

“Why human rights and democracy are critical to overcome poverty”

Public lecture by Gunilla Carlsson, Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation at the London School of Economics, Department of International Development and International Growth Centre, 7 March 2011

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Introduction

Professor Mkandawire, ladies and gentlemen, friends

The London School of Economics’ reputation for academic excellence and intellectual rigour is well known and well deserved. So I feel honoured to be able to share some of my thoughts on development cooperation, human rights and democracy with such a highly qualified audience.

It is of course impossible to address the relationship between development, democracy and human rights without mentioning the events currently unfolding in what is referred to in Brussels as our Southern Neighbourhood.

As Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation I have met many individuals whose commitment to freedom leads them to stand up for democratic values and human rights even in times of extreme difficulty and danger.

The popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa are an unprecedented testimony to the aspirations of the people in the region. Aspirations to achieve respect for human rights, freedom and democracy as well as development and growth.

The uprisings serve as a reminder to us all that human rights are universal rights. I will not hide from you that it sometimes makes me ill at ease to hear people hint at the existence of a contradiction between democracy and development, or between human rights and development. “But surely,” some people will tell me, “if you have to choose between food for your family and the right to vote you will go for the food.” This line of argument is of course pure nonsense. There is no reason to believe that material wellbeing and political rights should somehow be mutually exclusive. All available evidence points to the contrary.

What’s more, this is exactly the kind of argument fed to us by autocratic leaders clinging on to power and asking for our support in the name of stability. “Yes,” they will tell the donors, “we do not have democracy in the Western sense of the word but our society is not yet ready. You must give us time to develop. First we must feed our people.”

The second line of defence for maintaining restrictions on civil liberties will often consist of comments referring to the safeguarding of fundamental human rights as a purely “Western” concept, ill suited to the harsh realities of the country in question.

What frequently strikes me is the apparent willingness of some people in the West to accept this line of reasoning. These are the very people who will tell you that we have to be careful about

stressing human rights too forcefully in the developing world. Such an emphasis can be counterproductive, we are told, and we should avoid being seen as lecturing other countries. Frequently, it is pointed out that due to Europe's colonial past we have limited credibility when it comes to human rights.

Let me be very clear about this. I have never encountered a single human rights defender in Africa who has urged me to be less vocal about human rights or told me that free speech or freedom of assembly are European concepts, alien to the African continent.

We have a clear moral obligation to be on the side of individuals who are persecuted for their political opinions. Buying into the false logic of the governments that send these courageous men and women to jail for their political views should be out of the question.

Standing up for the true values of Europe means being on the side of the oppressed, not the oppressors.

The democratic upheavals are changing the political landscape. Some will say that this represents an end to stability. This is plain wrong. As if an undemocratic regime such as the one run by Colonel Gaddafi in Libya could somehow be said to represent something inherently stable. What we are witnessing now is a process that will hopefully lead to conditions being put in place for true stability, the kind of stability that can only be associated with free societies.

We have an obligation to support those who risk their lives fighting for values that we share and take for granted. The events in North Africa therefore represent a strong call to governments and donors working with and truly committed to democracy and human rights.

What we see today is a result of brave people's initiative, with limited or no external support. In Tunisia and Egypt, people have managed to get rid of their authoritarian regimes themselves with relatively peaceful means. This deserves our admiration and respect.

The events in North Africa show how access to modern information and communication technology and social media can create new opportunities for citizens to increase their influence and demand accountability from their leaders. ICT tools also provide us with the potential to modernise our development efforts in a very substantial way. These tools can be used, not least, to promote the cause of democracy and human rights; providing independent sources of information; holding leaders accountable to their citizens; serving as a means to connect citizens both from across the country and in diaspora communities; and quickly, and relatively safely, exposing corruption. To me, these are liberation technologies, symbols of a world that has irreversibly changed.

The number of Internet users in the world doubled between 2005 and 2010, *and has now passed the 2 billion mark*. However, the digital divide between developed and developing countries looms large – 71 per cent versus 21 per cent of the population are on line. Exploring and investing in ICT is a key tool for increased openness and transparency worldwide. Civil society organisations and defenders of human rights need wireless, net-neutral systems and access to be able to reach out.

Some countries limit or prohibit their citizens' access to the Internet – these are the Internet's black holes. In most of these countries it is a criminal offence to express oneself via the Internet

and the persecution of reform-minded people on the Internet is growing.

One of the main challenges is to identify how democratic activists can be brought to the forefront in our support, exploring ways to make use of innovative tools that are relevant for the initial stages of democratic change and transition.

While debate in the international community of democratic governments has largely focused on macro-level questions of diplomacy and political dialogue, much remains to be done in fine-tuning democracy assistance projects at the micro-level. History has also shown that the timeliness of international responses can be a critical factor in tipping the balance in favour of democratic reformers.

As a complement to traditional democracy assistance, the Swedish Government has therefore launched a Special Initiative for Democratisation and Freedom of Expression. This initiative provides an opportunity to rapidly support human rights activists and agents for democratic change in new and more direct ways, not least so as to take advantage of unexpected opportunities for democratic change.

A few weeks ago I invited researchers, Internet activists and ICT entrepreneurs to a meeting in Stockholm for discussions on how ICT can be used to create freedom and how our development aid can be adjusted to the reality we see today. I will meet them on Thursday to deepen the discussion on how our aid efforts should be designed to support digital democratisation and democratic digitalisation as efficiently and effectively as possible.

For me, democracy is about change. Human rights are about freedom. And I would like to see ‘change for freedom’ in the world.

Change for Freedom is also the name of the Swedish policy on democracy and human rights in Swedish international development cooperation, adopted last year.

In our policy three main issues are emphasised;
one: the importance of support to democracy and human rights for poverty reduction,
two: the importance of pluralism as a starting point for socio-economic development, and
three: transparency as a tool for democratisation.

Democratisation and freedom are key aspects of development and the rights perspective needs to be integrated in all our development cooperation efforts. Together with the rule of law, respect for civil and political rights is crucial in building functioning democracies and for reducing poverty in all its dimensions.

Poverty is not just a lack of material resources. It is a lack of power, opportunities and security. It is a lack of influence over one’s own life. I would like to highlight this position as an important starting point for Swedish ambitions for future international development cooperation in general, and more specifically for support to democracy and human rights.

When people living in poverty are denied their right to speak freely, to influence or change their living conditions, or the destiny of their communities and countries, it is a sign of poverty. More freedom and increased democracy is therefore, in itself, poverty reduction. For us, this means that the fight against poverty must be conducted with both resources and values.

This multi-dimensional understanding of poverty is shared by the European Union as a whole, as stated in the EU policy *Consensus on Development* from 2005. It is of the utmost importance to make sure that this is also well reflected in present and future EU policy development efforts.

I am convinced that democratic societies have the best potential to promote sustainable growth and development. We know that safeguarding the rule of law and equality before the law, upholding the ground rules of a market economy, including the protection of property rights and contractual freedom, protecting free media and freedom of expression, all create conditions conducive to economic growth. Everyone should have the right to meet and organise freely, as well as enjoying safety and security to exercise these rights.

Democratic development is more sustainable when combined with social development, in which all individuals in society are included, women and men.

Gender equality is a prerequisite for long-term democratic development. Women and men, girls and boys must have equal

rights and opportunities to shape their lives and to influence society.

Societies *can not* afford to *exclude* half of their population.

Support to democracy and human rights is not only an end in itself; it is also a means of increasing aid effectiveness and strengthening the fight against corruption.

Free and independent media, open and transparent government, *functioning institutions* and a pluralistic civil society are absolutely vital to achieve *true* democracy. These components are cornerstones of a modern development cooperation that takes accountability seriously.

Openness and transparency enhance opportunities for all citizens to monitor budgets and government performance. We know that increased accountability means that states generally better deliver what citizens expect. And in the long run, to be relevant and sustainable, democracies must deliver in terms of good governance. But democracies also need to deliver on their promises and implement decisions as well as making the democratic political system work. *I have followed the openness initiative of the British Government with great interest and together in the EU we, Andrew Mitchell and I, are now striving for an EU Aid Transparency Guarantee.*

The theme of my address is, “*Why human rights and democracy are critical to overcome poverty*”. Let me note that the Arab Human Development Report, in 2002, prophetically identified three main reasons for poverty in the Middle East and North Africa region; one: lack of democracy, two: poor education, three: women’s subordinate position.

In 2004, the report in particular highlighted the link between lack of freedom and lack of development in the region. Clearly, it is in the intersection between democratisation and economic development that the prospects for development in the Middle East and North Africa are to be found.

While many have benefited from economic growth, unless states invest in fulfilling economic and social rights like education, health, electricity, water, housing and civil and political rights, there will be no real development.

To create true democracy and development in the Middle East and North Africa region, pluralism must be recognised – socially, politically, religiously, between modern and traditional structures, young and old, different social classes and different political ideas.

Finally, an important lesson from recent events is the role of social media, new information and communication technologies. Social media like Facebook, Twitter, *text messages* and blogs have created a space for *constant* conversation between large groups of people.

Social media also show that civil society is created by individuals and that ICT provides important tools for people to realise their

democratic aspirations. The use of social media has given courage and mobilised a whole continent in the struggle for democracy.

The European experience of peaceful transitions from dictatorship to democracy is a source of inspiration for democratic movements and individuals in authoritarian states all over the world today. For this reason, Europe bears a particular responsibility to contribute to building democracy elsewhere, in the light of its own experience. In fact, we are morally obliged to do so by our own history.

It is my firm belief that the political dimension of international development cooperation should be guided by this moral obligation.

The Swedish approach is not only to politically pursue the democracy and human rights agenda worldwide, but also to make sure that we apply a development approach to these issues. Giving priority to democracy in development cooperation means recognising the political dimension of development cooperation.

Thank you.