.

23 One definition of “digital repression” is “the use of information and communications technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups in order to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state.” (Steven Feldstein, *The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance*. Oxford University Press (2021), p. 25.)

24 USAID, *Digital Ecosystem Framework* (2022). <https://www.usaid.gov/digital-development/digital-ecosystem-framework>; See also: USAID, *Digitized Autocracy Literature Review Final Report* (August 2021). [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00XV9R.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XV9R.pdf).



## USAID will...

In support of this pivot, USAID will work with a diverse set of local and global stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, government, philanthropy, multilateral institutions, media, and academia to improve democratic participation; promote transparency and accountability; support an open, free, global, interoperable, reliable, and secure internet; and push back against repression in all digital contexts. For example, we will help our partners to develop, disseminate, and, when appropriate, localize technologies that mitigate the risks of misuse and address manipulation of political processes or institutions, while we also work to raise awareness of the risks and benefits of data-driven technologies, including AI. We will work with lawyers, judges, and oversight bodies to strengthen their capacities to protect human rights in cases involving technology and data, and we will support efforts to help people understand and utilize technology in service of inclusive, free spaces that provide individuals with more control over their own data and its uses. We will support the development of national strategies and standards for public-sector digital transformation in alignment with international human rights norms. We will promote initiatives that foster collaboration among key stakeholders to increase government transparency and accountability at all levels. We will strengthen business-enabling environments to attract and foster responsible tech-sector investment. We will also nurture the development and application of technology that is widely accessible and rights-respecting, in order to narrow digital divides and combat [technology-facilitated gender-based violence](#) and other forms of digital harassment that prevent women, girls, and other historically marginalized groups from fully enjoying their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In alignment with the [USAID Digital Strategy](#) (2020-2024) and the forthcoming USAID Digital Policy (2024-2034), USAID will amplify its engagement in the development and promotion of global human rights-based principles and good practices to govern digital technologies and data, such as the [Declaration for the Future of the Internet](#), the [NIST Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework](#), and the U.S. [Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights](#). USAID is also committed to increasing the diversity of governments and civil society involved in multilateral organizations and fora to ensure that evolving digital governance principles reflect a truly global perspective.

## DIGITAL DEMOCRACY PRINCIPLES

USAID developed the following Digital Democracy Principles to present an affirmative vision for digital democracy—a context in which digital technology and data systems are designed, developed, deployed, used, and governed in alignment with human rights and democratic values. The principles are meant to guide staff to integrate digital technology and data management thoughtfully into programs in ways that align with democratic values and human rights.

1. Harness opportunities to strengthen democratic institutions, governance, and norms to advance rights-respecting digital ecosystems.
2. Collaborate with the private and public sectors to encourage rights-respecting digital investment and innovation.
3. Prioritize Do-No-Harm protections and support safeguards to prevent and minimize adverse impacts of digital technologies and data systems.
4. Facilitate and strengthen multi-stakeholder alliances, foster learning, and improve coordination among donor governments.
5. Prioritize digital inclusion, including by supporting local research and leveraging resources from local digital ecosystems.

These complement and are intended to be used in conjunction with the multilateral, USAID-endorsed [Donor Principles for Human Rights in the Digital Age](#) and [Principles for Digital Development](#).





## Pivot 4:

Elevate anti-corruption as critical to democracy and development, with a focus on transnational corruption, grand corruption, and kleptocracy.

*USAID will confront the realities of contemporary corruption through new resources, approaches, and partnerships, with a renewed commitment to anti-corruption-informed programming and practice across all sectors.*

USAID recognizes the profound threat that corruption poses to democracy and development across all sectors and levels of government. From impeding service delivery to accelerating environmental degradation, from exacerbating humanitarian emergencies to stoking conflict—corruption undermines human dignity and collective progress. Corruption disproportionately harms women and other historically marginalized groups, while its reach into the justice system leads to unjust and inequitable outcomes. In many countries, entrenched corruption is the operative system of governance, denying fair opportunities and deepening mistrust in political institutions. The increasingly transnational nature of corruption has compounded these challenges, necessitating an equally networked and global response. Corrupt actors routinely exploit vulnerabilities within national governance systems and in the global financial system to launder and shelter their ill-gotten gains, with the help of facilitators in key industries. Meanwhile, authoritarians employ strategic corruption and inject money into politics to subvert democratic processes in other countries.

The power of kleptocratic networks magnifies the impact of corruption—making graft in health, education, energy, and other sectors even more entrenched, while deterring high-quality private investment. In the health sector, for example, corruption limits access to reliable and affordable care, increasing costs and decreasing the quality of services. When people must resort to paying bribes to access life-saving medical care, it leads to unnecessary death and suffering. Systemic corruption and weak governance also enable illegal logging, fishing, and wildlife trade, resulting in the destruction of valuable resources and harm to local communities.

Local reformers recognize corruption's harms and are taking action through peaceful protests, courageous journalism, electoral campaigns, legal and administrative reforms, and more. In solidarity with these leaders and in recognition of corruption's significance to our core mission, USAID released its first-ever [Anti-Corruption Policy](#) in December 2022. This policy enshrines anti-corruption as a top priority for USAID, with the overarching goal of protecting resources crucial for development and delivering on the promise of democracy as a system that works in the public interest. The policy articulates USAID's emphasis on transnational corruption, grand corruption, and kleptocracy as part of addressing the underlying causes of more visible and daily forms of corruption.



### USAID will...

To advance this pivot, USAID will tackle the most pernicious abuses of power and forthrightly confront corruption in the places where we work.

Using the full range of our tools as an Agency, we will focus our anti-corruption actions on (1) reducing opportunities for corruption, such as through

responsible digitization of government services, and disrupting illicit finance and money laundering across borders; (2) increasing the costs of corruption, such as by exposing corrupt corporate and state practices that knowingly benefit from labor abuses in business operations and supply chains; and (3) incentivizing integrity, such as through celebrating officials who act with integrity.

Given the scope and scale of the challenge, USAID will further its efforts to tackle corruption from multiple angles, including across all DRG sectors given the close connection between corruption and democratic deficits. This pivot is intended to ensure connectivity between the DRG Policy and USAID's Anti-Corruption Policy by focusing attention on anti-corruption interventions that will have the greatest impact on spurring democratic progress. For example, our election integrity work will more deliberately address the threat that corruption poses to the conduct and outcomes of elections. Media freedom programming should continually emphasize the needs of investigative journalists and citizen journalism, whose exposure of corruption can be transformational. Civil society strengthening efforts should prioritize bolstering the organizations and social movements that are the engines for anti-corruption reform and often face acute protection needs. Governance programs working to improve public financial management and strengthen the civil service should include approaches to deter and detect corruption.

Substantial anti-corruption opportunities fall outside the DRG sector. Consistent with Pivot 1, USAID will continue to pursue openings to address corruption across all sectors, building on successful experiences to date in, for example, economic growth, natural resource management, health, and humanitarian assistance. As such, USAID's Operating Units should leverage their full range of capabilities, including strategic communications, donor mobilization, interagency coordination, and relationships with the private sector, to counter corruption and support reform. This holistic approach is necessary to safeguard development and humanitarian assistance from corruption risk, especially when operating in kleptocratic environments.





# PRINCIPLES

In addition to the above pivots, USAID will apply the following principles to maximize the effectiveness of programming in the DRG space. These principles are derived from research, learning, and USAID practice and field experience, and they provide guidance for improving the design and management of DRG assistance.

## Principle I:

**Advance social inclusion and gender equality by seeking transformational change in systems and structures.**

*USAID will emphasize gender equity, women’s empowerment, and inclusion of underrepresented communities as a core pillar of its approach to accelerating democratic development and bolstering open, just, peaceful, and resilient societies.*

The disempowerment of historically marginalized populations, including [women and girls](#), in politics and public life is rooted in entrenched societal norms and codified in political, legal, and economic institutions. Genuine democracy gains its power by drawing on the contributions, creativity, and participation of all members of society and in turn must extend its benefits to all. Inclusion in institutions, processes, and norms that together form the fabric of a political system is both a measure of democratic integrity and a prerequisite of sustainable democracy and societal development.

Unfortunately, political, social, and economic exclusion continues to affect communities and groups across the globe along different lines, including class, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, ethnicity, and [religion](#). Women remain grossly underrepresented in decision making worldwide at all levels of government, despite evidence that providing a safe and enabling environment for women to participate equitably in politics and public life produces more inclusive and effective policy outcomes and greater resilience to democratic backsliding.<sup>25</sup> Women politicians, journalists, and human rights defenders are increasingly targeted by highly sexualized, [gender-based attacks and threats online](#), which can lead to self-censorship and disengagement from civic and political life.

Historically marginalized groups are often discouraged from serving in public office, denied their rights to free assembly and association, or subjected to hate speech and violence. Furthermore, individuals with intersecting marginalized identities experience compounded disempowerment. For example, ethnically marginalized persons with disabilities may remain poorly integrated into society due to their ethnicity as well as accessibility barriers. While half of the world’s population is under the age of 30, young people remain underrepresented in formal political institutions and processes. Young people increasingly feel excluded from important decisions that affect

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<sup>25</sup> Georgina Waylen, “Strengthening Women’s Agency Is Crucial to Underpinning Representative Institutions with Strong Foundations of Participation.” *Politics & Gender* 10(4) (2014), pp. 495-523.

their future, instead looking to civil society and social movements for solutions, rather than to their governments.<sup>26</sup>

Progress toward more inclusive societies requires transformational changes to political systems and their underlying power dynamics. DRG interventions must address the systems that keep those barriers in place across the entire political ecosystem, including those at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. Representative governance, from informal settlements to major urban centers, must create avenues for all residents to have a voice. USAID programming should promote the meaningful participation of [young people](#) within their communities, enhancing their skills, providing opportunities, and fostering healthy relationships so they may build on their collective leadership. Social inclusion programming should go beyond training and capacity-building of women and marginalized groups or legal reforms, because these measures alone cannot transform the imbalances in power between women and men or between elite actors and marginalized populations. As such, USAID needs to incorporate an understanding of how social norms, including gender norms, affect the promotion of democracy, human rights, and governance. Programs that include social and behavior change are among the initiatives that can shape how marginalized groups are perceived and relate to other societal groups.

## Principle 2:

### Advance locally led development and adaptive approaches.

*USAID will advance programming that is locally driven and thrives amid change and will collect and use evidence to tailor or adapt programs with local leaders and communities.*

Locally led development<sup>27</sup> is vital to resilient, democratic societies. USAID will consistently strive to localize democratic and political processes and empower local voices and local needs so that our presence supports local initiatives rather than replacing them. Ultimately, local actors are the ones who define and carry out real change. It is up to governments to reform legal frameworks, for example, or for political parties to improve candidate selection processes. Indigenous leaders often play a critical role in ensuring respect for collective rights to land, while many subnational governments creatively solve complex problems to meet the needs of their constituents. Our efforts will support domestic champions of democratic values across all sectors and invest in what is already working.

In line with the Agency's localization commitments, we will continue to increase direct funding to local actors and elevate local leadership throughout our programs and partnerships. USAID will also promote locally driven programming that responds to local knowledge and priorities while advancing democratic development. We acknowledge the need to consider power disparities that exist within local systems whereby groups led by and representing historically marginalized communities are often under-resourced and enjoy less space to organize and act. USAID will recognize its projects as investments supporting locally led efforts that will bear fruit over the medium and long term because local actors' consistent engagement over time is essential for achieving sustainable development. Consistent with the Local Capacity Strengthening Policy and accompanying implementation guidance, USAID will work in ways that place host-country actors in the lead, provide mentorship to continue their growth in democratic knowledge and skills, and enable them to originate and set the direction of DRG initiatives to ensure continuous adaptation to changing local contexts.

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26 [https://beseenbeheardcampaign.com/static/media/UN\\_REPORT\\_TBS\\_ACCESSIBLE.b891cbcfa84c773f78e5.pdf](https://beseenbeheardcampaign.com/static/media/UN_REPORT_TBS_ACCESSIBLE.b891cbcfa84c773f78e5.pdf).

27 Locally led development is the process in which local actors—encompassing individuals, communities, networks, organizations, private entities, and governments—set their own agendas, develop solutions, and bring the capacity, leadership, and resources to make those solutions a reality. USAID recognizes that local leadership and ownership are essential for fostering sustainable results across our development and humanitarian assistance work. See <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/what-locally-led-development-fact-sheet>.



USAID will emphasize the development of problem-solving processes rather than identifying particular solutions for specific problems. Increasing our effectiveness also requires incorporating best-fit and contextualized evidence into program design and implementation decisions. Success is dependent more on appropriate tools and approaches defined by and tailored for the local context, than on the selection of seemingly “correct” tools.<sup>28</sup>

### Principle 3: Respond with agility and creativity to crises undermining democracy and opportunities to advance democracy.

*USAID will respond rapidly and decisively to opportunities and setbacks, embracing creativity, agility, and adaptation to respond to windows of opportunity for reform as well as cases of democratic backsliding.*

The dynamic and often contested nature of DRG work requires that USAID operate with agility, responding quickly and creatively to both setbacks and windows of opportunity. USAID must intentionally lay the groundwork, planning for different contingencies, strengthening relationships with a diverse set of frontline actors, and establishing surge capabilities so we are prepared to capitalize on transformational moments when they arrive. In anticipation of openings and reversals, USAID will continue to cultivate strong connections and networks with and among diverse democratic stakeholders to foster trust and conduct continuous political analysis so that we are more prepared to identify and respond to unanticipated needs.

Responding effectively to changing circumstances requires flexible programming, including rapid-response modalities to deliver support. As such, USAID will embrace responsible risk-taking in line with the Agency’s [Risk Appetite Statement](#), as well as innovation, creativity, and flexibility. We will also regularly measure our impact, identify areas for improvement, and make mid-course corrections when necessary.

When opportunity or crisis strikes, we will mobilize resources, technical expertise, political support, and strategic communications from across the U.S. government and our partners, pooling our collective capabilities to achieve more sustainable outcomes. We will leverage and triangulate timely information with deep knowledge of local systems and power dynamics to make decisions that maximize impact. By collaborating with stakeholders from various sectors, we will build broad coalitions and policy consensus to navigate change effectively and enable responsiveness in key moments. USAID also recognizes that governments sometimes curtail democratic freedoms when confronting war, natural disasters, pandemics, and other emergencies, so USAID will focus on preserving

<sup>28</sup> “Best fit” is a contingent approach to using evidence, as opposed to a universal “best practice” approach, and is appropriate to dynamic contexts.

transparency, accountability, checks and balances, and respect for fundamental freedoms in these key moments.

## Principle 4:

### Mainstream prevention and protection for frontline democratic actors.

*USAID will assess, adapt, and embed, as appropriate, measures to evaluate risk prevention, mitigation, and response into its programming, policy, and technical approaches to protect democracy champions.*

USAID's efforts to safeguard democracy and human rights defenders are central to American values and U.S. foreign policy goals that promote and protect human rights and strive to renew and strengthen democracy worldwide. Closing civic and political spaces, transnational repression, cyber attacks, and the use of laws and legal systems to repress human rights defenders, civil society organizations, labor unions, government reformers, journalists, scholars, students, religious leaders, and other democracy defenders have increased the need to protect those facing risks to their lives and well-being for upholding democratic values. The threats come in many forms, including physical, digital, legal, and psychological. Therefore, through our programming, presence, and policy engagement, USAID, alongside local and international partners, will take more deliberate steps to preserve and enhance civic space and defend the defenders. Such vigilance is especially important to manage the potential for backlash from authoritarian and kleptocratic actors to newly empowered populations or those pushing for reforms that threaten entrenched interests.

To help democracy defenders sustain their work in the face of conflict and threats to civic space, we must offer flexible and accessible funding, prioritize risk analysis and planning, and mobilize new tools such as those that offer legal defense to journalists, flag impending risk of closing space, or allow activists to access the internet and communicate safely. USAID programming should include explicit objectives to support frontline democratic actors and embed measures to prevent, mitigate, and respond to the dangers implementing partners and project participants face. Such support could include scenario planning, legal assistance, physical and digital security training, psychosocial support and trauma counseling, and relocation services for democratic actors forced out of their place of work or origin due to closing civic space.

Underlying our efforts is an understanding that partnering with USAID in closed and closing spaces comes with substantial risk and requires a heightened commitment to provide psychosocial support for those experiencing attacks, threats, and intimidation. USAID DRG programming will integrate mental health resilience,<sup>29</sup> use trauma-informed approaches, and give due consideration to the safety, security, well-being, and mental health of USAID's local Mission staff, implementing partners, and project participants. More programs should develop and deploy online and offline self-care education and tools to support local actors as they engage in the hard, and often perilous, work of building democratic societies.

Prevention, mitigation, and response measures are essential for long-term democratic development in partner countries. USAID will cultivate networks locally, regionally, and globally to strengthen legal, physical, and digital prevention and protection measures, including against transnational repression, to enable democracy defenders to solve problems, adapt, and withstand attacks. USAID will continue to back local partners and reformers while investing in approaches that strengthen institutional preparedness and response and expand protection.

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<sup>29</sup> Resilience in mental health is the adaptive process by which individuals and organizations build systems of protective factors in a developmental fashion to promote well-being and strength despite conditions of risk and adversity.

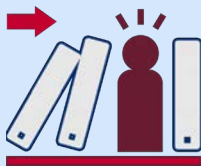
# LEARNING

USAID remains committed to using and generating evidence to improve DRG assistance. This includes better understanding both common and context-specific challenges to DRG, testing and refining our approaches, strategically targeting our efforts, and applying cost-effectiveness analysis. DRG programs regularly intervene in complex systems. As such, USAID embraces multiple approaches, methods, and tools for learning and is committed to facilitating learning with and by a wide range of stakeholders in democratic development. This includes prioritizing locally generated evidence and knowledge and cooperating with academic and other knowledge-producing institutions to identify high-impact and cost-effective interventions. Learning approaches must examine interactions within a given context to enable findings to be better applied in other contexts. Tailoring monitoring, evaluation, and learning is essential to help program designers and implementers use data and evidence to collaborate, learn, and adapt. USAID will also continue to generate rigorous evidence to fill knowledge gaps, distill ever-increasing learning and evidence products into usable formats, broadly disseminate its learning, and actively encourage its utilization. Through these efforts, we will continuously review and rethink our approaches to gain insight into what has worked and why, adapt and improve what has promise, and innovate and iterate.

## USAID will:



**Align its investments in learning with new and emerging DRG topics and fill critical gaps in knowledge.** Emerging focal areas for DRG work, including, for example, information integrity, supporting efforts to make decisions around climate action more accountable to citizens and communities, and transnational corruption, require accompanying investment in learning. As new trends emerge and contexts evolve, additional learning is required to develop cutting-edge approaches and address new threats and opportunities for democratic development.



**Move learning beyond “what works” to “why it works” and “for whom.”** In addition to asking if a DRG intervention works across our programming, we will seek to understand why an intervention works or does not work in a particular context. Moreover, we will explore if and how our interventions affect various groups differently and why. In doing so, USAID will identify patterns that will improve our ability to transfer learning from one intervention to another and adapt it to the local context.



**Learn about contributions to democratic resilience over time, from all development sectors.** There are gaps in our understanding of democratic resilience including which investments across sectors translate over time into a stronger democracy. Such learning demands a shift in our focus to more nuanced notions of progress, a longer time horizon, and greater attention to outcomes, such as shifts in norms and culture, that are less visible but equally important.



# REQUIREMENTS

To fulfill Pivot 1, this policy requires the establishment of a democracy review process. The goal of this review is to examine how USAID can adapt or change its programming and presence in autocratic, kleptocratic, or backsliding countries to better promote accountable and responsive states, active citizens, and rights-respecting governments, businesses, and societies; prevent unintended harm to DRG objectives; and improve outcomes in all development sectors. The DRG Bureau, in collaboration with other Bureaus or Independent Offices (B/IOs) and Operating Units, will develop the methodology for conducting democracy reviews and guidance for operationalizing this process. This requirement will align with relevant legal and ADS requirements and procedures as well as Agency priorities and policies; set clear objectives, scope, and parameters; and seek to minimize any potential burden associated with its operationalization. The Agency will pilot the democracy review process in five countries, preferably one country per region, within one year of this policy's release.

The reviews will employ a methodology that uses a set of analytical questions to understand the impact of USAID assistance on the political environment and vice versa. The methodology will establish criteria for selecting countries for democracy reviews, with a focus on autocratic, kleptocratic, or significantly backsliding countries with sizable assistance portfolios. Democracy reviews will put forth country-specific recommendations for how to adapt USAID's portfolio and development diplomacy to enhance our impact on development and democratic progress.

# CONCLUSION

This policy reaffirms and renews USAID's commitment to democratic governance and human rights by outlining approaches for enhancing the effectiveness of the United States' support for democratic development. The policy's four pivots and four principles aim to deepen the impact of U.S. assistance and respond to evolving trends. The DRG Bureau will develop an accompanying implementation plan, which describes in detail the roles, responsibilities, and actions necessary for the policy's operationalization, including conducting the democracy reviews described in the Requirements section above. The policy also serves as a foundation for advocating for adequate and strategically allocated resources to preserve USAID's role as a global leader in promoting DRG.





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