U.S. President Joe Biden will host a virtual democracy summit on December 9-10, 2021. The purpose of the summit is to exercise American leadership towards global democratic renewal by focusing across three principal themes: defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights. Anchored in the idea of the power of America’s example, the summit is expected to serve as a platform where the U.S. will lead the world’s democracies in confronting challenges of democratic backsliding and agreeing on a shared agenda to address threats to shared values. Given the memories of the past four years’ experiment with democracy at home, this announcement has raised questions. But its promise of political renewal has also re-energized the policy community. The result is an ongoing conversation by policy circles that includes, among others, different interpretations of the concept of democracy that delivers.

CIPE, the Center for International Private Enterprise, has been helping build democracy that delivers since 1983. Founded as one of the core institutes of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), CIPE acts with the belief that economic freedom amplifies political freedom, that democratic political institutions enable economic growth while open economic institutions help sustain democracy – thus operating in complementary ways, and that the creation of a level playing field and an enabling environment for the private sector to thrive is dependent on the core institutions of democracy being strong and transparent. Working with local partners that include advocacy organizations, chambers of commerce, think tanks and business associations, CIPE helps build these core institutions of democracy by currently supporting more than 200 projects in some 80 countries. So, while democracy that delivers may be a novel concept to some, it
is not to CIPE, and thus this contribution to the ongoing discussion.

Published in 2007, CIPE’s guide on *Helping Build Democracies that Deliver* underlined three ways in which democracy must deliver to make a meaningful difference. First, the government must provide social services, security and justice through access to education, health, mobility and personal protection. Second, the government must facilitate economic growth by creating an enabling environment for the private sector to flourish and for living standards to improve. Third, the government must be accountable to the public and responsive to its needs and demands. This means making commitments and following through on them.

Inherent to these deliverables are values that distinguish democracy from non-democratic forms of government. These are essential to democratic governance. As also argued by Frances Z. Brown and Thomas Carothers in an article for *Foreign Affairs*, democracies do more than improve their citizens’ standard of living. Democracies provide access to information, decentralize governance, democratize opportunity, take decision making closer to people, create and sustain effective channels for free expression of people’s aspirations, protect individual freedoms and thus enable the people to govern through political institutions they help shape. Democracy’s ultimate source of legitimacy lies in its ability to remain *credible* in the eyes of the people. Or as the Indo-European root of the word credible indicates, to remain worthy of the heart, of the millions that go through their journey of democratization and of the thousands that carry out the work of democracy assistance.

In a 1999 article, Amartya Sen draws similar conclusions and makes a strong case for the values that a democratic system represents in addition to its practical benefits. He

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**Get to Know FEDN**

The *Free Enterprise & Democracy Network* (FEDN), established and supported by CIPE, brings together private sector leaders and advocates of freedom from more than 40 countries to exchange solutions and make the case for democracy that delivers. Click here to learn how members exemplify leadership in tangibly improving lives, while promoting democratic values in their own communities and beyond.
terms the exercise of civil and political rights of intrinsic value to human well-being and social life. He underlines the political incentives offered through a democratic system to be of instrumental value in people’s ability to voice their economic needs. And he considers democracy to be a system that facilitates mutual public learning, thus playing a constructive role in shaping society’s values and priorities to eventually become fit through democracy. His analysis offers a holistic view of what it means for democracy to deliver in a meaningful way.

Traditional wisdom has its own way of echoing this theme. There is this old story about a young girl who visits a construction site. She approaches the workers and asks, “excuse me, what are you doing?” to which the first responds, “can’t you see, I am laying bricks.” She then approaches the second who is doing the exact same thing and repeats the question; he responds, “can’t you see, I am building a wall.” Upon approaching the third, who again is doing the exact same thing, here is what she hears as the answer to her question: “can’t you see, I am building a temple.”

This story has a worthwhile lesson. While it is easier to merely see the mundane task of, say “laying bricks” or the job of “building a wall,” there is more that drives, inspires and results from shared responsibility and collective human action: values that narrate our history, determine our current identity and define our tomorrow; values that bear the scars of time, carved and reshaped by it, as do human civilizations.

The story of helping build democracy that delivers can be viewed through a similar lens. It could be viewed as a set of apparently mundane tasks: writing reports or developing policies and proposals, building consensus and organizing through conferences, seminars and smaller round tables that together, may result in some form of minor improvement in how services are delivered in one, two or a few sectors, in one, two or a few geographies. But there is more. These apparently mundane tasks are inspired by the dream of human prosperity and are anchored in the ideals of political and economic freedom. The cumulative power of a coherent set of many of these apparently mundane tasks can result in changes in the lives of millions of people and the value sets they hold close.

Democracy’s ultimate source of legitimacy lies in its ability to remain credible in the eyes of the people.
A quick review of CIPE’s four decades of project implementation brings out several examples of programmatic interventions in support of democracy in many countries. These interventions, some of which are briefly described below, have resulted in improvements in people’s day to day lives. But equally if not more importantly, these programs have promoted the values of inclusivity, diversity, participation, fair play, a level playing field in governance, markets and civic life, and healthy competition to drive innovation in target contexts. The programs put emphasis on the empowerment of marginalized groups such as women, youth and the LGBTQI+ community, ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities and artists or art-entrepreneurs. In these examples, you will see humble attempts at supporting democracy to deliver through tangible improvements in people’s lives, as well as an earnest effort to represent and promote the values of democratic governance.

CIPE’s Women’s Business Agenda (WBA) concept is one such initiative. Its implementation in countries including Bangladesh and Nigeria has helped facilitate women entrepreneurs’ access to finance, increased businesswomen’s security in markets and resulted in the establishment of gender-sensitive loan desks at banks. As a result of WBA advocacy in Bangladesh, CIPE and the country’s first Women’s Chamber of Commerce succeeded in increasing the proportion of women entrepreneurs.

CIPE’s Center for Women’s Economic Empowerment (CWEE) works with partners in more than 80 countries to strengthen community and global networks that advocate for democratic reforms, facilitating more resilient and inclusive economies. Models of success include the development of women’s business agendas, business resource centers, and networking.
receiving commercial bank loans from 19% in 2007 to more than 50% by 2014. In addition, more than $93 million in loans for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were given to 10,000 women; and more than 65% of the country’s banks dedicated desks for women borrowers. In Nigeria, advocacy tied to a WBA initiative led to the Central Bank of Nigeria accepting moveable assets as collateral, increasing access to finance for women without fixed assets. Along the same lines, the CIPE supported Women’s Business Resource Center in Papua New Guinea has helped democratize opportunity by breaking down barriers faced by women entrepreneurs. The initiative has empowered women economically by facilitating their access to and participation in market activities, which in turn increased their level of participation in decision making.

To promote sustainable and integrated solutions to the Syrian refugee crisis, CIPE, in collaboration with a consortium of international partners, has been implementing the Livelihoods Innovation through Food Entrepreneurship (LIFE) project. The project leverages food as a medium for cross-cultural exchange and incubates entrepreneurs. As a result, it creates and expands enterprise opportunities, facilitates refugee and host communities’ access to these opportunities and stimulates business development in the food sector. The statistics of this project are impressive. To highlight a few: so far, more than 300 entrepreneurs, including 207 women entrepreneurs, have been through the incubation program, 84% of members attribute positive changes in their business ventures to their participation in the LIFE Project, more than $100,000 in seed funding has been awarded to over 35 food businesses through business pitch competitions, and over 1,000 food sector workers received Ministry of Education approved food sanitation certification. Yet there is more in the values that this project represents: values of equity, inclusion and empowerment of the marginalized communities.

To help make federalism deliver in Nepal, CIPE has been supporting the maturation of

The cumulative power of a coherent set of many of these apparently mundane tasks can result in changes in the lives of millions of people and the value sets they hold close.
market-oriented think tanks in every province of the country, including creating new think tanks where needed. In partnership with a Kathmandu based think tank Samriddhi Foundation, and the nation-wide network of think tanks including Bikalpa-An Alternative, Pokhara Research Center, and the Hriti Foundation, CIPE is building analytical and advocacy capacity to hold provincial and local elected officials accountable for democratic and economic reforms. The provincial think tanks are serving as platforms to create awareness of the roles and responsibilities of the local governments, thus strengthening decentralized decision-making and people’s ability to participate in it at the sub national level.

Through a unique programmatic intervention in Guatemala, CIPE, in partnership with the Red Nacional de Grupos Gestores (RNGG), a national network of community development groups, strengthens democracy through art-entrepreneurship and citizen engagement. With a particular focus on empowering the creative industries, also called the Orange Economy, the project promotes private initiative and innovation by motiving youth to harness their creative talents in exploring economic opportunities. The project makes use of creative media to improve the Orange Economy ecosystem and democratic processes in Quetzaltenango. To support and promote innovative resilience in the face

The new Soy Colmena Creativa entrepreneurship program supported by CIPE and partners in Guatemala and El Salvador focuses on youth in the creative economy, also referred to as the “orange economy”.

[Image of group of people]
of the ongoing pandemic, the project has facilitated art-entrepreneur led interactive opportunities to discuss and strategize on the leadership role of the creative industries in Guatemala. Empowering young artists and art-entrepreneurs to take inspiration from and promote their local culture and values and start new businesses in the creative industry not only improves these artists’ standard of living but also contributes to economic and civic engagement, particularly for rural youth, a group traditionally disenfranchised from political and economic participation.

CIPE’s programs in the Maldives, the Philippines and Sri Lanka contribute to building and strengthening political institutions that facilitate Right to Information (RTI). In these countries, CIPE is helping address existing gaps in accessing government information by improving the framework of RTI processes, advocating for RTI legislation, and promoting the implementation of the RTI Act. In the case of Maldives, CIPE’s work on RTI has helped to create the collaborative environment that is a prerequisite for responsive democratic governance. Working with Transparency Maldives and the country’s Information Commission, the program has improved the Commission’s transparency and effectiveness by establishing new operation procedures and training information officers in several ministries. The program has also helped popularize RTI requests among the public through awareness raising workshops, seminars and media campaigns.

As these examples demonstrate, CIPE and its local partner organizations are committed to generating results that improve people’s lives by facilitating and strengthening their access to information, enabling them to hold their governments accountable and have a say in how decisions are made. CIPE’s work is anchored in the values of democratic governance, takes inspiration from people’s resilience in the face of challenges, and gains strength from people’s indigenous movements that demand to be their own masters. It is these anchors, sources of inspiration and strength, that enable CIPE to marry the drive for tangible contribution to improving lives with a democratic value system. This marriage of tangible deliverables and democratic values renders CIPE’s work credible in countries where it operates.

To deliver on the promise of democratic renewal is to live by example and demonstrate that democracy still works.
It is humbling though to note that there are no shortcuts to democratization and the work of democracy takes, to say the least, patient persistence. Democratizing governance is a process of adaptive change, involving not just figures of authority, but everyone, the people. Sustainable democratization requires more than changes of figures of authority or symbolic quota allocation to promote representation of marginalized communities. Particularly in societies that have persisted in the face of non-democratic forms of governance, democratization involves long processes of collective and willing responsibility towards unlearning old habits and learning new ones. Support to democratic governance, therefore, is about empowering people to willingly choose their adaptive process of transformation and be part of their own unique journey to democracy. Democracy assistance is more than fixing the state of affairs in a country. It is more than the rather quick but less lasting introduction of a technical fix to resolve a technical problem. It involves people’s values and interaction between these value sets, that, over time, results in some form of value reassessment, deconstruction and reconstruction, affecting lives, of many generations.

This is precisely why democracy strategy and America’s ability to exercise real leadership in developing this strategy is of such vital importance. Real leadership in this case mandates two characteristics: first, willing embodiment of values of democracy, and second, courage to transparently pinpoint and acknowledge instances of contradiction between democratic values and the reality of a challenged state of democracy, whether at home or abroad. Democracy is not a state of being. It is an imperfect journey; a process of continuous struggle to meaningfully listen, learn and engage. To deliver on the promise of democratic renewal is to live by example and demonstrate that democracy still works.

CIPE makes a humble effort at supporting democracy that delivers in many countries. This effort aspires to improve people’s lives, but also be the face of what democracy represents in terms of values to its citizens. It is the balanced focus on both these aspects of democracy assistance that results in meaningful and lasting change. CIPE will continue its work of democracy assistance and welcomes the adoption of equally holistic approaches in the service of global democratic renewal by policy and development circles.
Aarya Nijat
Program Officer, Asia & Pacific

CIPE Program Officer Aarya Nijat manages a portfolio of projects in South Asia with a thematic focus on democratic governance, enterprise ecosystems, anti-corruption, and business advocacy. Most are implemented through partnering with local private sector and civil society organizations. Read her full bio here.

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