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Cambodian women
demonstrating against
the Government in
Pnom Penh in the end
of December 2013.
Foto by Rauli Virtanen

Ministry for Foreign Affairs' democracy support policy

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Promoting democracy has become increasingly evident in international discussions, for example as a result of the “Arab Spring”. This gives Finland an opportunity to assess its democracy support policy and decide on the activities in which it will participate in future as well as the concrete objectives it will pursue. At the same time, it is worth considering how Finland can increase the effectiveness of its activities by reducing their current fragmentation.

This document provides a general analysis of support for “broad democracy” in Finland’s foreign policy. It specifies the general starting points and objectives of Finland’s support for democracy as well as the strategic priorities and the methods used to promote them. The goal is to create as coherent and effective a democracy support policy as possible.

General basis of Finland’s support for democracy

According to the Government Programme, the aim of Finland’s foreign policy is to strengthen international stability, security, peace, justice and sustainable development as well as to promote the rule of law, democracy and human rights.

Democratic countries that respect human rights are the most stable and are less prone to conflicts.

The Government’s 2009 Human Rights Policy Report states that as part of its broad democracy concept, Finland will support the promotion of human rights, democracy, the rule of law, good governance and the eradication of corruption. Democracy work should therefore be based on the international promotion of human rights and the rule of law. It is part of support for social development, conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction work.

A democratic and accountable society that promotes human rights is one of the four priority areas defined in Finland’s Development Policy Programme.



Roma minorities have been marginalized in Kosovo. Literacy is a step towards participation for 63-year old Asime Tahir. Foto by Marja-Leena Kultanen

According to the programme, Finland promotes human rights, democracy and an accountable society by, among other things, supporting human rights actors, good governance and the rule of law, and by strengthening the democratic social institutions that serve citizens and produce security in partner countries. The programme states that development cooperation funding can also be allocated as human rights and democracy support for countries in social transition.

Objectives and priorities

The Foreign Service has prepared a separate Human Rights Strategy and a related action plan for 2013–2015. In addition, the ministry has prepared principles relating to human rights-based development cooperation. The objectives and priorities of these documents are not discussed in more detail in this paper.

Through support for democracy, Finland seeks to strengthen democratic social institutions that ensure equal treatment of citizens and create the basis for economic and business development as well as for a just social policy.

One point of departure is to utilise as far as possible past experience and already accumulated expertise. In view of the links between democracy and human rights, it is an advantage that the priorities of democracy support reinforce the priorities of human rights policy and development policy.

Taking these starting positions into account, in its democracy support policy Finland will focus on the following main themes:

- promoting the political and economic participation (including the development of societies and conflict resolution) of women and groups that are vulnerable, easily marginalised and subject to discrimination;
- supporting/reinforcing conditions for civil society, particularly through support for defenders of human rights (including whistleblowers);
- supporting the development of rule of law, good governance of public institutions and mechanisms, anti-corruption measures, free and fair elections, conditions for parliaments, and multi-party systems.

Modes of implementation

Finland supports the promotion of democracy in international dialogue, in bilateral political dialogue, as part of the EU, in Nordic cooperation, in cooperation with civil society and parliamentarians, in various donor entities, and by giving financial assistance to democracy initiatives both multilaterally and bilaterally.

Financial support is currently distributed in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs by the Department for Development Policy, the Political Department, regional departments and the Legal Service. Support is given using a number of channels: general and project assistance to international organisations engaged in democracy work, to international, Finnish and developing countries' non-governmental organisations, intergovernmental project assistance etc. At present, the number of different democracy-support interventions is large and their average size is quite small. According to the definition of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee, there are more than 200 individual projects, of which just over half consist of projects financed from the Local Cooperation Fund. Their total value is around EUR 40 million.

Democracy support funding will be increased. At the same time, in order to improve operational effectiveness and results, the number of projects will be restricted so that

democracy support does not become fragmented. Support channelled through organisations will be directed above all to selected priority themes, and cooperation with selected “key partners” will be deepened.

Finland will participate in democracy support via the EU, utilising in particular the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).

When selecting modes of implementation, the effectiveness and impact of support is essential. In addition, the added value generated by Finland’s activities in promoting set objectives, complementarity with respect to Finland’s other activities, and Finland’s opportunities to influence when support is directed via international organisations are all taken into account.

The main objectives of dialogue and funding relating to democracy support are specified in country and organisation strategies. Other individual projects specify their own impact targets. Use of the Local Cooperation Fund in democracy support will be encouraged while at the same time targeting it more precisely.

Impact targets and elements supporting rule of law and good governance in a cross-cutting manner will be included in bilateral projects, programme support and sector cooperation in all areas while also ensuring resources to implement the objectives.

Procedural guidelines are also contained in the handbook “Thinking Strategically about Democracy Assistance”, published by the ministry in 2001, and in the “Anti-Corruption Handbook for Development Practitioners”, published in 2012.

Ensuring coherence and consistency of democracy support activities

The more consistent democracy support policy of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs requires a more consultative approach, more systematic contacts and exchange of information within the Foreign Service. A new light Democracy Support Network will be established with the task of enhancing exchange of information about activities under way and to promote exchange of experiences and discussion about topical strategic issues. The network will consist of representatives of all departments engaged in democracy support work, and the Ambassador for Human Rights and Democracy will serve as its coordinator.

In addition, an effort will be made to ensure coherence between Finland’s national and international democracy work. The first Government report on democracy policy, led by the Ministry of Justice has been completed in spring 2014.

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