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Helsinki and Tokyo via the SDGs

In June 2019, I attended a [meeting](#) of the Political Party Peer (PPPeer) Network in Helsinki, Finland. In the lead up to the event, I was heavily focused on preparing for two panels and struggling to finalize the latest draft of a publication. As a result, beyond signing up for particular breakout sessions, I paid relatively little attention to the rest of the agenda for the meeting. As it turned out, the first substantive panel at the event focused on the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) and the importance of inclusive politics in achieving the [2030 Agenda](#).



By December, at the invitation of [Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA](#), I was in Tokyo with [six colleagues](#) from four democracy support organizations, learning more about Japan's evolving approach to values-based diplomacy. As we met with a wide range of Japanese interlocutors from civil society, the private sector, private foundations and government, nothing could have been further from my mind than the trip to Helsinki several months earlier. However, as the one-week trip unfolded, more and more of the meetings seemed to reference the SDGs. One of the organizations we met with handed us lapel pins prominently featuring an adapted version of the SDG logo. Another organization had furnished its lobby with several SDG-themed ottomans. Even the wide range of [KitKat flavors](#) in the shops almost seemed to match up with the color codes for the SDGs!

Alongside repeated references to the SDGs, we discussed some of the differences between ours and our interlocutors' approaches. Japanese development assistance defines country ownership as government (executive branch) consent or ownership. The National Democratic Institute (NDI), a U.S. based non-profit organization, partners with civil society, legislators, and political parties to strengthen democratic institutions and to facilitate stronger relations between these institutions and with the public. Ultimately, the goals of the Institute's programs are more credible elections, more inclusive and responsive policy making, and [more stable, prosperous societies](#).

Many of our Japanese interlocutors expressed strong reservations about the extent to which democracy can and should be proactively supported rather than allowed to emerge organically as the result of changes in societal norms, economic conditions, and levels of education. In particular, one expert proposed the SDGs as an alternative, less controversial framework for all development assistance. After all, given international agreement on the SDGs there could be no confusion over questions of country ownership of any assistance delivered under that framework, he implied. Additionally, he noted, the SDGs make no reference to democracy. (Although the

preamble references democracy, none of the 17 SDGs explicitly references or sets targets for democracy.) Drawing inspiration from conversations in Helsinki and elsewhere, I countered that democracy support is entirely consistent with SDG 16, which calls for peace, justice, and strong institutions and that SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality and empowering all women and girls, cannot be achieved without [inclusive democracy](#).

That particular exchange has stayed with me for several reasons. First, the dialogue over the SDGs points to a much broader conversation that has been growing in the international development community. Despite growing awareness of the nexus between political and socio-economic development, the international community has not yet reached a consensus on the links between the two, despite the acknowledgement of those links. For example, in 2002, the United Nations Development Program [noted](#), “Politics matter for human development. Reducing poverty depends as much on whether poor people have political power as on their opportunities for economic progress.” By 2013, growing recognition about this nexus between socio-economic and democratic development had spurred the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Thomas Carothers to write a [book](#) on the subject. That same year, a senior official of the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development [noted](#), “Politics is too important for development in general to be left to political scientists and governance advisors only—we all need to think about it when we act.” Three years later, a World Bank [report](#) issued the following call to action: “we have to overcome the fear of talking about politics, and confront it as part of the challenge of development.” The latest [Human Development Report](#) reiterated, “Too often, inequality is framed around economics...power is the protagonist of this story: the power of the few; the powerlessness of many; and collective power of the people to demand change.” In addition, efforts to understand and address the [drivers of violent extremism](#) have also joined this chorus of voices that increasingly agree that democracy is the enabler of all other development goals.

Second, the exchange gave me a new appreciation for some of the conversations in Helsinki and pushed me to take another look at the SDGs. Although a number of the SDGs were hotly contested and remain [controversial](#) in some circles, they continue to provide a useful framework for [conversations about development goals](#). While efforts to secure more explicit references to democracy in the 2030 Agenda failed, there has been no shortage of initiatives to restate the case for democracy as an integral, if silent, foundational element for accomplishment of the SDGs. In 2017, the Community of Democracies published a [report](#) restating the case for SDG 16 as an enabler of all other goals and outlining voluntary supplemental indicators to ensure more comprehensive reporting on progress towards peace, justice and inclusive institutions. Thus, the PPPeer meeting in Helsinki was just one small, if more recent, example of longstanding efforts to advance the debate on inclusive democracy as an enabler of all 17 SDGs.

Ultimately, like much of the rest of the study mission, the exchange raised more questions than answers. Perhaps that was the whole point: one of our hosts expressed the hope that the trip would spur participants to learn more about Japan and to forge new relationships with Japanese counterparts. I left Japan more convinced than ever that despite some of the differences, my colleagues and I can do more to engage like-minded Japanese. No bureaucracy is monolithic, and it was clear from our meetings that even within government circles, some officials are already persuaded of the case for democracy as an enabler of other development goals and see the case

for more proactively supporting democracy. Additional and perhaps even greater opportunities exist to engage actors outside the government. NDI's programs draw upon international networks that allow civic actors, elected officials, political party officials, and party activists to share experiences and lessons learned with their peers in other countries. Japan's political parties, civic actors, and elected officials have unique perspectives and experiences that could enrich and diversify such exchanges. More Japanese voices and experiences—and diverse ones—would enrich democracy support efforts. Differences in our approaches are not mutually exclusive but could be better aligned to enhance the impact of all development assistance.