

# Nation Building: A Foundation in Democratic Governance

Democratic governments are now in more countries than at any point in history. Accompanying this trend has been a move toward decentralization, where resources shift into stronger local governments, and people have a greater say in making the decisions affecting their lives. In all regions, the unprecedented growth of civil society has brought more people than ever before into the arena of public participation. At the same time, women remain vastly underrepresented in governments, accounting for only 11 percent of parliamentarians worldwide.

Many of the new democratic systems are struggling to grow in the midst of overwhelming development problems. A crisis of capacity means the rule of law may not yet be entrenched enough to slow the longstanding drain of corruption. Vested interests may twist elections, while lack of education strands large portions of the population on the edge of democratic debate. Economic distress shakes states not strong or well-funded enough to blunt its impact.

Other countries face different challenges from authoritarian regimes. Human rights abuses may flourish unquestioned, and the control of information—including by muzzling the press—renders it difficult to identify or respond to the full scope of development problems. Globalization, however, has given this issue a new dimension, with people using technology to glimpse the world beyond their borders. Many are learning enough to question their own system, and to call either for greater alignment with much of the rest of the world, or for

a retreat into more narrowly defined traditional values. Sometimes their protest is peaceful; at other times violent.

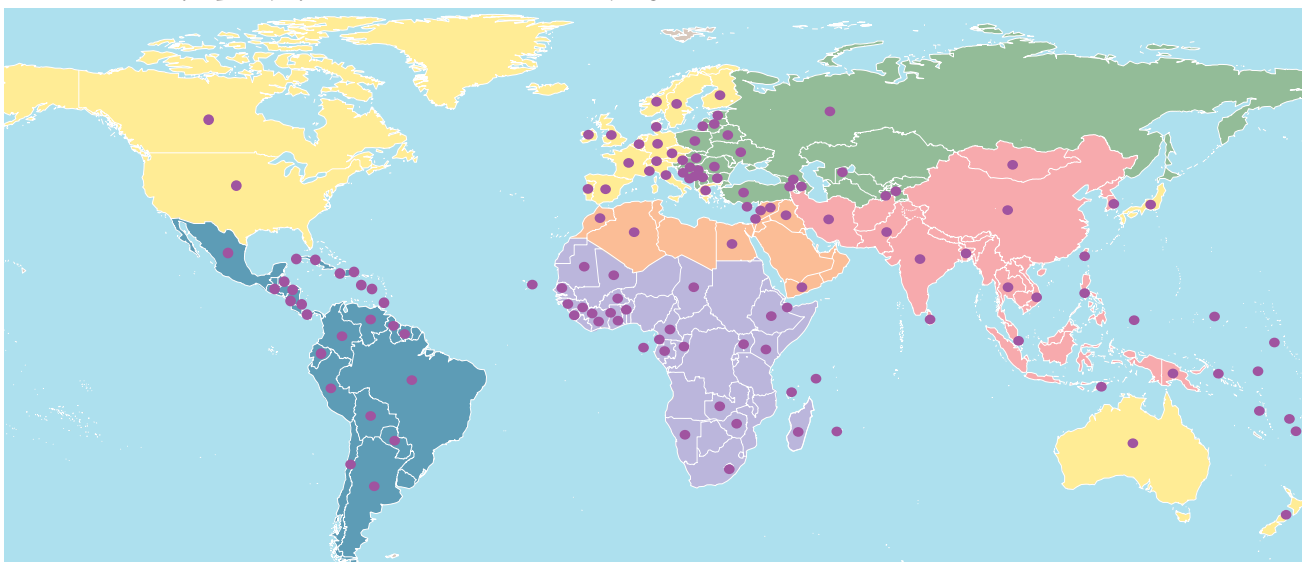
## UNDP Responds

With it increasingly clear that well-governed nations stand a better chance of reaching their human development goals, and at the request of programme countries, UNDP now directs the bulk of its programme resources into achieving results in democratic governance. We help countries promote political participation and become more responsive and accountable to ordinary citizens, especially the poor. Through brokering national and international partnerships and sharing knowledge, we assist nations intent on building stronger legislative systems; educating voters; delivering better public administration; improving access to justice; and strengthening municipalities in delivering basic services to those who need them most. In every arena, we advocate for human rights and women's empowerment.

Present in 166 countries, UNDP supports the largest network of experts working on democratic governance in the world. During 2002, our activities included public radio debates in Niger on a draft decentralization bill. The broadcasts reached a million people and encouraged parliamentarians to modify and pass the bill into law. In Lesotho, we engineered a historic meeting of party leaders to underscore commitment to a fair election, which then took place peacefully after four years of unrest and military intervention. In Nicaragua, we supported the

## COUNTRIES HOLDING ELECTIONS SINCE 2000

*The number and frequency of elections is on the rise in every region.*



Source: Election World

National Judicial Commission. Appointed by the President, it draws upon the expertise of jurists, academics, civil society activists and business people to develop constitutional amendments and new laws that are reviving trust in the justice system.

We also began assessing how to assist the forms of open media and free public debate that underpin successful democracies, and established a global knowledge network on local governance and decentralization. With a rising international interest in democratic governance, our Oslo Governance Centre opened to collect and share research on good governance as a means to reduce poverty. It will work with a wide spectrum of partners, including governments, political parties and NGOs, on questions related to access to justice, civil society, human rights and conflict prevention.

### **Timor-Leste: Reliable Justice, Lawyer by Lawyer**

When the people of Timor-Leste chose independence from Indonesia in 1999, it was nearly the end of their judicial system. All court houses and justice buildings were destroyed in the violence that erupted, and the departure of 7,000 Indonesian civil servants and professionals left only about 100 lawyers in Timor-Leste, almost none of whom had professional experience. Under the occupation, East Timorese could study law, but were not considered for most judicial posts. There was only one private lawyer before 1999.

Today, as Timor-Leste slowly rebuilds, its criminal court procedures are based upon those developed by the UN Transitional Administration. But a reliably free and fair system will depend on capable people. So UNDP, as part of an overall strategy to rebuild institutions and establish democratic processes, has created a mentoring programme that pairs local lawyers with experienced prosecutors, judges, public defenders and court clerks from outside Timor-Leste. The international experts offer many forms of advice, from interpreting contract law to preparing a closing argument. They serve as a resource to fall back on as the East Timorese make their own decisions on what works best for their country.

The stakes are high—in addition to ordinary infractions, the judicial system must grapple with violent crimes committed during the struggle for independence. Still, Vice Minister for Justice Domingos Sarmiento reflects that the East Timorese have fought hard to have justice and freedom. “We hope that, as a people gaining experience, we will be able to build a fully functioning and fair judicial system,” he says. “It is already happening; we have come a very long way since 1999.”

### **Sierra Leone: An Orderly Vote, A Chance for Peace**

Sierra Leone has been torn apart by civil conflict for over a decade. Last year, it landed at the very bottom of 162 countries surveyed by UNDP’s human development



*As Timor-Leste recovered from conflict and faced its limited legal capacity, UNDP brought in lawyers such as Rui Pinto, who serves as a mentor on contract law.*

index. So people held their breath in May 2002, when national elections took place. Would previously warring factions accept the results? Fortunately, as President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah swept through the polls with a wide margin, defeated candidates stepped forward and willingly conceded. The peace held—as did hopes for the future.

UNDP helped lay the groundwork for this major step toward a stable democracy by joining with other partners to strengthen institutions in Sierra Leone, including the National Consultative Conference, which charted the road to the elections, and the National Electoral Commission, which organized them. Civic education programmes encouraged debate and distributed information about the issues at stake.

Collaborative projects with the US-based National Democratic Institute and the UK’s Westminster Foundation for Democracy trained and deployed 2,000 election observers and political party representatives. In cooperation with the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union) and the Economic Community of West African States, UNDP provided funding and assistance for the deployment of 40 election observers.

Today, UNDP has turned to post-conflict recovery, connecting ex-combatants with job opportunities, reconstructing smashed infrastructure, and restoring civil authority in areas previously held by rebel forces. While addressing the consequences of the war, we are assisting Sierra Leone with the root causes as well—pervasive poverty, economic inequality and poor governance.