

Unclassified

English - Or. English

12 December 2025

**DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION DIRECTORATE
DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE COMMITTEE**

DAC Network on Governance

Key Considerations When Delivering Aid to Different Regime Types

This policy synopsis details the policy dilemmas and potential policy and programmatic responses that could be adopted by ODA. It highlights core challenges and policy options for DAC members, as distilled from 10 country cases. The findings of this report contribute to the workstream on “DAC engagement in politically constrained environments”.

This research was carried out as part of GovNet’s PWB 2023-2024 and under the supervision and guidance of Catherine Anderson and Marc de Tollenaere. The report was jointly authored by Nic Cheeseman, Marcel Dirsus and David Landry.

The document [DCD/DAC/GOVNET(2025)7] was circulated to GovNet members for APPROVAL via the written procedure.

No objections were expressed by the 09 October’s deadline; the report is therefore considered approved, issued as FINAL, and declassified.

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JT03578502

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Executive Summary

This report examines how DAC members respond to political change, whether democratic or authoritarian, to pursue key developmental and governance goals. It builds on the OECD's "Official Development Assistance by regime context" report of 2022,¹ which documented an increase in the proportion of official development assistance (ODA) being allocated to authoritarian countries in the period of 2010 to 2019 and concluded that "regime type does not appear to weigh heavily on ODA allocation decisions" (OECD 2022: 9). To better understand this finding and contextualise it, in-depth research was conducted on how DAC members track, understand and respond to different kinds of political change.

The report finds that DAC members are acutely aware of changes in political context and how it impacts their operations. While responses vary between DAC members based on priorities, internal structures and historical relationships with partner countries, donors do adjust their approaches when faced with a shifting political landscape.. There are significant variations in how the responses of DAC members to political change play out, which in turn shapes how effectively donors foster democracy and development. The report highlights key policy trade-offs that DAC members face in these contexts and in an increasingly complex and challenging world and weighs the pros and cons of different responses as well as some of the challenges faced by donors, including:

- **The global context.** Operating in an increasingly multi-polar world marked by the growing geo-political influence of non-DAC donors and by the existence of an increasing number of authoritarian states more broadly, has generated new challenges. In some cases, DAC members reported feeling more pressure to sacrifice democracy support to retain political influence than in the recent past.
- **Shifting priorities.** A number of DAC members increasingly focus on "trade not aid". In turn, this has led to a broader shift in terms of needing to justify aid and aid budgets as being in a country's own self-interest, which has given greater prominence to balancing economic interests with the reputational risks of engaging with authoritarian regimes.
- **The "re-humanitarianisation" of aid.** An increasing proportion of aid disbursements take the form of humanitarian aid. This is in part due to rising need, due to the crises and conflicts generated by authoritarian regimes. It may also, however, reflect the belief of some donors that humanitarian aid is a relatively apolitical and hence less risky means of addressing developmental and humanitarian needs in uncooperative contexts.
- **Adaptation.** Understanding how to effectively adapt development and democracy programming to remain effective in more challenging political contexts, including by working in countries exposed to high or extreme fragility with less cooperative governments.
- **Coordination.** The growing challenge of coordinating effective international responses, both between DAC members, within the broader international community and with multilateral institutions such as International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This is particularly significant in countries where autocratisation had led to the suspension of budget support—a key arena for donor coordination—and thus reduced the leverage of DAC members.

This report addresses how DAC members can enhance ODA effectiveness, before major political changes occur by:

- **Strengthening democratic resilience during “good times”.** Focusing democracy support on investments designed to build resilience to authoritarian threats, such as measures designed to further institutionalise democratic checks and balances and make it harder to change key constitutional provisions on issues such as judicial independence and presidential term-limits, could assist to galvanise democratic resilience.
- **Sharing evidence on how to build more effective responses.** While DAC members have forums for knowledge sharing on democracy support and development in more authoritarian contexts concerns about confidentiality and safety limit cross-donor learning. As a result, there is a risk that the democracy support community is innovating slower than the growing network of authoritarian states.

The report explores how different political contexts shape development and democracy support, focusing on the level of democracy or authoritarianism, the degree of state capacity and the pathways of democratic decline. Three main types of political change are highlighted in the report, starting with gradual democratic decline, followed by authoritarian and rapidly autocratising states and finally windows of democratic opportunity.

Gradual democratic decline. Gradual democratic erosion tends to receive less attention than military or constitutional coups, as it unfolds over time through institutional weakening and legal changes that are not always visible which can make it more difficult to track and respond to the problem. One of the challenges this generates for donors is knowing exactly how far a process of democratic erosion is likely to go, which processes are most problematic in terms of entrenching new forms of authoritarian rule and how and when to respond.

DAC members tend to remain engaged while seeking ways to reduce the risk that aid funds are diverted or subverted by shifting aid modalities and allocating more ODA through civil society groups. But donors’ ability to do so is constrained by a second challenge – i.e. governments countering and undermining the impact of these strategies, often through restrictive NGO laws or co-opting civil society.

The report reflects on these challenges and offers some preliminary suggestions. While there are a wide range of indicators of democratic erosion that are worth tracing, institutional changes such as anti-NGO legislation and the removal of presidential term limits are critical junctures during which donors can respond for maximum impact. In that vein, there is evidence that funding a wider range of organisations, including apolitical organisations and business groups, can create a stronger domestic coalition against the introduction of anti-NGO legislation.

Authoritarian and rapidly autocratising states. Although entrenched authoritarian and rapidly autocratising governments present distinct challenges, they share common dilemmas for DAC member engagement. When authoritarian ruptures like military coups occur, donors often initially disengage while expressing support for democracy. However, they frequently resume relations when juntas propose election timelines—sometimes despite weak commitments to democratic transition.

This tends to be motivated by development goals, limited confidence that donors could effectively support democratic initiatives in difficult contexts, perceptions that new authoritarian governments might be efficient development partners and the fear of losing strategic ground to other actors.

This pragmatic response allows continued development work but carries significant risks: First, development gains secured under authoritarian rule are vulnerable to future political shocks. Second, legitimising a junta might encourage further coups and expose DAC members to accusations of inconsistency or hypocrisy when they attempt to support democracy elsewhere.

In entrenched authoritarian contexts, donors often remain in a “holding pattern” in which their capacity to effect change is tightly circumscribed. Under these conditions DAC members often work on areas prioritised by the hosting government, while embedding participatory elements. In some contexts, donors work closely with authoritarian governments that are effective development partners, thus sacrificing support for democracy for other interests. However, they often do so in the hope of investing in projects that will improve long-term democratic prospects.

The examples in the report highlight three key points for DAC members:

- **Do no harm:** Considering the full impact of activities on democracy, both in recipient countries themselves but also more broadly;
- **Leverage development for democracy:** Recognise that aid often strengthens the recipient regime’s structure. Development aid can foster the building blocks of democracy when designed strategically;
- **Innovate and adapt:** The importance of innovating and adapting to ensure that development aid has spillover benefits for democracy is highlighted throughout the report. Given that working in authoritarian countries is the norm, deepening the understandings of how broader development investments can have democratising effects – and when they do not – is a key priority.

In this vein, the report discusses three adaptation strategies for donors – appeasement, replacement and resistance – and their strengths and weaknesses. Drawing on recent OECD research and evidence gleaned from interviewees, it concludes that only sustained efforts aimed at fostering inclusive development carried out with a democratic theory of change are likely to simultaneously strengthen democracy and development.

Democratic windows of opportunity. When democratic openings emerge, donors generally increase ODA with a focus on democratic institutions and civil society. This is most effective when DAC members maintain prior engagement which enables them to better understand the local context and to scale-up their activities quickly. This, in turn, demonstrates the importance of remaining engaged even in difficult contexts.

DAC members face distinctive challenges during democratic openings due to the rapid influx of funds and, in some cases, of new donors, which can exacerbate coordination challenges. Interviewees also highlighted the risk of DAC members assuming that transitions were “complete” when democracy was still fragile. Therefore, it is critical to ensure that funding is channelled to the projects most likely to boost long-term democratic resilience.

Overview

	TYPICAL RESPONSES	CHALLENGES	KEY CONSIDERATIONS
DEMOCRATIC OPENING Armenia 2018 - present Ecuador 2017 - present Georgia 2003 - present Tunisia 2011 - 2020	 Significant increase of ODA  Increased funding through government	▶ Greater funding for government has implications for civil society ▶ Risk of overlooking deeper barriers to change ▶ Risk of moving on too quickly when gains remain vulnerable	▶ Realising that windows close quickly ▶ Differentiating institutional and personnel change ▶ Watch for CSO co-optation and support those that stay independent from the government
GRADUAL DEMOCRATIC EROSION Bangladesh 2009 - 2024 Ecuador 2007 - 2017 India 2014 - present Tunisia 2020 - present	 No immediate major changes  Decline in budget support; Increased funding through NGOs	▶ Knowing when to intervene in longer-term processes ▶ Galvanising action in absence of obvious "red lines" ▶ Risk that shifting funds to NGOs triggers backlash	▶ Shift into less explicitly pro-democratic areas or "political" issues ▶ Identifying factors contributing to erosion ▶ Demonstrate the value of civil society to partner government to prevent a "them" vs "us" mentality
RAPID AUTHORITARIAN RUPTURES Burkina Faso 2012 - present Mali 2012 - present	 Initial decrease; often quick rebound  Suspension of budget support; Increased funding through NGOs	▶ Assessing new government's commitment to reform ▶ Risk of mistiming "normalisation" with the government ▶ Risk of being seen to legitimise military interventions	▶ Identifying likely challenges to return to democracy ▶ Being consistent while adapting to local context ▶ Consider concentration on core development goals such as poverty alleviation and providing core services
ENTRENCHED AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES Cambodia 2017 - present Nicaragua 2003 - present	 No major changes unless significant violence  Shift to NGOs stymied, leading to higher share through government & multilaterals	▶ Threats to staff, local partners, and civil society ▶ Limited linkage with and leverage over the government ▶ Risk that political crisis undermines development gains	▶ Understanding the importance of doing no harm ▶ Doing development in a way that fosters democracy ▶ Focus on technical areas of collaboration with government as entry to prevent further democratic decline

1. Introduction

In 2022, in the face of 20 years of rising authoritarianism and political instability around the world, the OECD published its “Official Development Assistance by regime context” report. This publication reviewed trends in democracy levels and aid flows between 2010 and 2019 and asked how ODA was responding to political changes around the world. In addition to showing that the proportion of ODA going to countries classified as authoritarian states had increased significantly, the report concluded that “regime type does not appear to weigh heavily on ODA allocation decisions” (OECD 2022: 9). In turn, this finding raised important questions about how international donors track, understand and respond to political change. Drawing on a large-scale follow-up study of ten countries, this report deepens the understanding of the relationship between foreign aid and regime type. It elucidates on the initial report’s findings and sheds light on how DAC members respond to changes in the political context of aid recipients, such as authoritarian ruptures and new democratic openings. In particular, it assesses the extent to which DAC members’ strategies and approaches enable them to strengthen democracy – or reduce the extent of autocratisation – and meet core development goals.

To provide nuanced answers to these questions, in-depth research was conducted in ten countries: Armenia, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Ecuador, Georgia, India, Mali, Nicaragua and Tunisia. The research combined analysis of ODA data with more than 50 interviews with representatives of DAC members (see Annex 1 for a full discussion of the research approach). The country cases were selected because they have experienced different levels of autocratisation, democratisation or oscillation between the two and represent four of the world regions that donors view as critical: Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. In each country, the research was guided by five main questions, which were discussed at length with interviewees:

- How do DAC members measure and track political change?
- What strategies do DAC members use – in terms of aid levels, focus areas and modalities – to respond to democratic erosion/openings?
- What strategies do donors use to adapt programming so that they can continue supporting development in the context of growing authoritarianism?
- To what extent (if at all) does supporting development in authoritarian contexts require trading-off with supporting democracy?
- What lessons can we learn from these experiences?

This report finds that DAC members are acutely aware of changes in political context and how it impacts their operations. While there is considerable variation between DAC members based on their priorities, internal structure and historical relationship with the recipient country, the report finds that donors do adjust their approach when the political landscape in a country shifts. However, there are significant variations in how this plays out, depending on the nature of political change. Interviewees often stated that they were unsure about how to best try and support development and democracy when working with uncooperative governments. These findings and the conclusions of this report more broadly, therefore further nuance the conclusions of the “Official Development Assistance by regime context” report in important ways. They also raise questions about the kinds of peer learning and guidance that may benefit DAC members and how to overcome long-

standing challenges such as cross-donor coordination and information sharing. In addition, the report highlights the main policy trade-offs that DAC members face in an increasingly complex and challenging world and weighs up the pros and cons of different responses.

When countries experience democratic openings, as has happened at various points in Armenia, Ecuador, Georgia and Tunisia, donors typically increase foreign aid to support reform, invest in democratic institutions like the legislature and judiciary and seek to strengthen civil society. In these cases, DAC members view democracy and development as mutually reinforcing, investing in both without facing a trade-off between the two. In cases such as Tunisia, the need to process and allocate large budget increases may generate new challenges related to coordination and absorption capacity, but there is no question that a number of DAC members sought to “step up to the plate”.

Responses to democratic backsliding are more complex, however. Donors approach gradual democratic erosion (a slow decline in democratic quality) and rapid authoritarian shifts, such as coups, differently. In both scenarios, they generally curtail or significantly reduce less restricted forms of aid, such as budget support and channel an increasing proportion of funds through non-state organisations. These actions tend to be swift and decisive in response to coups, as seen in Burkina Faso and Mali. In contrast, gradual democratic erosion, as in Bangladesh, India and Tunisia elicits less consistent responses. Donors find it challenging to dramatically shift allocation strategies without a clear “trigger event”, making it more difficult to coordinate effective responses.

Moreover, while there is often a strong reaction to rapid autocratisation initially, in the medium-term continuity often emerges. Despite initial cuts in aid following the first coup in Burkina Faso, for example, funding levels soon returned to pre-coup levels. This reflects a tendency toward the “normalisation” of relations with authoritarian governments, as donors adapt their approaches to align more tightly with government priorities in constrained environments.² The situation is more complicated with entrenched autocracies, especially in cases where high levels of political violence lead donors to be more critical, but there are also examples of donors engaging in similar practices with countries in this category such as Cambodia. In addition to the desire to meet development goals, donors have a number of motivations for “normalisation”. Some reflect a concern for democracy, including the belief that supporting the provision of services such as education creates democratic building blocks for the future. In some cases, however, donor representatives explicitly recognised that other imperatives had been pursued at the expense of sustaining democracy. Such decisions were typically motivated by three main factors: limited confidence that donors can effectively support democratic initiatives in difficult contexts, perceptions that new authoritarian governments would be efficient development partners and the fear of losing strategic ground to China and Russia.

This report is divided into five sections, organised around the choices that donors face at different stages of political change and their implications. The first section explores the challenges that DAC members face in terms of responding effectively to political change, with a particular focus on growing geo-political competition and the importance of coordinating both within the donor community and between donors and international financial institutions. The second section outlines different ways in which political context may impact the prospects for supporting democracy and development and the kinds of

training needs this creates for DAC representatives. The next three sections consider the challenges and opportunities presented by specific types of political change: gradual democratic erosion, fully authoritarian and rapidly autocratising contexts and windows of democratic opportunity. In each section, the report avoids prescriptive recommendations in favour of laying out the menu of options available to donors and assessing their potential impacts based on the evidence provided by interviewees themselves. The final section highlights key questions that currently lack sufficient data to answer, which would benefit, amongst others, from greater sharing of evidence and data between donors themselves.

2. Building the Foundations to Enhance ODA Responses to Development and Governance in Different Regime Contexts

The interviewees consistently stressed the importance of advance planning to ensure that DAC members are prepared for and can respond effectively to, periods of political change. At the same time, their comments reveal a set of common needs and concerns across a wide range of contexts, related to training and analysis. This section highlights these common themes, which include the implications of the growing influence of non-DAC donors and the potential trade-offs this can generate between supporting development and supporting democracy, the need to improve coordination between ODA members and international financial institutions, the importance of overcoming barriers to information and key lesson sharing between donors and the imperative of investing in democratic resilience when times are good. Taken together, these points reveal a number of ways in which DAC members can work together to strengthen their ability to be able to respond appropriately and productively to political change.

2.1 The implications of non-DAC aid and the growing geo-political influence of non-DAC donors

Over the last decade, non-DAC donors have increased their role in international development and partly as a result, have expanded their geo-strategic influence.³ This has gone hand-in-hand with countries such as China and Russia gaining an increasingly prominent profile in large parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America and providing an increasing amount of foreign aid. While a lot of attention has been placed on authoritarian global powers such as China, this process has included a large number of other actors, including Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates.

This development has created challenges for traditional donors on multiple levels. Most obviously, some of these new/emerging donors make it harder for DAC members to support democracy by providing governments alternative sources of political and economic assistance. At the same time, donor coordination becomes significantly more challenging when some of the most important donors are not DAC members and do not recognise the value of democracy.

The approach of DAC members is also shaped by the growing influence of authoritarian powers in other ways. In the cases of Mali and Burkina Faso, interviewees were clear that their approach to the new junta governments was shaped by the reality of their increasingly intimate diplomatic and security ties to Russia. DAC members who were particularly concerned about losing influence to Russia were therefore less critical and more accepting of post-coup administrations than they would otherwise have been. In some cases, it was clear that despite the prominent statements of many leaders of DAC member states, many representatives of DAC members would have preferred regional groups such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to have adopted a weaker stance with regards to the reintroduction of democratic rule. This was mainly because many DAC members felt that they could not undercut the position taken by regional actors, which in turn reduced their own flexibility in terms of how they engaged with post-coup governments.

This raises the question about how DAC members will balance security, development and democratic concerns moving forwards. This is not a new challenge, of course, but it is one that donors will be increasingly confronted with as authoritarian superpowers and middle-powers extend their influence globally. In thinking through these trade-offs, it is important that donors do not overestimate what authoritarian partners can offer or underestimate the impact that pulling their punches on democracy may have on their international reputation.

While Russia's disregard for human rights and international law means that it can provide forms of security support to authoritarian governments that more democratic and rule-bound states cannot, its overall aid budget is small. In this sense, Russia is well placed to respond to some of the most pressing concerns of authoritarian governments – such as their own survival – but less well placed to actually replace DAC members, despite some of the claims made by Russia. The level of trade and aid that China can offer is far more significant and is also likely to prove more sustainable. There are also a host of other countries that provide significant aid in certain sectors and regions and do not seek to strengthen democracy.

2.2 The “re-humanitarianisation” of aid?

Humanitarian aid is by far the quickest growing form of aid, especially to more authoritarian recipient states. According to the OECD's “Official Development Assistance by regime context (2010-2019)” report, since 2010 there has been a remarkable 1809% increase in the humanitarian aid received by “closed autocracies”. This raises two important questions. The first is whether this increase is solely driven by a greater number of humanitarian crises or may also reflect a deliberate decision by some DAC members to deploy humanitarian rather than development aid when operating in particularly challenging states because it represents an “apolitical” option and hence reduces a range of risks. The case studies underpinning this report suggest that at least in some cases, the latter consideration can also be a motivation, as DAC members seek to reduce the reputational risk of engaging with controversial regimes and also seek to manage the risk to their partners of engaging in more overtly “political” areas. If this is true more broadly then it has significant implications for the way that aid is distributed moving forwards, as the growing number of authoritarian states suggests that this trend is likely to remain and may even deepen.

This leads to the second question, which is to what extent providing aid through humanitarian rather than developmental channels hampers DAC members' ability to defend democracy and indeed to improve development conditions to prevent future crises. Given that political conditions cannot be attached to humanitarian aid and that by definition this aid is not intended to strengthen democratic systems and processes, if donors increasingly pursue humanitarian approaches rather than developmental ones it is likely to further constrain their ability to defend democracy. At the same time, the emphasis on humanitarian aid on alleviating immediate suffering means that this trend may also hamper DAC members' ability to foster the kinds of sustainable development that have spillover benefits for democratisation.

2.3 Improving coordination between DAC members and with international financial institutions

Interviewees were almost unanimous in concluding that a major challenge in responding to political change was that the donor community has become more fragmented over the last decade. The growing diversity of goals and strategies among donors and the lack of coordination in democracy programming, pose particular challenges. Furthermore, the UK leaving the European Union, rapidly changing foreign policy goals and the rise of increasingly wealthy and powerful non-DAC donors have exacerbated some of these pre-existing problems.

This has taken different forms in different contexts and appears to be particularly acute in authoritarian and autocratising contexts. Interviewees working in such countries pointed out that a common response to democratic decline is to halt budget support, which has the unintended consequence of curtailing one of the forums that has historically served to bring different donors together and hence helped coordinate donor activity.

It was also suggested that deteriorating relations between previously prominent donor countries and their host governments – such as the expulsion of French diplomats from some West African countries following the series of coups that have rocked the region in the past five years⁴ – had disrupted established patterns of engagement. French representatives, for example, had at times served as a galvanising force when it came to engagement with the region among members of the European Union, but they could no longer play that role.

A reduction in the number of DAC members working in some authoritarian contexts – for example due to the difficulty of cooperating effectively with host governments – was also cited as significant challenge. Although interviewees noted that it was sometimes easier to coordinate a smaller number of donors, they also pointed out that this trend contributed to the shifting balance of international influence in favour of undemocratic partners. In turn, this generated far greater challenges of international coordination. These risks are exacerbated when a number of donors choose or feel compelled to operate remotely, as in cases such as Yemen, which can increase the distance of DAC representatives both from their colleagues working for other organisations and from the reality on the ground. Taken

together, these processes mean that donor coordination is often most challenging in precisely those contexts where the need for it is most pressing.

Beyond coordination between bilateral donors, many of the interviewees felt that the large funds controlled by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank undercut the leverage of individual donors, whose financial footprint is typically much smaller. DAC members part-own international financial institutions as shareholders and so can influence how they spend their funds through their boards. Some interviewees pointed out, however, that the fact that these boards are global and that states such as China, Russia and Saudi Arabia are all represented on the IMF and World Bank boards, not only exacerbate coordination challenges, but also considerably reduce the prospects of reaching consensus on the need to give a higher priority to issues such as respect for human rights. This issue was particularly acute in contexts where donors were attempting to adopt a strong position against democratic erosion, while international organisations issued sanguine statements about the same governments. Interviewees from smaller donors often emphasised the fact that these sums dwarfed their own contributions, making it harder for their concerns to gain traction.

There was a high degree of consensus among interviewees that greater donor coordination was essential if DAC members were to be successful in either defending democracy or fostering development. A number of interviewees highlighted, for example, the decision of the United Nations and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) to pull out of a forest conservation project in Nicaragua 2024 on the basis of governance and human rights concerns⁵ as an example of donors and international financial institutions (IFIs) successfully responding to a common area of concern by building a more consistent and effective platform.

This suggests a strong and growing need to develop more structured, coherent and effective ways for DAC members to coordinate with each other and with World Bank and IMF representatives – thus creating fresh opportunities for more “joined-up thinking”. Achieving greater cohesion will be highly challenging, due to the diverse mandates and responsibilities of international organisations. Furthermore, politicising the work of these institutions could undermine their ability to achieve core goals such as economic stability and growth and to liaise with host governments on technical matters. Given this, a productive way forward, which could render development gains more sustainable in the longer-term, could be to enhance the systematic exchanges of information and perspectives between DAC members and international organisations across national boundaries.

2.4 The barriers to sharing evidence and lessons to build more effective responses

Interviewees indicated that they had worked hard to share key findings – for example on particular successful or unsuccessful strategies – with others within their organisation. In some cases, DAC members had set up working groups on democratic resilience or leveraged pre-existing regional forums to share lessons about how policies and approaches could be most effectively adapted to different challenges.

What was somewhat less common was examples of cross-regional evidence sharing with a focus on bringing together staff working in similar political contexts and lesson sharing between different donors and organisations. In many case donor discussion groups and forums are organised regionally rather than thematically. This may constrain more effective forms of lesson sharing. For example, representatives working in countries on the cusp of a new democratic opening – such as the election of a pro-reform leader – may learn more about how to respond to such an opportunity from colleagues who have experienced a similar process in a different region than those in a neighbouring country whose main experience is navigating coups or gradual democratic erosion.

In addition to the challenges of coordination highlighted above, interviewees suggested two further challenges to effective information sharing – both with other donors and with external organisations. First, many project evaluations are conducted internally and confidentially and in order to be shared widely, would need to be significantly redacted to protect partners’ information, which might reduce their usefulness. Second, sharing evidence of what works too broadly risks empowering authoritarian actors to intervene to shut down or subvert innovative programmes.

The threats of exposing partners to greater risk and of making life easier for autocrats by sharing evidence and lessons too broadly were especially salient for interviewees working in highly repressive contexts, where donor staff face surveillance and civil society leaders are subject to intimidation and harassment. In these contexts, interviewees were naturally particularly concerned about the potential risks of sharing findings beyond their organisation and felt they would need to conduct ex ante risk analyses before doing so.

While these considerations are difficult to overcome, there are strategies that could be used to facilitate more effective cross-donor conversations. Forums for structured oral exchanges of information between trusted DAC members behind closed doors, could be extended and deepened. Some DAC members are not always comfortable sharing evidence of strategies that were not successful and the DAC does not operate at country and regional level in the same way. This suggests the value of strengthening closed-door cross-donor country and thematic platforms to facilitate lesson learning and enable the sharing of frank assessments on the impact of different approaches without compromising confidentiality or putting partners at risk. This would allow successful projects to be adopted more broadly while reducing the risk of an authoritarian backlash.

2.5 Building democratic resilience during “good times”

The spread of autocratisation around the world over the last twenty years has resulted in a growing interest in democratic resilience among researchers and practitioners. The democratic struggles of multiple countries that had previously been viewed as “stable” or “consolidated” have been particularly impactful, leading to a growing recognition that democracy is always under threat and constantly needs to be fostered, reinforced and protected.

Democratic resilience is often defined as “the ability of a political system to withstand and adapt to challenges, threats and crises without compromising its core principles,

institutions, or processes”.⁶ A growing literature demonstrates that bolstering the ability of a political system to withstand threats may require a subtly different focus and hence different interventions than standard democracy promotion aid. This point was echoed by some of the interviewees, who had experienced a growing focus on democratic resilience first-hand but did not always understand what the concept referred to or the different approaches that might be required to strengthen it.

Classic democracy aid programmes often include projects to increase the proportion of women in political positions, enhance the quality of legislation produced by parliament, strengthen the coverage and reach of independent media and make elections more accessible by supporting electoral commissions to provide more accessible polling stations. While many of these programmes foster democratic resilience, a specific focus on insulating political systems from future threats might comprise a stronger emphasis on measures such as:

- institutionalising presidential term-limits;
- raising the thresholds needed to pass constitutional amendments, building public support for key democratic institutions;
- inclusive economic growth to expand the proportion of citizens and groups who feel they have a stake in supporting democratic institutions;
- enhancing judicial independence from the executive and enhancing the legitimacy of the justice system; and
- countering disinformation.

In other words, building resilience is likely to involve combining existing democracy aid practices – such as efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and civil society – with specific measures designed to improve resilience to authoritarian challenges and threats. The programmes that are most effective will be shaped by the specific threats that are the most plausible in a given country and the strengths and weaknesses of its political system. Simply put, there is no “one size fits all” response that would be appropriate in all contexts. What can be done consistently, however, is to systematically review political systems to document where they are most vulnerable to being dismantled and to design risk responses accordingly.

3. Understanding how political context matters

Responding effectively to political change is one of the most pressing and difficult challenges that DAC members face. Key issues include: How can DAC members best identify what change is occurring and its implications for democracy and development? How can donors most effectively operate in different political contexts? What are the issues that commonly undermine effective donor responses? What kinds of training and skills are required to undertake these tasks effectively? In order to begin to answer these questions, it was drawn on both the responses to the dozens of interviewees conducted with respondents benefiting from a wide range of experience and expertise and on the most relevant academic and practitioner guidance available today.

Recent research reveals a number of different ways to think about how political context shapes the potential for democracy and development. The critical point for building a strong foundation for effective ODA responses is to ensure that donor staff are aware of these relationships and have the tools and skills required to accurately assess the situations they face.

3.1 The pathway of autocratisation

Where a country is moving away from democracy it is valuable to think carefully about the different potential driving forces, as these have been shown to have specific implications both for defending democracy and protecting the groups and communities most at risk.

Work by Riedl,⁷ for example, highlights the distinction between threats from within the government, such as efforts by the executive to weaken checks and balances – often known as executive *aggrandisement* – and threats from the outside, such as a military coup or an autocratically-minded opposition leader. In the former, the main challenge would be to strengthen the independence of institutions like the judiciary and the legislature to safeguard them from hollowing out by government leaders. In the latter, more effective responses might focus on strengthening the existing political system, including the executive against malign outside forces.⁸

Such an approach can also provide insights about which groups may stand to benefit or lose from political change. The rise to power of far-right populist leaders, for example, has often led to a reduction in the rights enjoyed by women and LGBTQI+ communities.⁹ By contrast, instances of executive aggrandisement may not have a gendered impact, but tend to put the government on a collision course with civil society and independent media.

Interviewees were typically quick to identify the main threat to democracy or pathway of authoritarianism in their context and had often designed their approach with this in mind. A number of DAC representatives also recognised, however, that this had been often done after the fact and that earlier identification of key risks and possible pathways would have enabled a more effective response.

3.2 The level of state exposure to fragility

It has long been recognised that the capability of a state to perform its basic functions, such as collecting tax revenue, providing social services and maintaining order, has a profound impact on the likely impact of development aid. Fukuyama and a number of other scholars have stressed the significance of state capacity to economic development and stability.¹⁰ More capable states are better able to efficiently use aid and therefore tend to benefit most from the assistance that is provided. Meanwhile, assistance to less capable and more fragile contexts is at greater risk of being undermined by a range of unanticipated developments, ranging from mismanagement to insurgencies and natural disasters.

The OECD has already integrated aspects of this insight into its research and analysis, recognising six dimensions of fragility – security, environmental, human, societal,

economic and political – and producing the bi-annual States of Fragility report. The latest version of this report highlights the numerous complex challenges that the “age of crises” poses for donors working in contexts exposed to fragility in the world and points out that contexts exposed to fragility account for 25% of the world’s population but 72% of the world’s extreme poor.¹¹

Recent research suggests that state capacity also shapes the very process of autocratisation.¹² Democracies exposed to high or extreme fragility are more likely to lapse into authoritarianism than those in more capable states because governments find it harder to maintain law and order and sustain legitimacy. They are therefore more likely to experience coups, for example. Precisely because the state is particularly weak in such contexts, however, new authoritarian governments – such as the juntas that have recently seized power in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali – often struggle to assert their authority. By contrast, it is rarer for authoritarian leaders to gain control of a high-capacity state. However, when this happens, the resulting system is more likely to endure.¹³

Interviewees were consistently aware of the level of state fragility and capacity context, especially in high fragility settings, but tended to emphasise this much more with respect to the challenges of supporting development – the implications for democracy were not always as clearly identified.

3.3 The level of democracy and the “political settlement”

The latest cross-national data suggests that, on average, democracies enjoy better economic growth and deliver better public services to their citizens than dictatorships, though these results mask substantial variation.¹⁴ Democracies largely perform better overall because relatively few democracies perform very badly. Therefore, even if relatively few democracies achieve stellar results in a given year, the average performance of democracies is fairly high. The situation is very different when it comes to authoritarian states, where there is much greater variation. Some dictatorships perform exceptionally well but many more fail to effectively provide for their citizens.

This is not to suggest that authoritarian states may not have certain advantages when it comes to acting efficiently to drive rapid economic growth,¹⁵ but to note that many authoritarian states fail to do this, while also being more likely to suffer from corruption. Moreover, Rizio and Skali (2018) find that “growth under supposedly growth-positive autocrats does not significantly differ from previous realisations of growth, suggesting that even the infrequent growth-positive autocrats largely “ride the wave” of previous success.”¹⁶ It is also worth noting that, as Martinez demonstrates by comparing government-reported economic growth figures to nighttime satellite imagery data, authoritarian governments are vastly more likely to exaggerate their country’s economic performance.¹⁷

This point is particularly salient today, as there are more authoritarian states than ever before and interviewees working in various contexts revealed that they had expected authoritarian governments to be better development partners than they turned out to be. It is therefore particularly important to ensure that in-country DAC representatives and

development practitioners have been trained to evaluate when an authoritarian political system is most (or least) likely to deliver economic growth and public services.

Research on “developmental states”, as well as a more recent literature on political settlements, has emphasised the importance of looking beyond political regime type to consider how power is distributed, both within the regime and between the government and other economic, social and political actors.¹⁸ Authoritarian states are most likely to deliver development when they feature internal checks and balances to control corruption, when they can maintain political stability in the absence of democratic legitimacy and when they feature a high degree of discipline. When these conditions do not hold, authoritarian regimes are particularly vulnerable to inefficiency, waste and outright graft.¹⁹ Around the world today, the authoritarian political systems that fail to control corruption, deliver economic growth and meet their citizens’ expectations far outnumber those that do. Therefore, it is particularly important that DAC members understand the political system in which they are working and the implications this may have for the effective use of ODA.

As documented at greater length in Section 3, these lessons and in particular the question of how to distinguish between democratic and authoritarian regimes that might facilitate (or undermine) development, was an area in which many representatives of DAC members felt they were particularly lacking.

3.4 Training staff to work in different contexts

One area in which there was considerable consistency was in terms of how interviewees spoke about their training and their informational and knowledge needs. Most interviewees revealed they had received little systematic training in areas such as political economy analysis and more practically, on how to detect and counter democratic decline. This did not mean that people lacked relevant skills, education and awareness. Many of those interviewed had relevant degrees and had spent a considerable length of time working on related issues. What was less common, however, was for DAC members staff to have been trained in techniques such as “thinking and working politically” (TWP) and “Problem Driven Iterative Adaption” (PIDA). While many interviewees were clearly deploying similar kinds of “home grown” approaches in how they sought to analyse and address key barriers to change, few had taken part in dedicated and holistic training programmes designed to enable them to understand and operate in different political contexts.

This reflects broader research findings that demonstrates that, while terms such as TWP and PIDA have “entered the lexicon” following the creation of communities of practice around these issues, they have “yet to be mainstreamed into either traditional developmental assistance or democracy aid”.²⁰ According to Teskey,²¹ there are number of reasons for this, including resistant organisational cultures, time pressures and a lack of diffusion into sector-specific programmes. Similarly, a review of a decade of political economy analysis (PEA) conducted by the Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank also found that such an approach often requires the investment of greater resources and that even then PEA findings are not always implemented (Independent Evaluation Group, 2011).

Many donor staff have not received significant training in this area and so are unclear on the benefits of TWP and exactly how to deploy such approaches. This kind of approaches are based around three main pillars: “strong political analysis, insight and understanding; detailed appreciation of and response to, the local context; and flexibility and adaptability in program design and implementation”.²² This is especially relevant given the growing evidence that the adoption of these approaches can yield concrete benefits. For instance, in a literature review published in 2022, Aston argues that though adaptive management is not a universal solution, substantial evidence supports its value and that the evidence is compelling enough to warrant serious consideration by policymakers.²³

Moreover, in a number of the cases, the interviewees reflected that they had overlooked or underestimated the barriers to effective reform – such as the continued influence of established political elites in Tunisia or the likelihood that military juntas would foster exclusionary and dysfunctional forms of government in Mali and Burkina Faso. This may have been avoided with a stronger focus on understanding underlying power dynamics and especially the actors who can veto meaningful change.

Given the limited resources and time available to those working in-country, however, this situation is unlikely to change without clear leadership and strong initiative from the top. As Teskey puts it, to effect **a transformation in the adoption of TWP approaches, they would have to both be taught systematically and “incentivized by donors at the procurement and design stages, then enabled at delivery”**.²⁴

4. Key Considerations for ODA Responses in Different Political Contexts

As set out in Section 2, the initial research for this report selected cases based on five main political contexts. These included four main types of political change – democratic openings, gradual democratic erosion, rapid authoritarian ruptures and oscillation between democratisation and autocratisation – and one form of continuity, namely entrenched authoritarian regimes. To simplify the discussion and make it easier to highlight key themes, this section focuses on three main types of experience, starting with gradual democratic decline (Bangladesh and India, as well as Ecuador and Tunisia at certain points) and then moving to authoritarian and rapidly autocratising states (Burkina Faso, Mali, Cambodia and Nicaragua), and finally windows of democratic opportunity (Armenia and Georgia, as well as Ecuador and Tunisia at some points).

Each sub-section begins by highlighting common features of ODA responses in this kind of situation, before setting out the main trade-offs and questions that they raise and offering guidance on how these can most effectively be tackled.

4.1 Key considerations for ODA responses during periods of gradual democratic decline

Gradual democratic erosion tends to receive less public attention than military or constitutional coups. In part, that is because governments undermine democracy over an extended period of time in ways that are not always visible, which can make it more difficult to track, demonstrate and respond to the problem. In some cases, for example,

leaders change the law to confer more power on themselves, raising questions as to whether actions that undermine checks and balances might in some cases be legal and hence legitimate.

One of the challenges this generates for DAC members is knowing exactly how far a process of democratic erosion is likely to go, which processes are most problematic in terms of entrenching new forms of authoritarian rule and how and when to respond. In many cases, interviewees highlighted the absence of clear guidance regarding how and when to intervene, especially in a context in which existing democracy strengthening strategies had ceased to be effective. At the same time, the cases of Bangladesh and India reveal evidence of donors trading off support for democracy against other priorities such as pursuing development gains and geo-strategic influence. Partly as a result, while budget support is often reduced or removed, overall aid flows and collaboration with government ministries may be sustained – and in some cases increase. This is the type of political change in which continuity in donor engagement is most likely, especially in cases where the country has an impressive development record.

The recent collapse of Sheikh Hasina’s government – which had eroded democracy in Bangladesh for more than a decade – demonstrates the limitations of such strategies. On the one hand, the student-led uprising suggests that a significant part of Bangladeshi society was not satisfied with the government’s performance. On the other hand, being seen to cooperate with authoritarian governments may represent a risk to the reputations of DAC members, leading them to be blamed for helping an unpopular leader to stay in power and undermining their moral authority.

At a glance: DAC members responses to gradual democratic decline

- **Aid flows.** No clear trend; variation in level of both non-governance and governance aid.
- **Modalities.** General trend to reduce/move away from budget support, with an increasing proportion of aid being channelled through non-state actors, although this often is often curtailed by the introduction of anti-NGO legislation.
- **Areas.** Focus on more technical areas of collaboration with the government; supporting democratic institutions where feasible; shift into less explicitly pro-democratic areas or “political” issues such as education and climate change
- **Challenges.** Lack of donor influence in states with larger economies/where there is limited economic linkage and leverage; repression and/or co-optation of civil society; difficulty of identifying exactly when and how to intervene.

When discussing cases of gradual democratic erosion with DAC representatives, many interviewees felt that they lacked clear guidance on the best ways to respond. This includes issues such as the most effective strategies to respond to gradual democratic decline and the best time to deploy them. There was also a clear recognition that some classic donor responses to democratic backsliding, such as changing aid modalities to channel a greater share of resources through non-state actors, had the potential to backfire. This section considers the difficult choices that donors face when working in the context of slow democratic erosion and how to navigate them.

4.1.1 Factors to look out for in cases of gradual democratic decline

One of the main challenges DAC members face when responding to gradual democratic erosion is determining which factors may make a crucial difference to the resilience of a country's democracy. Does a certain government policy obviously cross a red line or make it significantly less likely that accountability institutions (i.e. parliament, independent oversight institutions, civil society) will be able to prevent further authoritarian decline? Or is it just another in a long line of policies that has given the government a slight advantage over its opponents and is not significant enough to merit a strong response? If donors do not respond at any point, what is there to prevent a constant slide towards authoritarian rule?

No two political systems work exactly the same way, but there are common factors to look out for in cases of gradual democratic erosion. These include, but aren't limited to: growing electoral manipulation, purges of the judiciary, an increase in formal and informal censorship of both traditional and social media, the passage of "anti-NGO" legislation by the government, efforts to circumvent legislative scrutiny such as curtailing debate, growing repression of citizens through both the state security forces and government-aligned groups and militias, and the removal of presidential term limits.

While these are all significant institutional changes are particularly significant because they represent a step-change in the capacity of the government to retain power in the absence of public support. The following developments are therefore particularly important to track and respond to, where feasible:

- The removal of presidential age- and term-limits, which can enable the incumbent to become a "president for life", a development that is typically associated with an increase in electoral manipulation.
- The introduction of anti-NGO legislation, which can starve civil society groups of funding and neuter critical voices, facilitating greater backsliding.
- Limited internet suspensions/throttling, especially around elections and elections and mass protests, which is often an indication that a government is considering a full shutdown to prevent effective opposition/civil society coordination.
- The removal/co-optation of the Anti-Corruption Commission, which is often a prelude to greater graft and misuse of state funds.
- Efforts to "pack" the courts and the electoral commission with government allies, which can undermine critical checks and balances and increase the risk of electoral manipulation.
- The closure of independent media and steps to increase regulation of the traditional media through government, which can undermine transparency and access to information.
- The introduction of cyber-security that are poorly drafted/include loopholes that increase the ability of the state to engage in unfounded acts of surveillance and censorship.

- The introduction of anti-terror legislation and similar laws that are poorly drafted/include loopholes that increase the ability of the security forces to target legitimate non-state actors on spurious grounds.

Critical moments in the introduction of such measures are therefore likely to be particularly significant turning points during which it is especially important for DAC members to try and coordinate effective responses. It is at these points that effective donor coordination, including harnessing a powerful combination of programmatic and diplomatic influence, can play deter changes that could represent a step change in terms of the balance between democracy and authoritarianism in a country.

4.1.2 The design of strategies for adapting to provide development in difficult contexts

Across the case studies, DAC members employ a wide range of strategies to adapt their programmes when faced with a difficult environment or an uncooperative government. These can be divided into three main categories: appeasement, replacement and resistance.

Appeasement strategies effectively involve increasingly funding development work that meets the priorities set out by the government, while trying to maintain support for poverty reduction initiatives. In a number of countries covered in this study this included continuing with investments in healthcare while funding government-approved climate change resilience schemes. Interviewees pointed out that these were usually areas that they normally support and that these projects were valuable because they often created opportunities to engage more positively with the government and in some cases also generated the space needed to pursue more risky strategies.

One of these more challenging responses is **replacement**, which involves identifying the gaps in government development plans and attempting to fill some of them, to the extent this is possible. Some interviewees stated that they had deliberately moved to focus on particular parts of the country and particular groups – such as women or certain economic classes or ethnic communities – that risked being “left behind”. This was sometimes difficult work because it often involved directing aid at areas or peoples who were not government supporters and this work was rarely advertised to avoid it being shut down – and for this reason no specific details are provided here.

The same is true of efforts at **resistance**, when DAC members fund activities that are designed to reverse or at least ameliorate some of the effects of government policies. These were much less common, but usually involved supporting initiatives that it was hoped would have the side effect of strengthening the economic position of a group adversely impacted by government policies. This might work, for example, by supporting projects that would increase demand for certain goods or items produced by groups or communities under particular economic strain, such as agricultural outputs and tools produced by cooperatives in historically marginalised areas. Again, these “hidden” goals were rarely advertised to avoid it being shut down – and for this reason no specific details are provided here.

In many cases, DAC members were implementing some combination of appeasement and replacement, depending on how tight the constraints were set by the government. Especially in more authoritarian contexts, interviews and a review of aid data suggests there tends to be more appeasement than replacement or resistance. This is perhaps an understandable response from DAC members who are concerned that if relations with the government deteriorate, they will be forced to leave, making the situation even worse for vulnerable communities. It is clearly true that simply pulling out of a country could cause significant harm to areas such as health and education, especially in the short-term.

These risks need to be balanced, however, against the prospect that designing development assistance to fit in with the approach of an authoritarian government may make it seem that DAC members are complicit in political systems that actually undermine some of their core principles. This is a particularly significant issue given that recent studies have found that autocratisation often results in a deterioration in conditions for women and ethnic and sexual minorities, both in terms of rights and legal standing and in terms of economic opportunities.

One way that some DAC members have attempted to offset this risk and to continue to support democracy in contexts in which official programmes are not feasible, is to incorporate aspects of inclusion and participation into development projects. This might include, for example, measures to strengthen citizen voice and accountability in the way that projects are designed and in how they are managed. Some interviewees expressed hope that these kinds of approaches could enable donors to continue to do transformative work even when shifting aid programmes to reflect government priorities. Others suggested, however, that the more participatory aspects of development projects were often the first to be sacrificed in the face of time or budget pressure and worried that there was a lack of evidence as to whether these approaches generated lasting or spill-over effects.

OECD's 2020 report entitled "Why does inclusion matter" reflects this concern,²⁵ emphasising the fact that there is no inherent or easy connection between development, inclusion and democracy. Partly as a result, it concludes that "international development actors can support inclusion more effectively through more politically aware ways of thinking and working", echoing a point made in Section 2. In response, GovNet has made a significant investment in recent years undertaking evidence-based policy research on the links between inclusive processes and inclusive development outcomes, so to inform the production of new OECD GovNet Guidance on '[Enabling Inclusive Governance](#)' (2024), which aims to enhance the potential impact of ODA support on this issue.

4.1.3 The tricky balance between supporting civil society and avoiding authoritarian backlash

One of the main strategies that donors utilise during episodes of autocratisation is to shift aid modalities, channelling an increasing proportion of funds through non-state actors. This typically results in a significant increase in the amount of funds channelled through non-state and in particular civil society actors. These changes are particularly noticeable following military coups but is also true of many cases of gradual democratic erosion. In the case of Ecuador, for example, DAC members came to rely heavily on NGOs during the Correa era and both donors and civil society representatives believed that this led to more

effective ways of working jointly and hence more effective assistance. A number of interviewees also noted, however, that shifting funding to civil society as a way to circumvent the state often had problematic consequences in the medium-term, not least encouraging the government to look for new ways to regulate civil society.

In many countries, for example, governments have introduced restrictive “anti-NGO” legislation in the wake of either a) strong civil society criticism of government leaders or policies or b) large increases in the volume of aid channelled to civil society groups by donors aiming to strengthen democracy.

This legislation often includes measures to limit the proportion of funding that NGOs can receive from abroad and tightly constrains their activities. Even in cases where an anti-NGO bill has not been introduced, governments often move to introduce other kinds of restrictive measures such as new reporting rules or to try and co-opt civil society groups - in some cases creating new government-aligned NGOs. Well documented instances of this phenomenon have taken place in Bangladesh and India, where significant increases in donor funding to civil society in response to gradual democratic erosion was followed by the imposition of “anti-NGO” laws restricting international NGO funding and in some cases empowering governments to closely monitor and control NGO activity.

It is not yet clear what the most effective strategy is for reducing this risk, but some interviewees suggested the need to conceptualise civil society as a bridge to government as well as a bulwark against government. Demonstrating the value of civil society to government can help to prevent the emergence of a “them” vs “us” mentality, while funding a wider range of organisations - including business groups and non-political organisations - can create a stronger domestic coalition against the introduction of anti-NGO legislation.

4.2 Key considerations for ODA responses in entrenched authoritarian and rapidly autocratising states

Cases of rapid democratic breakdown, such as coups and entrenched authoritarian regimes like Cambodia and Nicaragua present international donors with a different set of challenges. Donors mostly – but not always – respond to coups by cutting budget support (where it existed), shifting support to local governments and/or supporting decentralisation, channelling a greater share of funds through civil society and calling for a return to civilian rule. These decisions are often made by high-level officials, including ministers or even presidents and prime ministers and are therefore taken out of the hands of in-country representatives.

But once a commitment to a future civilian transition has been made, there is substantial variation in how donors engage with military juntas and the civilian administrations they set up. In many cases, DAC members proved willing to normalise relations after an unconstitutional transfer of power had taken place, even in contexts where progress towards civilian rule was limited. In most cases, this approach was motivated by a combination of frustration with the weaknesses of the previous system of government and a related perception that it may be more feasible to support development by working with the new authoritarian administration.

Geo-strategic considerations are also becoming increasingly prevalent, especially in countries that have strong ties with Russia and China. In such cases, DAC members

sometimes fear that insisting on democratic principles will strain relations with the government and hence result in a loss of influence to international rivals. In the cases of Burkina Faso and Mali, the approach taken by the international community was also heavily shaped by the Sahel region's ongoing security and humanitarian crises, which were widely perceived to present particularly severe challenges to both development and democracy.

At a glance: DAC member responses to rapidly autocratising states

- **Aid flows.** Typically decrease initially, but often rebound fairly quickly, including non-governance aid and to a lesser extent governance aid.
- **Modalities.** Suspension/cancellation of budget support; increasing proportion of aid channelled through non-state actors and in some cases local government; tendency towards normalisation once a timeline for a transition to civilian rule is established.
- **Areas.** Growing concentration on core development goals such as poverty alleviation and providing core services such as education and health; increased focus on elections and support to democratic institution when greater progress is made towards transition to civilian rule.
- **Challenges.** Tension between delivering development and promoting democratic renewal; sacrificing democracy under conditions of heightened geo-political competition.
- **Cases.** Burkina Faso, Mali.

The situation is somewhat different when it comes to countries that have been authoritarian for some time, although some of the challenges are repeated. In entrenched authoritarian contexts, a lack of momentum towards democracy, combined with government reluctance to countenance reform, can leave DAC members in a “holding position” in which their capacity to effect change is tightly circumscribed. This situation has at times brought donors into conflict with the government, for example around human rights abuses, straining relations – in some cases to breaking point – and resulting in the shrinking of the donor community. Under these conditions, as in Nicaragua, DAC members that remain engaged often feel compelled to stop working on overtly political projects, refocusing on cooperation in areas prioritised by the government, such as climate change, while designing them in ways that foster citizen inclusion and participation at the local level.

In other cases, relations with host governments have been more cordial, either because they refrain from crossing “red lines” such as using high-profile political violence, are viewed to be effective development partners or due to similar geo-strategic concerns to those notes above. In conjunction with rising aid flows from non-DAC donors, support from China and Russia and the ability of governments to secure sizable financial support from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, this has facilitated an environment in which it is easier for authoritarian governments to survive. While there are some cases in which authoritarian governments are not recognised by the boards of the IMF and World Bank, the vast majority are members, including a number of states that routinely commit human rights abuses.

The approach of DAC members in these kinds of political context therefore raise two types of considerations and questions that interviewees often brought up themselves. The first relates to the developmental impact of donor engagement and how sustainable it is. Key issues in this regard include balancing the gains from adjusting development plans to align

with the priorities of authoritarian governments in order to be able to continue operating against the risk that may become harder to encourage the fair distribution of these gains, for example between different parts of the country or between men and women. This is a particularly significant issue given that recent studies have found that autocratisation often results in a deterioration in women's rights, while a large body of research has concluded that authoritarian governments often preside over growing disparities in development between different communities and regions due to the tendency to channel state resources to allied groups.

At a glance: DAC members responses to entrenched authoritarian states

- **Aid flows.** No clear trend, but aid flows tend to reduce when overt political violence is deployed by the government.
- **Modalities.** Shift modalities to channel funding through NGOs stymied by repression and co-optation, leading to an increase in the share of funds channelled through the government and in some cases to channelling funds through multilateral institutions to reduce risk.
- **Areas.** Focus on more technical areas of collaboration with the government; working in less overtly “political” areas such as climate change and poverty reduction; supporting historically marginalized groups; preventing further democratic decline.
- **Challenges.** Lack of influence in states with larger economies/limited economic linkage and leverage; repression and/or co-optation of civil society; risks to donor staff and partners.

The potential for instability and civil conflict in authoritarian contexts - as demonstrated recently in the very different cases of Bangladesh and Ethiopia - also raises the question of how to balance the potential for short-term gains against the long-term risk that such investments may not prove to be sustainable. Historically the most successful developmental states, such as South Korea and Taiwan, have typically consolidated their gains by evolving more inclusive political systems. Given this, it is important for DAC members to ask themselves whether opportunities exist to support more open and inclusive institutions in the medium to long-term. It is not clear that this lesson is always kept in mind when donors engage in more exclusionary authoritarian systems where the prospects for stability and evolving more inclusive forms of politics are much more limited, however. Interviewees in coup-affected countries also stated that in hindsight they had been overly optimistic about the prospects that new authoritarian governments would deliver on their promises and be more efficient development partners.

A second set of considerations arise with regards to the political consequences of DAC member engagement. These issues include balancing the potential that investing in development goals can lay the foundations democratic processes against the risk that development programmes serve to further entrench authoritarian regimes in power. A key related question is whether designing development projects to foster citizen inclusion and participation at the local level has long lasting effects on the citizens concerned and broader impacts in terms of improving the prospects for future democratisation. This is particularly significant given that the 2020 OECD report on inclusion mentioned earlier concluded that although “more open and inclusive states and societies tend to be more prosperous, effective and resilient”, “there is no automatic causal relationship between inclusion as process and inclusion as outcome in either direction”.²⁶ This section discusses these

considerations, highlighting the importance of adopting a critical approach to the prospects for generating sustainable and inclusive development in authoritarian contexts.

4.2.1 Likely challenges in cases of rapid autocratisation

When an authoritarian rupture such as a military coup occurs, the public impact is often so large that immediate decisions are escalated to a higher level, where political-decision makers determine what is to be done. They often decide to disengage to distance themselves from the new regime. That practical disengagement tends to be coupled with strong rhetoric around the importance of democracy. But as time goes on and the military junta maintains power, donors are forced into another decision: Do they normalise relations even if the government shows no inclination to democratise? After time passes – typically 6-12 months – many, though not all, donors revert to normalisation.

When making that decision, donors face a number of difficult trade-offs. The most significant argument in favour of re-engagement tends to be the prospect of development gains, especially if the previous government was authoritarian as well. When the Compaoré government was overthrown in Burkina Faso, for example, many donors attempted to maintain or even expand development programming, without many changes in aid modalities. They did so because they assumed that the new government would be more apt to deliver results. In some cases, donors felt so strongly about cooperating with coup regimes that their position was “softer” than that of regional organisations like ECOWAS. A second factor that often plays into this consideration is the perception that the new authoritarian regime has considerable public support and legitimacy. Some of the recent coups, for example, were met with public celebrations in capital cities, reflecting the fact that they replaced civilian governments that had undermined their own legitimacy.²⁷

In making these decisions, donors should consider not just the likelihood of development success but also the broader problems it may engender. Although a small number of military governments have delivered sustained economic growth, juntas most often fail to deliver inclusive and lasting development. One reason for this is that they do not allow the kind of representative and inclusive politics that Acemoglu and Robinson – among others – have shown foregrounds citizens’ concerns and desires.²⁸ Another is that, as with some of the new military regimes that have taken power in Sudan and West Africa recently, juntas often refuse to genuinely transfer power to civilian hands, adopting increasingly repressive and exclusionary strategies to retain political control in the midst of growing popular frustration. Furthermore, providing legitimacy to a junta risks creating the impression that there are few downsides to taking power through force, encouraging further coups not only in the country itself, but also in the wider region. It may also bring donors into conflict with civil society groups and citizens they are supposed to be aiding, especially as the popularity of military leaders often declines rapidly when it becomes clear they are unwilling to relinquish power and do not have the answers to security and development challenges.

4.2.2 Balancing the advantages of staying engaged and the risk of entrenching authoritarian governments

One of the most challenging questions facing DAC members in cases where the government is authoritarian and cooperation becomes challenging for both development and democracy is whether to stay engaged. It is clear that there are benefits to remaining engaged in terms of being able to respond quickly to future windows of democratic opportunity. In countries like Armenia, Ecuador and Tunisia, democratic openings happened quickly and unexpectedly. To take advantage of these opportunities, it was important that DAC members could react quickly. This was possible because many DAC members had maintained a presence, even if small, in these countries. Having offices and relationships with the government in place allowed them to swiftly increase development and governance aid.

DAC members who stayed engaged during authoritarian periods, though in a reduced capacity, were better prepared. They had established relationships with civil society groups, a clear understanding of the local context and networks with other donors. This proved useful when aid volumes increased, as one of the main challenges during such times is to manage and allocate resources effectively, avoiding overlap and inefficiencies.

There are also significant risks of staying engaged, however. These include the risks to staff and partners of continuing to operate in highly repressive contexts and the risk of being seen to legitimate authoritarian government, for example by working with them on shared projects. An additional risk is that there is considerable evidence that in many cases – though not all – delivering ODA does not facilitate higher levels of democracy in the longer-term.

4.2.3 The potential for ODA to deliver on poverty reduction, economic development and state-building in a way that facilitates longer-term democratisation

A recurrent topic of conversation with many DAC representatives concerned whether or not investing in traditional sectors - education, healthcare and poverty reduction - would have positive political effects as well as developmental ones. Unfortunately, most of the cross-national research, including a systematic review by Gisselquist et al. (2021), finds that the provision of development aid does not, on its own, promote democratisation. Instead, development aid tends to stabilise whatever political system is in place, in part because it enables governments to meet the needs of citizens and run their operations.²⁹

This is an important reminder that investing in areas such as infrastructure and education does not necessarily have democratic effects, at least in the short-term. A similar point was made by a number of interviewees who expressed hope that their development activities would build the conditions for future democratisation, but acknowledged that they had little evidence to demonstrate this was the case and recognised that any effects would be felt in ten to fifteen years' time.

This does not mean, of course, that development aid cannot have positive effects for the prospects for democracy. What it does mean is that this is only likely to happen if development investments are intentionally designed in line with a suitable theory of change that is designed, for example, to enable more open and inclusive systems and institutions, support a vibrant and independent civil society and strengthen scrutiny and accountability institutions.

4.2.4 The importance of doing no harm

Given the risk that aid could strengthen authoritarian governments, it is particularly important that DAC members reflect on the sum total of their engagement in a country and consider its overall impact on the quality of democracy. Foreign aid is only one of a number of ways that DAC members engage with governments around the world. Others include trade deals, security cooperation and international collaborations on issues such as migration and climate change. It is unrealistic to expect democracy to be prioritised in every decision, especially when balancing broader development, economic or security concerns. However, governments can still evaluate the potential costs to democracy and human rights, ensuring that trade-offs are transparent and that foreign engagements do not inadvertently strengthen authoritarian regimes.

One way to promote human rights and democracy that some DAC members have already adopted is to take a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to foreign and development policy. This approach puts human rights at the heart of engagement, strengthening both human rights and inclusive development outcomes simultaneously. Some European countries, like Sweden, have adopted this. HRBAs show promise, with examples of improved gender equality, education and rights protections in countries that apply this framework.

At present, however, such approaches focus on human rights rather than democracy. To cover this wider set of issues and processes, international donors could consider conducting "democratic risk assessments" to identify how their actions might inadvertently support authoritarian rule and take appropriate action to reduce or offset particularly problematic forms of engagement.

4.2.5 The trade-off between being consistent while adapting to different contexts

Almost all interviewees working in-country stressed the importance of being able to adapt their approaches to the particular context they face. In most cases, interviewees were also clear that this was only really possible for those working and living in the country, who would have a better understanding of the culture, personalities and the economic and political landscape. More senior interviewees also tended to point out that their personal relationships with government leaders were important to being able to identify and take advantage of opportunities to pursue key developmental - and in some cases democratic - goals. This meant that there was considerable resistance to the idea of external guidance that might, for example, result from broader donor strategies designed to reverse global democratic decline.

This desire for flexibility and adaptability is understandable, especially as it is mainly motivated by a desire to deliver on key development goals and to have a positive impact on the country. There is nonetheless some risk that the cumulative effect of taking this approach is to unwittingly facilitate problematic political trends – and exacerbate the risk that DAC members will be perceived to be acting inconsistently or hypocritically. If DAC representatives in every country in which democracy is under threat adapt in ways that reduce the extent to which they invest in strengthening democracy, while finding new cooperation areas that are acceptable to the government, the overall effect will be that DAC members accommodate, rather than challenge, growing authoritarianism.

It was therefore striking that very few interviewees said that they had considered the impact of developments in the country they were responsible for on broader political trends either globally or in the wider region. Similarly, very few interviewees suggested that the strategies they were implementing had been shaped in a significant way by a global or regional strategy designed at a higher level. While national and domestic imperatives should not be deprioritised, greater consideration could be given to the regional and global implications of current ODA investments, especially as regional and global trends shape the capacity of donors to foster both development and democracy. Given the resistance of many interviewees to top-down guidance on these issues, one way to start moving in this direction could be to encourage a more explicit recognition of the trade-offs involved when determining ODA investments and the potential costs of such decisions for other priorities.

4.3 Key considerations for ODA responses during windows of democratic opportunity

When windows of democratic opportunity arise, DAC members often respond by increasing their engagement. In particular, they tend to increase ODA and cooperate more with the government while trying to advance democracy and development. The evidence suggests that this an approach is often successful in the short-term. In a longer timeframe, all of the cases in this category considered in this report demonstrate how fragile initial progress can be.

One general challenge is worth highlighting in this respect: to a large extent, democracy is built from within. With the right policies, DAC members can help but no amount of aid can create democracy if the local conditions are not right. The case of Tunisia is perhaps the most prominent example. Despite vast support in relation to the country's population, the push towards genuine democratisation could not be sustained.

At a glance: How DAC members respond to democratic openings

- **Aid flows.** Typically increase, with substantial expansions of both non-governance and governance aid and an increase in allocations of democracy aid.
- **Modalities.** An increasing proportion of aid is channelled through the government, which often means there is little change in the proportion of aid channelled through civil society groups, despite the democratic opening.
- **Areas.** Key areas of support usually include additional funding for democratic institutions and decentralisation programmes.
- **Challenges.** Lack of understanding/effective strategies to shift underlying political barriers to deeper reform; geo-political considerations.
- **Cases.** Armenia, Ecuador, Georgia, Tunisia.

While domestic factors are particularly significant, however, this does not mean that there is no scope for DAC members to improve their responses and effectiveness. Multiple DAC representatives interviewed about different countries highlighted how a lack of political economy analysis had negatively impacted donor responses. In Tunisia, for example, donors tended to view obstacles to reform as technical or logistical. As a result, they determined that these challenges could be met through more effective strategies, more aid or a combination of both. In reality, it is unlikely that any amount of money could have solved Tunisia's problems because they were neither technical nor related to logistics, they were about underlying power dynamics. Since powerful vested interests within the political system had little interest in democratisation, political pressure would have been much more likely to produce results than further support. Many donors learned this lesson late.

Windows of democratic opportunity therefore raise a number of difficult questions. Democratic windows of opportunity can close as quickly as they open, so how can donors respond quickly? At what stage is it safe to move resources from a "success story" to a country that may need assistance more urgently, without risking the gains that have been secured? Research also highlights an important point that is often overlooked, most notably that democratisation can weaken some of the actors that are crucial to build truly sustainable democratic political systems. This includes civil society organisations, which can be weakened if they become co-opted into government following the victory of an opposition party at the polls. This section discusses the trade-offs and challenges and how donors can respond.

4.3.1 The importance of rapidly responding to opportunities (windows close quickly)

Democratic windows of opportunity are extremely difficult to predict. Just as quickly as they open, they can close. The examined changes in Armenia, Ecuador and Tunisia, for example, happened very quickly. More recently, few foresaw the ousting of Sheikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh. That presents DAC members with a significant challenge: How can they respond rapidly when meaningful change becomes a realistic possibility?

One factor that can make a crucial difference is an existing presence on the ground. When DAC members are already present in countries such as Bangladesh even though democratisation seems unlikely, they have an advantage when it comes to scaling up their work. Partly, that is due to logistics. There is already an office, there is already a team. But importantly, donors with an existing presence will likely understand the operating context much better than donors who have not been active in a country for multiple years.

Interviewees also reported that an existing presence on the ground can make a significant difference in another way. Existing donors often have established local relationships with other donors on the ground, thereby making coordination much easier. This is of particular importance when foreign aid is increased drastically in a short time frame because it allows donors to avoid repetition and redundancy.

4.3.2 The distinctive challenges facing donor coordination and aid effectiveness when donors rapidly scale up activities

As discussed in section 3, donor coordination has often been identified as a critical barrier to responding more effectively to democratic and developmental challenges. This is a particularly acute issue when DAC members rapidly scale up their activities during windows of democratic opportunity.

This was clear in cases such as Tunisia, where interviewees recognised that the large increase in the volume of aid following the Arab Spring often led to a situation where individual DAC members struggled to manage, process and direct funds and had little time to systematically engage with counterparts from other organisations. The challenge of staffing offices to appropriate levels and then breaking-in new staff who had only recently moved to the country, also complicated the process of sharing knowledge and coordinating responses.

Under these circumstances, finding ways to enhance coordination is particularly important for three main reasons. First, it can help DAC members to avoid redundancy, which is a serious concern when many donors suddenly increase their engagement in a given country, especially when that country is comparatively small. Second, coordination also allows donors to share what has and has not worked, thereby helping others to avoid repeating the same mistakes. Finally, if (or rather when) a situation arises in which DAC members wish to apply political pressure on the host government to defend democratic gains, existing forums for exchange will make it easier for DAC members to cooperate.

4.3.3 The value of focusing on institutional rather than personnel change

When democratic windows of opportunity open, there is often a great deal of focus on the change of personnel. This is most obvious when it comes to the change of government, as following an election and the removal of corrupt individuals from government positions. Such a focus is understandable, especially given that politics often becomes highly personalised in authoritarian political contexts. It also risks missing the bigger picture, however, because the kinds of individuals that emerge – as legislators, as judges, as civil servants – is often a product of the institutional environment.

Removing individuals without addressing weaknesses in the legal system and in the kinds of politics that brings them to power – such as clientelism, neo-patrimonial and ethnic politics – is therefore likely to prove to be a short-term solution at best. At worst, it can simply result in a “shuffling of the pack” as a new set of leaders repeat the actions and behaviours of their predecessors.

This is not an easy task and achieving far-reaching institutional change may be unfeasible. It is important to keep in mind, however, that institutional changes such as the removal of legislation criminalising criticism of the president, conferring on the legislature the right to set its own agenda and control its own budget and the introduction of a Supreme Court, typically represent a better option for how donors can deploy their finite influence in moments of transition. Conferring greater independence on the electoral commission, for example, means that should a new reform minded administration fail to deliver, it can also be removed via the ballot box.

It is also important to keep in mind that there is now considerable evidence that removing officials in ways that do not follow due process can weaken democratic checks and balances, because it sets the problematic precedent that the rules do not always need to be followed.³⁰ DAC members should therefore be extremely careful before endorsing rapid purges of existing authoritarian officials that do not follow existing protocols for reviewing and dismissing personnel. Such extraordinary measures may seem justified in some cases, but it can expose the broader political system to greater manipulation in the future.

This trade-off is particularly significant given that the growing number of authoritarian governments around the world means that there are likely to be an increasing number of instances in which authoritarian governments are defeated by pro-democratic opposition parties at the ballot box in the years to come.

4.3.4 The risk of disengaging and moving on too early – democratisation is a marathon, not a sprint

One good election does not make a democracy. When democratic windows of opportunity lead to some degree of genuine democratisation, DAC members might be tempted to start disengaging or to focus on other areas of cooperation. A consistent finding across countries is that initial gains can easily be lost very quickly. Many interviewees said that it can take decades to build a sustainable democracy and even then, authoritarian subversion remains a constant threat. Moreover, work by the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) has demonstrated the value of funding political transitions in terms of both peace and political stability.³¹ Because resources are extremely limited, however, it can become difficult to justify continued democracy support in a country in which things seem to be going well, especially when the situation is deteriorating elsewhere.

This has been a particularly significant issue in recent years due to the growing pressure on donor funds. To give just one example, multiple interviewees stressed that budgets had come under pressure in the context of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. In

some cases, for example, resources were reallocated from countries that were seen as less of a priority to enable DAC members to meet the commitments they had made to supporting reconstruction in Ukraine. Due to these shifts, countries that required further democracy support became less likely to receive it.

This is a particularly challenging policy dilemma and one that is all the more difficult for DAC members to navigate given that it is not simply about weighing up democratic or developmental priorities, but also other interests related to national security and foreign policy. One broader point this perhaps demonstrates is therefore that if DAC members are serious about supporting democracy in the current era of rising authoritarianism, this may require ring-fencing democracy aid and related spending. This could be done, for example, by adapting the kinds of “transition compacts” often used in peacebuilding efforts in fragile and conflict-affected states. When done well, such compacts are “light and non-bureaucratic arrangements that allow national and international partners to agree on the most urgent priorities” and identify “how, and from which sources and instruments, the implementation of these joint strategies will be financed”.³² When implemented with a focus on building long-term and sustainable transitions, compacts can be a useful and practical way to lock-in the reality that democratisation is a marathon not a sprint.

4.3.5 The success of democratic transitions can weaken as well as empower civil society

Democratic transitions, such as the defeat of an authoritarian leader in an election, create new opportunities to strengthen key institutions and expand the role of civil society. Yet they often also generate new challenges for civil society groups in terms of their independence and ability to hold the new government to account. This is because in some transitions, as in Armenia, and historically in other cases such as Zambia, civic leaders whose organisations played an important role in challenging authoritarian excess are often appointed to state or quasi-state positions by the new government. Well-known anti-corruption campaigners are often appointed to Anti-Corruption and Ombudsman roles. Meanwhile, academics and public intellectuals/commentators may be appointed to positions in the Education Ministry, while journalists and human rights campaigners may be given a role in media regulators.

While these appointments bring skilled and passionate people into government, they also increase the risk that civil society leaders become effectively silenced by being co-opted into the government. Some interviewees, for example, suggested that this process risked creating a situation in which civil society scrutiny of the government went down rather than up. Another potential risk for civil society organisations arises when the share of aid channelled through civil society falls as DAC members look to forge new partnerships with government ministries.

DAC members have limited capacity to reduce this risk, but can manage it by being flexible, watching for the signs of co-optation and focusing on providing support for organisations that maintain greater independence from the government.

5. Next Steps

The research presented here has identified some of the challenges facing DAC members in the context of a rapidly changing world. Strengthening democracy and fostering development have always been difficult tasks, but they have become increasingly complicated over the last twenty years. Growing repression in a broad range of states has often made it more difficult to work with established partners such as civil society groups, while reducing the space for DAC members to invest in areas that are important for development but might weaken the ruling party's hold on power. Even when conditions on the ground are favourable - as in the case of windows of democratic opportunity - greater coordination challenges, rising geo-political competition and increased scepticism about the value of democracy in some countries means that it is harder to take advantage of them.

DAC members respond quickly to try and take advantage of democratic openings, both increasing aid flows and investing in democratic processes. There is much less consistency when it comes to responses to democratic decline, however, in part because these are extremely challenging contexts in which a lack of cooperation from host governments severely constrains what is possible. Common findings across the cases include that DAC representatives find it particularly difficult to know how best to respond to cases of gradual democratic erosion; that it has become more challenging to ensure cohesive coordination in the absence of modalities such as budget support and the rise of more assertive authoritarian global powers on the world stage; that there is a tendency to normalise government relations following military coups, even in cases in which juntas have demonstrated little commitment to a genuine transition back to civilian rule; and that there is sometimes a tendency to overestimate the potential of achieving sustainable development by working with authoritarian governments.

Taken together, these findings suggest that DAC representatives could potentially benefit from more focused training on “thinking and working politically” and how to implement key lessons and strategies in different contexts, as well structural changes to implement these approaches in the design and delivery of programmes. Greater evidence and guidance on the likely impact of different responses to autocratisation could also be very valuable. A stronger and more unified approach to training across DAC members might also facilitate greater common ground between DAC members in terms of their assessments of key risks and opportunities, easing coordination challenges. DAC representatives would also benefit from the opportunity to systematically share experiences with others working in similar political contexts, which suggest a need to organise “lesson learning” sessions thematically rather than regionally, which tends to be the norm at present. More broadly, DAC members could consider how to develop more effective global strategies that enable pro-active rather than only reactive approaches; operate more coherently and consistently to avoid accusations of hypocrisy; and “do no harm” when engaging with repressive states in order to minimise the risk of entrenching authoritarian rule.

This report has also raised a number of important questions that have yet to be adequately answered, either because they were beyond the scope of enquiry or because the data required does not exist/has not yet been collected. These include:

- How can DAC members develop effective strategies to respond to the global trend of democratic decline while enabling in-country representatives the flexibility needed to design context-sensitive approaches?
- What is the most effective way to sequence democratic and developmental reforms across different regime contexts?
- What forms of development aid and investment are most likely to have democratising effects, and how can these be enhanced?
- What are the most effective ways to track and respond to gradual democratic decline, and what kinds of developments are particularly significant in terms of undermining the prospects for sustaining or rebuilding democracy?
- How effective are projects that seek to sustain or foster inclusive practices in authoritarian context by building-in elements of inclusive governance and accountability, and what measures are necessary to ensure that they have positive “spillover” benefits for democracy?
- What can DAC members do to ensure that they “do no harm” when engaging in authoritarian states?
- What are the implications of the rapid growth of humanitarian aid to authoritarian states for the ability of donors to foster the kind of sustainable development that contributes to democratic strengthening?
- How can international donors share the evidence and knowledge they have gained about what works and what does not with each other while protecting their staff and projects?
- How can DAC members build bridges to, and work more effectively with, non-DAC donors in areas that can reduce the risk of democratic erosion?
- What is the most effective way to support civil society groups while insulating them from the threat of authoritarian backlash?

Annex 1. Research Approach

Developing a more nuanced view of how DAC donors' approaches in response to political developments have changed requires contextualising data on aid flows through in-depth case studies. It also means being attuned to the different political contexts in which donors operate. Based on that reasoning, 10 country cases were selected for in-depth studies. Between them these countries have experienced all of the main types of political change experienced over the past twenty years and exemplify many of the different contexts in which donors operate around the world (Table 1). Although it is not representative of the full set of countries in which DAC members operate, the sample includes examples from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America and of a wide range of political transitions, including coups, gradual democratic erosion, and new democratic openings linked to leadership changes. In some cases, as with Ecuador and Tunisia, countries have experienced multiple forms of political change, which made it possible to consider how donor responses were shaped by processes of learning and adaptation.

Table 1. Case studies organised by type of political change

Democratic openings	Gradual democratic erosion	Rapid authoritarian ruptures	Entrenched authoritarian regimes	Democratic and authoritarian oscillation
Armenia (2018-present)	Bangladesh (2009-present)	Burkina Faso (2012-present)	Cambodia (2017-present)	Ecuador (2010-present)
Georgia (2003-present)	India (2014-present)	Mali (2012-present)	Nicaragua (2003-present)	Tunisia (2008-present)

To develop a set of robust and holistic answers, each case study was informed by four main information sources: official OECD data on aid flows and donor reports and documentation; data on democratisation levels from organisations such as the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem); a thorough review of over 250 articles and reports; and over 50 interviews conducted with DAC representatives and researchers. As part of the interview-based research for each case, interviews were requested with representatives from a range of DAC members, including those with larger and smaller aid budgets. In some cases where a donor was particularly significant in terms of its historical influence or the amount of aid it provided, interviews were carried out with representatives located both in the recipient country and in the donor country's headquarters to obtain a fuller picture of their considerations and decision-making processes. To encourage people to speak freely and frankly, all interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, and so neither their names, nor quotes from their interviews, are included in this report.

For each country included in the project, a comprehensive case study of roughly 7,000 words was written, providing an overview of political developments and donor responses since the turn of the millennium. These case studies, which total over 60,000 words of grounded insights, are the foundation on which this report is based.

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