DRAFT Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Policy
December, 2023

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I.   **INTRODUCTION**

This policy seeks to optimize and align the Agency's investments to maximize USAID's contribution to democratic development. Expanding the community of resilient, rights-respecting democracies and reversing nearly two decades of democratic backsliding requires a fundamental reorientation of our approach, including the deployment of a more expansive and nimble set of tools that can address both new and longstanding challenges. This policy elaborates on the pivots that we need to make, across the entire Agency, to foster a sustained, global renewal of democratic governance that delivers justice, security, and inclusive development for all.

Advancing democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) globally is an expression of deeply held U.S. values founded on the belief that all people have an inherent right to be free from repression, tyranny, and the indignity of corruption; shape their own destinies; and live in liberty under the rule of law. While there is no single model for how these values are enshrined within a political system, no system of government is better for unleashing human potential, respecting human dignity, and addressing the problems facing people's daily lives than representative democracy.[1] In short, democracy and development are integrally linked.

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[1] See "Remarks by President Biden at the Summit for Democracy Opening Session," December 9, 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/12/09/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-summit-for-democracy-opening-session/

This policy builds on decades of USAID investment in the core pillars of democratic governance and partnerships with a diverse array of actors and institutions at all levels. It rests on a solid foundation of evidence and learning generated through cutting-edge DRG practice, and USAID's global cadre of experts and presence in more than 100 countries. This policy also builds on the strategic approaches that preceded it, such as the 2013 DRG Strategy, which established human rights as central to USAID's mission, and works in alignment with all other USAID policies. As USAID and its partners anticipate and face unprecedented threats to democracy, human rights, and accountable governance, this policy will provide essential guidance for modernizing our toolkit and modifying our approaches.

II.   BACKGROUND

The Case for DRG

The spread of democracy enhances U.S. national security. Democratic systems foster global stability and economic prosperity[2], and established and stable democracies do not fight wars with each other.[3] Democracies are effective partners for addressing transnational issues such as terrorism, pandemics, and climate change. Moreover, well-functioning democracies are less likely than their autocratic counterparts to be sources of forced migration, famine, human trafficking, and cross-border criminal activity.[4]

Democratic systems have intrinsic value given their superiority in upholding human rights and justice, respecting individual dignity, enhancing equality and inclusion, and allowing freedom to flourish. They also have instrumental value as a means to deliver human, economic, and environmental security benefits to citizens and communities. Despite authoritarian arguments to the contrary, democracies are uniquely capable of generating the conditions that allow every member of society to thrive and contribute to sustainable growth and prosperity. In fact, evidence demonstrates that:

- ● **Democracy better protects human dignity and rights.** Democracies have significantly less repression of human rights than autocracies, and the more inclusive the democracy, the better the protections.[5]

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

[3] See for example V-DEM Policy Brief # 30, 5/11/2021, https://v-dem.net/media/publications/pb30.pdf

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

[5] USAID, DRG Policy Evidence Support Research Report, 9/1/2022, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZNBD.pdf

- ***Democracy produces more prosperous communities.*** Evidence shows that average GDP per capita growth has been higher in democracies than in autocracies since 1800.[6] Democratization also leads to greater economic development. Countries that democratized increased their GDP per capita by about 20 percent over autocracies in the 25 years following democratization.
- ***Democracy delivers public goods and services***. Research since 2013 confirms that democracies do a better job providing public goods and services (such as electricity, education, and healthcare), spend more on social protection, and have more ambitious climate policies than autocracies. As a result, residents in democracies experience better health outcomes in the form of longer life expectancy, lower infant mortality rates, and fewer deaths from non-communicable diseases.[7]

Challenges

Most countries where USAID works are neither full democracies nor full autocracies, and often struggle with a similar set of challenges. Despite its many advantages, democracy is facing historic headwinds. Complex and mutually compounding crises such as climate change and biodiversity collapse[8], crippling debt, colonial legacies, armed conflict and fragility, rapid urbanization, sluggish economic growth, inept governance, weak rule of law, and social mistrust challenge the ability of all states to provide services that people want and expect from their governments. Where democracies are not consistently or inclusively delivering outcomes in the core areas of education, health, security, and livelihoods, trust in democracy is eroding and creating opportunities for autocrats to exploit that frustration for their own gain.

Control of state organs by elites constrains political expression and civic freedoms as they act to consolidate power and reduce the degree of genuine political competition. Polarization, exclusion, and intolerance obstruct policy making, fuel discontent with political parties and democratic institutions more broadly, corrode social cohesion, and contribute to political violence in countries around the world.[9] And rising inequality has left communities frustrated, uncertain, and distrustful of one another and of their governments' ability to tackle the existential problems they face. This context of anxiety and doubt is fed and amplified by corrupt, extremist, and autocratic leaders who mount disinformation campaigns and scapegoat marginalized groups[10] to increase polarization and intolerance in a bid to weaken democratic

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[6] The Business Case for Democracy. Carl Henrik Knutsen. Pp. 9-10.
https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/handle/2077/66690/gupea_2077_66690_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[7] https://www.v-dem.net/documents/34/C4DReport_230421.pdf

[8] https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment

[9] https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/18175.pdf

[10] "Marginalized groups'' refers to a wide range of people, including, but not limited to, youth, women, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+, displaced persons, migrants, Indigenous Peoples, urban poor, and particular religious and ethnic groups. For a full discussion see: https://www.usaid.gov/inclusivedevelopment/additional-help-ads-201.

systems and maintain their own grip on power. These dynamics are often mirrored in subnational and traditional governance structures, which often have their own locally-specific drivers of corruption, exclusion, and injustice.

Against this backdrop, pro-democracy forces face myriad threats. Governments around the world have cracked down on freedom of expression, association, and assembly, reducing people's ability to organize and peacefully protest, and limiting civic organizations from engaging their constituencies and stakeholders. Freedom of the press – a pillar of democratic governance – has experienced a sustained assault in democracies and autocracies alike. Local media in many parts of the world are undergoing what some call an "extinction event," with media outlets closing due to market, technological, economic, and political forces. Global internet freedom has also declined over the past 12 years, with users facing increasingly draconian legal repercussions for expressing themselves online.[11] And technology – once seen as a powerful tool for progress – is increasingly being used by anti-democratic forces to surveil, harass, intimidate, and discredit their critics.

Moreover, many countries face deep-seated problems of state capture by elites, or of entrenched and pervasive corruption. Corruption not only siphons off the resources required for development but also weakens public trust in government, disproportionally affects marginalized groups, threatens the integrity of elections and political processes, and undermines the rule of law. Transnational corruption allows external actors to further distort policy outcomes by inducing public officials to prioritize corrupt foreign interests above the interests of their own population.

Autocracies have become emboldened, adaptive, and strategic. Autocratic leaders manipulate modern technologies and systems to change the rules of the game and insulate themselves from accountability, even as their citizens endure increased physical and psychological violence, inequality, and indignities. Autocrats use increasingly sophisticated tactics to reduce challenges to their own power, often while seeking to maintain the facade of electoral democracy to preserve their legitimacy. All countries, including democracies, are not free from problems of exclusion, injustice, and corruption. Democracy must be supported, repaired, and maintained. Too frequently, elections take place in environments devoid of meaningful political participation and competition where opposition political parties face playing fields heavily tilted toward incumbent power. And, since 2021, we are seeing a growing number of coups displace elected and non-elected leaders alike. These unconstitutional military takeovers – until recently thought to be a relic of history – are once again a feature of our (un)democratic landscape. Finally, unexpected shocks, such as the COVID pandemic, or a debt crisis, can be used as justifications

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[11] Freedom on the Net 2022, Freedom House

for repression, though they can also lead to outpourings of collective action and civic activism. Many autocratic regimes are not only repressing their own citizenry and residents but also exporting their distorted model of governance and anti-rights impulses abroad.

Opportunities

Though democracy is down, it is not out. There is reason for optimism. Democracy has proven to be remarkably resilient and to have broad, enduring appeal, as people around the world stand up, again and again – in the face of violence and repression – for fundamental freedoms and just societies.[12] There are countless recent instances of large-scale civic mobilization, justice systems willing to take action against an executive, and opposition movements emerging in support of democratic values.[13] Independent and active legislatures, judicial systems, and oversight institutions have acted as important bulwarks for democratic resilience. Subnational governments continue to be sources of innovation in meeting citizens' daily needs and helping resolve complex crises. As cities grow and the demand for services increases, democracy will be defined not just at the national government level, but also in cities, which significantly influence national and international policies on key issues such as climate change. These examples reflect the extraordinary efforts of government reformers, societal leaders, civic activists, marginalized groups, labor unions, the private sector, and many others to defend democracy at all costs.

Today, people around the world are participating in civic life through social movements, grassroots organizing, and other forms of nonviolent collective action more than ever before in recorded history.[14] Collective action, often involving communities that have been historically excluded from power, is working to change policy, cultural norms, and attitudes. Collective action ranges from grassroots organizing to build political power at a local level to mass mobilization at a national level, for example to demand an end to corruption or advance worker rights. Moreover, emerging spaces and technologies, such as popular assemblies, mini-publics, direct legislation, participatory community mapping, and e-democracy, offer new opportunities for societies to reinvigorate citizen engagement.

After nearly 20 years of ascendance, autocracies are manifesting severe disadvantages – economic stagnation, brutal repression, and deep isolation, among others – that attest to the bankruptcy of the authoritarian model. Evidence indicates that we may be reaching a turning

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[12] Even leaders in non-democratic and autocratic leaning countries claim that their countries are democracies because it is a durable concept with broad appeal, and opinion polls consistently show widespread support for representative democracy– see, for example, Democracy Perception Index 2023, https://6389062.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/6389062/Canva%20images/Democracy%20Perception%20Index%202020 23.pdf.

[13] Democracy Report 2023, Defiance in the Face of Autocratization, V-DEM Institute.

[14] Erica Chenoweth et al., "This May Be the Largest Wave of Nonviolent Mass Movements in World History. What Comes Next?" *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage blog, 16 November 2019.

point. In this year's Freedom House report, the gap between the number of countries that registered overall improvements in political rights and civil liberties and those that registered overall declines for 2022 was the narrowest it has ever been through 17 years of global deterioration.[15] If we are to seize this moment, USAID must learn from its past and adapt its strategies going forward.

III. DRG POLICY GOAL

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

USAID's elevation of DRG across all sectors responds to all peoples' longing to have greater agency to influence the decisions that affect their daily lives, enjoy fairer systems of government, and see their basic needs and concerns addressed by those in power. To advance this aspiration, we will partner with and support reformers to nurture and sustain gains, increasingly investing more effort in democracies that are making progress and in societies that are experiencing pivotal moments during which democratic values can take root. We will continue to stand with our partners even in the most challenging moments. And we will reinforce the transnational networks and connections that offer ideas and partnership to those on the front lines of the struggle.

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

> *We will work to strengthen democracy around the world because democratic governance consistently outperforms authoritarianism in protecting human dignity, leads to more prosperous and resilient societies, creates stronger and more reliable economic and security partners for the United States, and encourages a peaceful world order.*
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> U.S. National Security Strategy, October 2022

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[15] https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigtalPDF.pdf

IV. PIVOTS

Since USAID published its seminal DRG Strategy in 2013, the landscape for democratic development has dramatically transformed. So must we. This policy elevates and reorients USAID's efforts, prioritizing four strategic changes, or pivots, to our approaches in DRG programming, and highlighting four important principles that underpin democracy assistance.

Pivot 1: Harness all of USAID's programs and influence to pursue democratic progress.
➔ *USAID will adopt a whole-of-Agency approach to democratic renewal, leveraging all of its resources, capabilities, and partnerships to drive meaningful change.*

Democratic political systems, however imperfect, are the best way to achieve peace, prosperity, and sustainable development. Therefore, USAID will refocus its efforts to adopt a whole-of-Agency approach that leverages all of our resources and influence to invigorate DRG globally and support more democratic practices in the countries where we work. For over a decade, DRG has been working closely with other sectors to amplify development results and integrate DRG principles (participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability) into their work. This is evident, for example, in the DRG plan in support of the [USAID Climate Strategy](#) and in the [USAID Guide to Countering Corruption Across Sectors](#). This type of integration will remain a bedrock of USAID's approach and is essential to promoting sustainable, inclusive development. However, it is insufficient given the existential challenges facing democracy, human rights, and governance today.

Pivot 1 moves beyond having DRG programs support other development sector outcomes and commits us to having other development sectors support DRG outcomes. This is a necessary, fundamental shift that will put more of USAID's resources to work in advancing democratic progress. Windows of opportunity for addressing constraints to government accountability and building democratic culture exist throughout all sectors, and development assistance can be more intentional about identifying and seizing these opportunities. Therefore, all USAID officers should proactively seek out opportunities to support open, just, peaceful, and democratically resilient systems. Doing so will help reformers deliver tangible results and sustain popular support for democratic reform. Prioritizing democratic progress in development may sometimes entail accepting more uncertain progress toward other sectoral outcomes in the short term, but should ultimately produce better development outcomes overall.

Further, the goal of democratic advancement around the world cannot be achieved through programming alone. Assistance will be ineffective in spurring democratic progress without

supportive policy frameworks and diverse partnerships across all sectors and at all levels, creating both incentives and disincentives for reform. Therefore, USAID should leverage its convening power, multilateral partnerships, and in-country presence to encourage positive change, and support democratic reformers with timely and tailored assistance.

In countries that fail to govern democratically, we should look for opportunities across all sectors to bolster pockets of reform while guarding against assistance that perpetuates corruption or autocratic rule. Where there are democratic openings or consistent democratic progress being made, we should mobilize the assistance that reformers need to consolidate democratic gains. When reformers fail to solidify their democratic and economic gains quickly, populations can grow impatient, opening the door for democratic spoilers to wrest control.

USAID will… USAID's approach to DRG will use all of the tools at our disposal – our policy insights, technical expertise, convening power, diverse partnerships, strategic communications, and development diplomacy to spur democratic renewal and foster just and free societies. In the policy arena, USAID will leverage its country-level presence and the insights derived from programming to inform interagency debates and shape policy outcomes. Topics of engagement may include revamping the U.S. bilateral relationship in response to a democratic opening, forging whole-of-government anti-corruption strategies, or contributing to sanctions deliberations. New policy postures will be amplified through our convening power — to draw in the private sector on areas of shared interest, broker consensus between disparate actors at the local level, or catalyze investment from other donors. We will cultivate new partnerships and invest in multilateral initiatives and platforms — both globally and at the country level — to catalyze collective action on shared priorities and provide connection and solidarity to democratic reformers. And we will leverage our voice, narrative campaigns, and high-level visits from senior leadership to press for policy change and strengthen our relationships with local change agents.

In support of this pivot, USAID will take bold steps to promote democratic development throughout all of our programming. Development assistance, ranging from health to climate change to economic growth, should take into consideration how programs can facilitate democratic progress in a country. To advance this pivot, all USAID missions should examine how their entire assistance portfolio can contribute to democratic development by explicitly and deliberately considering DRG principles and practices in the program design and implementation process. Missions should use political economy analysis to identify stakeholders and existing power dynamics, to ensure that assistance maximizes accountable and democratic governance.

Finally, as described in the Requirement section below, USAID will develop and pilot a "democracy review" process to make recommendations for our programming and presence that can enhance the impact of our development resources and contribute to democratic progress in autocratic, kleptocratic, and backsliding countries.

Pivot #2: Intensify the focus on norms and values that build social cohesion and cultivate democratic political culture and processes.
➔ *USAID will expand its efforts to support democratic values, social capital, civil political discourse, information integrity, and norms that are the linchpin of a just, resilient, and inclusive society.*

Just societies require not only democratic institutions and processes, but also the values and norms that make them truly democratic in practice. Political scientists have long suggested that the stability and effectiveness of democratic regimes depend in part on the existence of a democratic "political culture." Institutions only function democratically when the people and systems within them embrace and embody democratic norms – justice systems require respect for equality under the law; ethical and open government institutions must respond to community needs rather than to corrupt elites; electoral processes are only meaningful when there is genuine political competition, and the outcome reflects the will of the voters. All these stem from a political culture based on a common set of beliefs, values, and norms that are broadly accepted and upheld. Yet, for far too long, international donors haven't placed enough attention on the importance of the norms and values that shape and give meaning to democratic systems.

Fostering a democratic political culture is particularly important as a sharp uptick in polarization increasingly tears the fabric of communities apart and gives rise to uncivil political discourse. New technology has made it easier for political actors and individuals to manipulate information, use hate speech, and create divisiveness to promote their anti-democratic agendas.

Democratic political norms also require consensus on the rules of the game that govern political competition. Political competition is an intense, high-stakes process that requires constructive political behavior within agreed-upon boundaries. Unfortunately, political actors are increasingly violating accepted norms, for example by rejecting legitimate election results that did not go their way. Moreover, many elected leaders gain power through the ballot box, only to abuse their power by changing the rules to entrench their position and weaken opposition in future elections. Building consensus among political elites and populations to accept the rules of the game is vital for democracy – in the fullest sense of the word – to prevail.

USAID will… To implement this pivot, USAID will support societies to develop democratic norms and values at the local and national levels, in communities and in political institutions, and in formal political rules and in informal practices. This emphasis on norms requires that USAID pay as much attention to the beliefs and habits that form a political culture as we do formal institutions, laws, and policies. For example, USAID's Rule of Law Policy adopts a new paradigm of people-centered justice that places the person affected by the law at the core of the policies, processes, and practices that constitute justice systems and services. The Policy shifts our emphasis from institutional performance metrics to a focus on individual outcomes and experience. Similarly, where USAID works with institutions, our programs will push for ethical and transparent governance that is accountable to citizens and reins in corruption. Our work with government bodies will move beyond a focus on technical capacity to emphasize the processes and social norms that strengthen the social contract between government and citizens.

USAID will also promote and preserve healthy information ecosystems that protect freedom of speech, encourage civil political discourse, and build resilience to information manipulation in tandem with its efforts to promote open, inclusive, and secure digital ecosystems. We will increase our engagement with the private sector, civil society, academia, media and journalists, local partners, donors, and the interagency to develop more effective partnerships and approaches. We will boost programming to build social trust, strengthen the media sector, help partner governments share information more effectively with communities, enhance information resilience, and safeguard election integrity. We will support efforts to counter gendered disinformation that uses false or misleading narratives to discredit, silence, or harm women and girls as well as LGBTQI+ persons. And we will work with our international partners to prioritize information resilience and integrity through bilateral and multilateral fora.

USAID will support robust democratic political cultures through assistance, such as civic education, that promotes informed and engaged publics. As digital technologies change the practice of civics, so too must USAID change its approach to civic education. Programs will endeavor to reinforce cross-cutting coalitions of democratic reformers and change agents, such as social movement leaders, to overcome political polarization and rebuild societal trust.

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

Social and behavior change (SBC) methodology will be used to identify and address drivers of social norms and behaviors that advance democratic progress, including closely-held values and related message framing. To better understand how power dynamics and incentives among stakeholders shape the frontiers for democratic reform and the risks of conflict, USAID will expand the use of political economy analysis (PEA), gender and inclusive development analyses, and more rigorously apply systems thinking, conflict sensitivity, and SBC to improve activity design and implementation. Local stakeholders, knowledge holders, and communities should be engaged as joint owners and co-creators in problem definition and solution design.

PIVOT 3: Advance digital democracy by supporting rights-respecting approaches to data and technology.
➔ *USAID will apply innovative rights-respecting approaches to the development, deployment, governance, and use of digital technologies and data to harness their power in fostering vibrant democracies, while countering the rise of "digital repression."*

Technology has transformed how people live their lives. In the year 2000, roughly 6 percent of the world used the internet; by 2020, it was 60 percent[16]. Digital and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies have had a tremendous impact on development, and will continue to do so at an accelerated pace. Some changes have been positive, for example, fostering economic growth, giving voice to marginalized communities, expanding opportunities for participation in civic and political life, improving service delivery, making healthcare more accessible, and strengthening systems of transparency and accountability. Digital technologies provide powerful new avenues for open societies to work together to strengthen democracy and deepen civic engagement.

At the same time, the rapid rate of technological innovation has steadily outpaced humanity's ability to understand and prevent harm. Smartphones, instantaneous global communication, geolocation technologies, digital surveillance tools, big data, machine learning, information manipulation, and artificial intelligence are powerful tools that some governments have used to practice "digital repression" and suppress or violate human rights[17]. In the absence of strong legal frameworks, effective digital literacy, and incentives for identifying and managing potential adverse impacts of technologies, digital innovations can intentionally or unintentionally lead to violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms; and democratic decline.

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[16] World Bank ICT Indicators Database https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS
[17] https://www.usaid.gov/digital-development/digital-ecosystem-framework; See also: USAID Digitized Autocracy Literature Review, 2021.

USAID will… In support of this pivot, USAID will work with a diverse set of local and global stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, government, and academia to improve democratic participation, promote transparency and accountability, and push back against repression in all digital contexts. For example, we will help our partners invest in developing rights-respecting technologies that mitigate the risks of misuse and address manipulation of political processes or institutions; while we also work to raise awareness of both the risks and the benefits of data-driven technologies, including artificial intelligence. We will work with lawyers, judges, and oversight bodies to strengthen their capacity to protect human rights in cases involving technology and data, and support efforts to help people understand and utilize technology in service of inclusive, free spaces that provide individuals with more control over their own data and its uses. We will support development of and alignment with national strategic planning and standards for digital transformation in the public sector and promote initiatives that foster collaboration among key stakeholders to increase government transparency and accountability at all levels, while strengthening the business enabling environment to attract responsible tech-sector investment. We will ensure that the application of technology is accessible and rights-respecting which narrows the gender digital divide and combats technology-facilitated gender-based violence and other violence that prevents women, girls, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and LGBTQI+ persons from fully enjoying their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

USAID will amplify its engagement in the development and promotion of human rights-based principles to govern digital technologies and data, such as the Declaration for the Future of the Internet, the Donor Principles for the Digital Age, the NIST Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework, and the U.S. Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights. USAID is also committed to increasing the diversity of governments and civil society engagement in multilateral organizations and fora to ensure that evolving digital governance principles reflect a truly global and diverse perspective.

Text Box _ **Digital Democracy Principles**

USAID developed the following *Digital Democracy Principles* to present an affirmative vision for digital democracy–a context in which digital technology and data systems are designed, developed, deployed, used, and governed in alignment with human rights and democratic values. The principles are meant to guide staff to thoughtfully integrate digital technology and data management into programs in ways that are in alignment with democratic values and human rights.
1. Harness opportunities to strengthen democratic institutions, governance, and norms to advance rights-respecting digital ecosystems.
2. Collaborate with the private and public sectors to encourage

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rights-respecting digital investment and innovation.
3. Prioritize do-no-harm protections and support safeguards to prevent and minimize adverse impacts of digital technologies and data systems.
4. Facilitate and strengthen multi-stakeholder alliances, foster learning, and improve coordination among donor governments.
5. Prioritize digital inclusion, including by supporting local research, and leveraging resources from local digital ecosystems.

These supplement and complement, and are intended to be used in conjunction with, the USAID-endorsed Principles for Digital Development.

PIVOT 4: Elevate anti-corruption as critical to democracy and development, with a focus on transnational corruption, grand corruption, and kleptocracy.
→*USAID will confront the realities of contemporary corruption through new resources, approaches, and partnerships, and a renewed commitment to corruption-informed programming and practice across all sectors.*

USAID recognizes the profound threat that corruption poses to democracy and development, across all sectors and levels of government. From impeding service delivery to accelerating environmental degradation, from exacerbating humanitarian emergencies to stoking conflict—corruption undermines human dignity and collective progress. Corruption disproportionately harms women and other marginalized groups, while its reach into the justice system leads to unjust and inequitable outcomes. In many countries, entrenched corruption is the operative system of governance, denying fair opportunities and deepening mistrust. As citizen faith in government erodes, illiberal forces and violent extremists may co-opt people's grievances stemming from corruption for their own ends. Likewise, the challenges of kleptocracy have become increasingly difficult for local reformers to contend with alone, as corruption becomes more transnational. Corrupt actors routinely exploit vulnerabilities within national governance systems and in the global financial system in order to launder and stash their ill-gotten gains, with the help of facilitators in key industries. The power of these global corruption networks magnifies the impact of corruption—making graft in health, education, energy, and other sectors even more entrenched, while deterring high-quality private investment. Meanwhile, authoritarians employ corruption to manipulate democracy and subvert sovereignty outside their borders.

Local reformers recognize corruption's harms and are taking action: through peaceful protests, courageous journalism, electoral campaigns, legal and administrative reforms, and more. In solidarity with these leaders, and in recognition of corruption's threat to our core mission, USAID released its first-ever Anti-Corruption Policy in December 2022. This policy enshrines

anti-corruption as a top priority for USAID, with the overarching goal of protecting resources crucial for development and delivering on the promise of democracy as a system that works in the public interest. The policy articulates USAID's emphasis on transnational corruption, grand corruption, and kleptocracy, while also addressing the underlying causes of more visible and daily forms of corruption.

*USAID will…*In support of this pivot, USAID will tackle the most pernicious abuses of power, and forthrightly confront corruption in the places where we work. Using the full range of our tools as an Agency, we will focus our anti-corruption actions on reducing opportunities for corruption (such as through responsible digitization of government services, open government, and enhanced public financial management); increasing the costs of corruption (such as through supporting the accountability role of journalists and activists; strengthening the effectiveness, independence, and accountability of public-sector institutions, especially oversight bodies and the justice sector; and working to identify and deter corrupt corporate and state practices that knowingly benefit from labor abuses in business operations and supply chains); and incentivizing integrity (such as through celebrating officials who act with integrity). We are expanding our toolkit to include increased programmatic resources, strengthened staff capacity, new technical guidance and tools, and the creation of USAID's Anti-Corruption Center in the DRG Bureau. Consistent with Pivot 1 above, USAID's operating units should leverage their full range of capabilities—from programming and strategic communications to donor mobilization and focused interagency coordination—to counter corruption and support reform. This work will take a renewed focus on safeguarding development and humanitarian assistance from corruption and grappling with the realities of operating in severely corrupt environments.

Given the scope and scale of the challenge, USAID will tackle corruption from multiple angles. This begins with deepening collaboration across all DRG sectors to counter corruption and spur democratic progress. For example, our election integrity work will more deliberately address the threat that corruption poses to the conduct and outcomes of elections. Media freedom work should continually emphasize the needs of investigative journalists, whose exposure of corruption can be transformational. Civil society strengthening work should prioritize bolstering the organizations and social movements who are the engines for anti-corruption reform and often face acute protection needs. USAID's efforts to support our partners to improve public financial management and build strong civil services should incorporate efforts designed to deter and detect corruption.

Significant anti-corruption opportunities fall outside the DRG sector. As such, USAID will continue to relentlessly pursue openings to address corruption, building on successful experiences to date, including in the natural resources context (e.g., extractives, wildlife

trafficking and illegal fishing and logging), in the economic growth and health sectors, and in humanitarian assistance.

V. PRINCIPLES

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

PRINCIPLE 1: Advance social inclusion and gender equality by seeking transformational change in systems and structures.
→*USAID will emphasize gender equity, women's empowerment, and inclusion of underrepresented communities as a core pillar of its approach to accelerating democratic development and bolstering open, just, peaceful, and resilient societies.*

The disempowerment of marginalized populations, including women and girls, in politics and public life is both rooted in entrenched societal norms and codified in political, legal, and economic institutions, resulting in systemic inequality. Genuine democracy gains its power by drawing on the contributions, creativity, and participation of all members of society and in turn must extend its benefits to all, not the few. Inclusion in institutions, processes, and norms that together form the fabric of a political system is both a measure of democratic integrity and a prerequisite of sustainable democracy and societal development.

Unfortunately, political, social, and economic exclusion continue to affect large communities and groups across the globe along different lines, including class, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, ethnicity, or religion. Women remain grossly underrepresented in decision making worldwide at all levels of government, despite evidence that providing a safe and enabling environment for women to participate equitably in politics and public life produces more inclusive and effective policy outcomes and greater resilience to democratic backsliding.[18] [19] Marginalized groups are often discredited, discouraged from serving in public office, denied their rights to free assembly or association, or subjected to hate speech and violence. This has occurred as well-funded coalitions of anti-democratic actors increasingly pursue targeted, divisive campaigns using 'wedge' issues to foster social division, undermine rule of law and free and independent media, and control political outcomes, including

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[18] Waylen, Georgina. 2014. "Strengthening women's agency is crucial to underpinning representative institutions with strong foundations of participation." *Politics & Gender*. 10(4): 495-523.

[19] Summer Forester, Kaitlin Kelly-Thompson, Amber Lusvardi, S Laurel Weldon, New Dimensions of Global Feminist Influence: Tracking Feminist Mobilization Worldwide, 1975–2015, *International Studies Quarterly*, Volume 66, Issue 1, March 2022, sqab093, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab093.

democratic elections. Furthermore, individuals with intersecting marginalized identities experience compounded disempowerment. For example, distant rural communities of ethnically marginalized people may remain poorly integrated into their society, facing not only geographic barriers to full economic and political participation, but also heightened disadvantage due to their ethnicity. Youth, in particular, are often shut out of decision-making. Despite making up over half of the world's population, youth are increasingly turning away from formal politics, namely participation in electoral processes and political parties.[20]

Progress toward more inclusive societies requires transformational changes to political systems and their underlying power dynamics. DRG interventions must maintain a sharp focus on addressing the systems that keep those barriers in place across the entire political ecosystem, including those at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. USAID programming should promote the meaningful participation of youth within their communities, enhancing their skills, providing opportunities, and fostering healthy relationships so they may build on their collective leadership. Assistance should move beyond programs solely focused on one area, such as the capacity-building of women and marginalized groups or legal reforms, because these measures alone cannot transform the imbalances in power between women and men or between elite actors and marginalized populations. As such, USAID needs to incorporate an understanding of how social norms, including gender norms, affect the promotion of democracy, human rights, and governance. Programs that include social and behavior change are among the initiatives that can shape how marginalized groups are perceived and relate to other societal groups. Social and cultural change must accompany legal reform to lower the barriers to political participation and leadership within government.

PRINCIPLE 2: Advance locally led development and adaptive approaches.
→*USAID will advance programming that is locally driven and thrives amid change, and will collect and use evidence to tailor or adapt programs with local leaders.*

Locally led development is vital to resilient, democratic societies. More so than donors, local actors carry out real change – from governments shifting policies or passing new laws, to political parties improving candidate selection processes, to traditional leaders supporting gender-responsive governance structures, to labor unions negotiating better conditions for workers. Indigenous leaders, for example, often play a critical role in making sure that collective rights, such as rights to land and natural resources, are respected and protected. As we recognize that each society will create unique institutions and processes within the broad

[20] Dalton, R. (2004). Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies; Norris, P. Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press; and A. J. Martin. (2012). Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo-American democracies. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge. Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Wenger, D., Rand, A. and M. Slade. 2020.

umbrella of democracy, we need to center local expertise and partnerships in our work. This policy recognizes that democracy should not be envisioned as a particular institutional "end state", but rather as a dynamic and evolving socio-political system that is inclusive, accountable, and constantly adapting.

USAID will advance locally driven programming that responds to local knowledge and priorities while working in partnership with local actors to collect and use evidence and feedback to tailor and adapt programs to changing local contexts. USAID will recognize its projects as investments supporting locally-led efforts that will bear fruit over the medium- and long-term because local actors' credibility, accountability, and long-term perspectives are essential for achieving sustainable development. So, to more effectively empower local leadership, USAID should find new ways of working that places host country actors in the lead, and enables them to originate and set the direction of DRG initiatives.

USAID should emphasize the development of problem-solving processes rather than identifying particular solutions for specific problems. Increasing our effectiveness also requires incorporating best fit and contextualized evidence into program design and implementation decisions. Success is dependent more on appropriate tools and approaches for the local context, than on the selection of seemingly "correct" tools.[21] USAID will support effectiveness by fostering evidence collection that examines why certain approaches worked to enable transferability from one context to another.

PRINCIPLE 3: Respond with agility and ingenuity to crises undermining democracy and opportunities to advance democracy.
→*USAID will respond rapidly and decisively to opportunities and setbacks, embracing creativity, agility, and adaptation to respond to windows of opportunity for reform as well as cases of democratic backsliding.*

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

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[21] "Best fit" is a contingent approach to using evidence as opposed to a universal "best practice" approach, and is appropriate to dynamic contexts.

Responding effectively to changing circumstances requires flexible programming. As such, USAID will embrace responsible risk-taking, innovation, creativity, and flexibility. We will also regularly assess our assistance, identify areas for improvement, and make mid-course corrections when necessary.

When opportunity or crisis strikes, we will mobilize resources, technical expertise, political support, and strategic communications from across the U.S. Government and our partners, pooling our collective capabilities to bolster and sustain success. We will leverage and triangulate timely information with deep knowledge of local systems and power dynamics to make decisions that maximize impact. By collaborating with stakeholders from various sectors, we will build broad coalitions and policy consensus to navigate change effectively, and enable responsiveness in key moments.

PRINCIPLE 4: Mainstream prevention and protection for frontline democratic actors into programming.
→*USAID will assess, adapt, and embed, as appropriate, measures to evaluate risk prevention, mitigation, and response into its programming, policy, and technical approaches to protect democracy champions and strengthen democratic institutions.*

Closing civic and political spaces, cyber attacks, and the use of laws and legal systems to repress democratic institutions, human rights defenders, labor unions, government reformers, journalists, and civil society have increased the need to protect those facing risks to their lives and well-being for upholding democratic values. The threats come in many forms, including physical, digital, legal, and psychological. Therefore, through our programming, presence, and policy engagement, USAID will fight to preserve civic space and prevent attacks against democracy defenders, while mobilizing new tools, like Reporters Shield, to protect frontline actors and enable them to continue their work in the face of growing and ever more creative forms of repression. Underlying our efforts is a greater commitment to understand and provide psychosocial support for those experiencing attacks, threats, and intimidation. Mental health resilience will be integrated in USAID DRG programming, with due consideration to the safety and security of USAID's own DRG FSNs, and the frontline defenders working in human rights, civil society, labor, and media, whose safety, security, mental health, and wellbeing are foundational.

USAID will cultivate networks locally, regionally, and globally to strengthen physical and digital prevention and protection measures, including against transnational repression, to enable reformers to solve problems, adapt, and withstand attacks. For example, developing strong networks of not only civil society, activists, and journalists, but also government reformers, such

as judges, prosecutors, anti-corruption champions, parliamentarians, supreme audit institutions, human rights commissions, and change-makers from across development sectors will help prevent attacks, strengthen institutional preparedness and response, and expand protection.

Prevention, mitigation, and response measures are essential for long-term democratic development in partner countries that consider not just immediate needs, but strengthen resilient democratic systems that can weather attacks by internal and external actors. USAID's efforts to safeguard democracy defenders is core to U.S. values and U.S. foreign policy goals that promote and protect human rights and renew democracy worldwide.

VI. LEARNING

USAID remains committed to generating and using evidence and learning to improve DRG assistance. This includes better understanding both common and context-specific challenges to DRG, testing and refining our approaches, and strategically targeting our efforts. DRG programs regularly intervene in complex systems. USAID embraces multiple approaches and tools for learning and is committed to facilitating learning with and by stakeholders in democratic development. Learning approaches must examine interactions to enable findings to be applied in other contexts. Tailoring monitoring, evaluation, and learning is essential to help program designers and implementers use data and evidence to collaborate, learn, and adapt (CLA). As new trends emerge and contexts evolve, additional learning is required to develop cutting-edge approaches and address new threats and opportunities for democratic development. We will continuously review and rethink our approaches to gain insight into what has worked and why, adapt and improve what has promise, and innovate and iterate.

USAID will:
1. **Align its investments in learning with new and emerging DRG topics, and fill critical gaps in knowledge.** Emerging focal areas for DRG work, such as information manipulation, democratic climate action, and transnational corruption, require accompanying investment in learning so that USAID and our partners can more quickly discover which combinations of approaches are effective.
2. **Move learning beyond "what works" to "why it works" and "for whom."** In addition to asking if a DRG intervention works, DRG learning will seek to understand why an intervention worked (or did not) in a particular context, and identify the key programmatic and contextual factors to its effectiveness. In doing so, USAID will learn from patterns when and why interventions are effective and the extent to which they are sustained. This will improve USAID's understanding of how to transfer the learning

from one intervention to another context, and how to adapt it using local knowledge in the new context.

3. **Learn about contributions to democratic resilience over time, from all development sectors.** Research and learning around democracy have emphasized openings and democratization of states, more than understanding what sustains democracies or how they recover in the face of challenges and threats. Put simply, we do not know enough about what factors underpin democratic resilience, or which investments across sectors translate over time into a stronger democracy. Such learning demands more complex notions of progress, longer time horizons, and greater attention to outcomes, such as shifts in norms and culture, that are less visible but equally important.

VII. REQUIREMENTS

To fulfill Pivot 1, this policy introduces a requirement to establish a process for a *democracy review*. The goal of the democracy review is to examine how USAID can adapt or change its programming and presence in autocratic, kleptocratic, or backsliding countries to better promote accountable states, active citizens, and rights-respecting governments and societies; prevent unintended harm to DRG objectives; and improve outcomes in all development sectors. The DRG Bureau, in collaboration with other bureaus or independent offices (B/IOs) and operating units (OUs), will develop the methodology for conducting a democracy review and guidance for operationalizing it. The democracy review requirement will align with relevant legal and ADS requirements and procedures; set clear objectives, scope, and parameters; and seek to minimize any potential burden associated with its operationalization. The democracy reviews will be piloted in one country per region within one year of this policy's release.

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

VIII. CONCLUSION

This policy reaffirms and renews USAID's commitment to democratic governance and human rights by outlining approaches for enhancing the effectiveness of the United States' support for democratic development. The policy's four pivots and four principles aim to deepen the impact of U.S. assistance and respond to evolving trends. The policy is to be accompanied by an implementation plan, developed by the DRG Bureau, which describes in detail the roles,

responsibilities, and actions necessary for its operationalization. The policy also serves as a foundation for advocating for adequate and strategically allocated resources to preserve USAID's role as a global leader in promoting DRG.