THE AUTHORITARIAN ECOSYSTEM

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The effects of international aid on authoritarian regimes

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Introduction to the papers

Authoritarianism is on the rise globally. It is estimated that 74% of the world's population now live in authoritarian regimes and that many countries are currently experiencing a decline in their levels of democracy, including the United States of America, among others (Nord et al., 2026).

These developments have profound global implications. Many authoritarian regimes have already become more assertive on the global stage and are actively reshaping a wide array of elements of international politics, spanning international organisations, public opinion, and culture. Thus, the rise of authoritarian regimes poses a challenge to societies across the globe and to democratic governments and policymakers. Understanding how authoritarianism sustains itself, and what can be done about it, has therefore never been more urgent.

This paper is part of a collection of policy briefs that brings together some of the leading academics and practitioners involved in research and work on authoritarian regimes. While authoritarian regimes are primarily characterised by the executive's means of accessing power (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018), the toolbox of autocracies spans a wide web of practices, actors, and institutions to ensure their hold on power domestically and with effects internationally. We have, therefore, termed this network the authoritarian ecosystem, in an effort to bring together the important components of modern authoritarian rule. Authoritarian rule is sustained not by leaders alone but by the interlocking network of institutions, actors, incentives, and norms that make it possible. The contributions of this collection show that while unfair elections are the defining feature of authoritarian regimes, the nature of the authoritarian eco-system goes well beyond that and connects different actors, institutions, and levels.

The contributions gathered in this collection were selected to reflect both the breadth of the authoritarian eco-system and the diversity of regional and institutional contexts in which it operates. Authors were invited to ground their analysis in current research while orienting their conclusions toward actionable recommendations for democratic policymakers, civil society actors, and international organisations. Each brief is intended to stand alone as a resource for practitioners while also forming part of a cumulative and coherent analytical framework. Together, the briefs provide a comprehensive picture of the authoritarian eco-system and the challenges it poses for policymakers across the globe. While there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach in dealing with autocracies, all briefs provide detailed policy recommendations that may serve as guidance for stakeholders.

The policy briefs are jointly published by the UK Political Studies Association (PSA) Specialist Group on Autocracy and Regime Change (ARC) and Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD).

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Executive summary

The decline of democracy across the world shows no signs of slowing down. At the same time, some 80% of aid is provided to authoritarian regimes. There are concerns that international development assistance may be entrenching authoritarian rulers. But aid does not necessarily only strengthen regimes;[1] there are also examples of where it has undermined them.

Development practitioners are aware of the risks of providing assistance in these countries. In order to mitigate these risks, they have implemented programmes which are intended to support democratization, and have taken measures to protect aid against capture, for example routing it via non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Despite these measures, development programmes remain at risk of bolstering authoritarian rulers – especially general development aid which is not specifically targeted at supporting democracy. This brief focuses on helping development practitioners identify and think through the possible ways in which aid programmes may entrench or indeed weaken authoritarian regimes, with a view to minimising negative consequences and maximising the potential for positive ones.

The brief sets out three main ways in which aid programmes can impact on authoritarian rule:

- Firstly, programmes distribute *resources*, including cash but also in-kind resources. If these are captured by regimes, they can be integrated into patronage networks. But if they reach other groups which oppose the regime, this may weaken regimes' dominance in society. Whether this is desirable to aid donors depends on who these groups are.
- Secondly, programmes build *structures* such as roads, railways, schools, hospitals, and offices. These may enhance regimes' ability to reach across their national territory. But they can also be used by other social groups, including political opponents, which can reduce regimes' dominance.
- Thirdly, development programmes can have political effects linked to the *ideas* they propagate. These ideational effects may include, for example, promotion of democratic norms, or on the other hand, signalling a permissive environment following election rigging or violent repression, which indicates acceptance of the regime.

The brief does not suggest that all aid to countries under authoritarian regimes should be stopped. However, if aid is not to bolster regimes, practitioners need to anticipate and track relevant consequences more effectively. There are five specific policy recommendations:

1. **Avoid high-risk forms of aid**. Budget support and support to the security sector in authoritarian regimes are particularly likely to entrench regimes. Donors should generally avoid these forms of aid.

[1] Throughout this brief, I use the term 'regimes' as shorthand for 'authoritarian regimes'.

2. **Carefully consider resource distribution practices, support reformers and avoid increasing regime patronage**. Donors and NGOs should seek to ensure that resources are under the control of reformers (inside or outside the state) and that they avoid being integrated into wider regime patronage networks.
3. **Where constructing infrastructure, minimise risks of entrenching regimes at the design stage**. Donors should be aware of the risks of supporting regimes politically through infrastructure, for example where projects are located in a regime's political base. In some cases this should prevent projects from going ahead, or modifications should be made to mitigate risks.
4. **Carefully calibrate communications to avoid legitimating regimes**. Communications – including day-to-day interactions with local populations – should emphasise support for democracy and avoid creating the impression that development partners condone authoritarian practices.
5. **Monitor programmes' consequences for regimes during implementation, adapt, and evaluate**. Drawing on this brief, development practitioners should identify potential consequences of programmes for regimes during implementation and also incorporate these into evaluations. Programmes should be adapted quickly where adverse consequences are found.

Introduction

The decline of democracy across the world shows no signs of slowing down. For some time, international observers have been recording rises in authoritarianism globally. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index reports that only 6.6% of people now live in a 'full democracy' (EIU, 2025). Yet authoritarian regimes continue to receive large volumes of international aid. In 2024, according to OECD figures, 80% of official development assistance flowed to autocracies.[2]

Development practitioners are aware of the risks of providing aid in these countries. Whether they work in foreign ministries, bilateral or multilateral development agencies, or NGOs, practitioners have implemented programmes which are intended to support democracy. They have also taken measures to protect aid against capture – for example routing it via NGOs rather than through state systems.

Despite this, development programmes remain at risk of bolstering authoritarian rulers. This is especially true of general development assistance, such as that focused on economic cooperation, global health, humanitarian assistance, or climate change. Most of this is not intended to promote democracy, and practitioners do not always investigate its effects on regimes. According to the latest available evidence, aid specifically targeted at promoting democracy may have some positive impact on democratisation, but the effects of general development aid are much less clear and may be negative in some cases (Gisselquist, Niño-Zarazúa and Samarin, 2021). Also, while assistance routed through NGOs may reduce some risks, studies also show that this can be co-opted by regimes and may contribute to legitimating them (Toepler et al., 2020; Heiss, 2019; Lorch and Bunk, 2017).

This does not mean that all aid necessarily bolsters autocrats. In some cases, development assistance may undermine authoritarian regimes. Development assistance represents a source of funding that is distinct from the government, and is provided by authorities who do not necessarily share regimes' worldview. This means that it has the potential to weaken regimes' hold on power (see for example Paudel, 2016; Williams, 2025). But this is not necessarily the same as supporting democracy. For example, some development assistance may increase popular support for non-democratic opposition groups.

The effects of development assistance in authoritarian regimes are complex and context-dependent. In order to understand them better, we first need to move away from the idea that some aid can be politically neutral, or that only a few programmes are at risk of having negative consequences. In reality, every programme that spends money in a country is likely to have some

[2] Research by the OECD found that the proportion of country allocable development assistance flowing to autocracies, as defined by the Varieties of Democracy institute, rose from 64% in 2010 to 79% in 2019 (OECD, 2022). I have reviewed the equivalent data for subsequent years, and found that the proportion varied from 74% in 2020 to 80% in 2024.

kind of political consequence, whether local or national. Funds are provided to certain individuals and groups, which can strengthen these individuals and groups politically. International development programmes also introduce new ideas or interact with existing ideas and this can also have political consequences. Not all these effects will necessarily support incumbent governments. But in order to understand the effects aid programmes do have, we need to examine closely what each programme does, who it funds, and the kinds of ideas it is engaging with.

To help practitioners anticipate, identify and monitor the consequences of development programmes in authoritarian regimes, this brief suggests there are three pathways through which programmes can impact on authoritarian rule. Some will be familiar to practitioners, others less well known.

- Firstly and most obviously, programmes distribute *resources*, including cash but also in-kind resources such as vehicles, drugs and food. If these are captured by regimes, they can be integrated into patronage networks. But if resources end up in the hands of other groups which oppose the regime, this may weaken regimes' dominance in society. Whether this is desirable to aid donors depends on who these groups are.
- A second type of effect relates to programmes' effects on the built environment. Many programmes build *structures* such as roads, railways, schools, hospitals, and offices, and these may enhance regimes' ability to reach across their national territory, making it easier for them to repress dissent, increase surveillance, and broadcast regime propaganda. However, these structures can also be used by other social groups. They may be captured by political opponents or used in a system of parallel service delivery by aid agencies, both of which can weaken regimes' dominance.
- Thirdly, alongside their material consequences, development programmes can have political effects linked to the *ideas* they propagate. These ideational effects may include, for example, promotion of democratic norms, or on the other hand, signalling a permissive environment following election rigging or violent repression, which indicates acceptance of the regime.

In order to minimise the risk of development programmes strengthening authoritarian regimes, practitioners need to develop their understanding of how their programmes are distributing resources, building structures and engaging with ideas locally. It is also important to recognise that programmes may have complex effects whereby they bolster a regime in some ways and undermine it in others. The rest of this brief outlines the three processes through which aid can impact on authoritarian regimes in more detail. In the final section, I then turn to specific policy recommendations for development practitioners.

Resources

Development practitioners are aware of the risk that development assistance may be captured by authoritarian regimes. Most obviously, practitioners seek to prevent aid from being lost to corruption. But the risk of capture is much broader than this. Even where development assistance is used for its intended purposes, it may be incorporated into regime patronage networks.

There are two main ways in which this can happen. Firstly, aid funds can be used to co-opt strategic groups including elites within the ruling coalition, other elites that rulers are seeking to buy off, or the regime's wider political base. Various studies have shown how governments of aid-recipient countries have shaped the allocation of development assistance, ensuring that their political supporters are rewarded. For example, Jablonski reviewed the allocation of World Bank and African Development Bank projects in Kenya from 1992 to 2010, finding that there was a 'strong bias in the allocation of aid toward constituencies with high vote shares for the incumbent' (Jablonski, 2014, p. 295; see also Briggs, 2012). In Angola from 2008-12, a flagship Chinese-funded housing programme constructed some 20,000 apartments but access to these was linked strongly to political affiliation. The government assigned 43 apartments to every ministry. In order to get onto the waiting list for an apartment, one had to be loyalist of the ruling party (Wang, 2022).

A second strategy is where regimes use aid resources not to buy off elites but to cultivate dependence in the wider population (Albertus, Fenner and Slater, 2018). If citizens receive benefits, such as social protection, agricultural inputs, or healthcare, they may be more likely to support the regime. Those who are considering dissent or resistance are threatened with having these benefits withheld. An example of this is Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front regime (EPRDF, 1991-2019). There are various accounts of how local officials used distribution of development resources, including food- and cash-for-work schemes funded by international donors, to force people to comply with regime directives and vote for the ruling party (see for example Lavers, 2024, pp. 236-60). Jablonski quotes an opposition politician who said 'People are told if they don't vote EPRDF, then no fertilizers, [and] clinics. If you get sick, they don't get a referral note from the *kebele* [sub-district] official for hospital in Addis Ababa' (Jablonski, 2014, p. 293).

The potential for development assistance to be captured in these ways means that there are particular risks associated with programmes that are implemented through the state in authoritarian contexts. Budget Support, where direct financial transfers are made to governments' national treasuries, together with other non-earmarked types of assistance such as debt relief, is especially susceptible to capture. Security sector reform programmes are also a high-risk form of aid in authoritarian contexts as funding can support repression (Rolandsen, Dwyer and Reno, 2021).

Non-budget support programmes which transfer resources through state systems have a lower but still significant level of risk. The fact that resources are earmarked for particular activities gives regimes less discretion compared with budget support, but still allows them significant control for example over sub-contracting. Working with legislatures and judiciaries may be subject to lower levels of risk, but only if these are not also captured by regimes; unfortunately, this is rare in authoritarian contexts.

In reaction to the risks of passing aid through state systems, donors have looked for alternative modes of delivery. One strategy is to pass assistance through NGOs – referred to in some studies as 'bypass aid' because it bypasses the state. The literature is quite divided in terms of the impacts of this form of aid on regimes. Some studies find that allocating more aid through NGOs is likely to undermine incumbents. For example Allen, Ferry and Shammama (2023), reviewing data from 2004 to 2017, found that where more foreign aid was allocated through NGO channels, leaders

were more likely to lose office. However, DiLorenzo (2018) found almost the opposite effect. Looking at OECD data from 2005-10, he found that aid delivered through NGO correlates with less frequent domestic unrest in autocracies. Reviewing this literature, it is clear the effects of bypass aid are context-dependent, but that bypassing the government is not a panacea for avoiding regime capture. This is also borne out by accounts of aid delivery in particular contexts. For example, during his fieldwork in Ethiopia in 2018, Lavers found that local officials had a high degree of control over NGO-funded support, which 'went exclusively to those on local government lists' (Lavers, 2024, p. 244).

Aid resources can undermine regimes just as they can strengthen them. If aid resources are provided to powerful actors who are not captured by regimes, this may undermine regimes' domestic political dominance. Whether this is desirable to donors depends on who these actors are, for example internal reformers within government, democratic opposition figures, or rebel groups. It has been a guiding principle of governance thinking for decades that development agencies should seek to identify and work with reformers within government. If these figures acquire influence over aid resources, this has the potential to reform and democratise governments from within; but this only applies if reformers are not themselves co-opted by regimes. Donors have funded NGOs advocating for democracy in the past, but this has become increasingly difficult as regimes have imposed restrictions on their operations (Toepler et al., 2020). But development assistance has on several occasions been captured by rebel groups, for example in Somalia (Elder, 2022). This indicates how control of aid resources has significant political consequences for regimes which can either bolster or undermine them.

Finally, aid resources can have complex effects that are not always possible to predict in advance. My own research into an NGO-funded rural development project in Ethiopia implemented between 1988-2009 found that the regime had significant control over key funding streams including construction of schools, clinics and roads, and training with its associated *per diem* allowances. But certain resource streams escaped regime control, in particular staff salaries and agricultural inputs. Over the long term these allowed a group of influential people in the district to build up their financial independence from the regime, which was linked to increased dissent in the area (Williams, forthcoming). This indicates the importance of close monitoring of programmes' resource streams and the individuals and groups which benefit from them.

Structures

Besides the general risk that the resources of development programmes may be captured by regimes, there are particular risks faced by programmes that build structures, from small-scale schools and clinics to large-scale infrastructure such as roads, railways, ports and telecommunications. These structures can potentially impact on authoritarian regimes' political dominance by enhancing their ability to reach across their territory. Structures built by development programmes such as roads, government offices, schools, and health clinics can increase the presence of officials in areas that were previously remote from the political centre. Regimes can use aid-financed roads to move police or soldiers to areas where there is dissent or protest. For

example, international efforts to build roads as an extension of state authority in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) enabled predation by officials and state security forces (Bachmann and Schouten, 2018; Autesserre, 2014, pp. 143-7).

Even seemingly innocuous 'developmental' infrastructure can potentially be used to enhance regime reach into previously remote areas. In my own research, I found that a hospital built by an NGO in rural Ethiopia in 2003 was incorporated into the regime's political strategies, for example through political evaluations of hospital staff and the commandeering of an ambulance to transport soldiers around the district during election time (Williams, 2025, p. 16). Leaders can also use infrastructure to change the political landscape: for example the Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya has been seen as contributing to the political marginalisation of coastal people, as port operations were moved to an inland dry port close to Nairobi (Wang, 2022).

Another way in which built structures can contribute to regimes' political dominance is through conveying a particular image of the state or regime. Many authoritarian regimes justify their rule by claiming that they are bringing modernity and progress to citizens. In such cases, regimes can point to structures built by development agencies, like dams, highways and railways, as evidence that the promised modernisation is happening (Anand, Gupta and Appel, 2018; Terrefe, 2022).

Of course, not all built structures will have these effects and some may have the opposite. Roads may be used by rebels as well as state security forces. Schools and clinics which are run by NGOs or donors can operate as parallel systems, undermining regime authority. An example of this is Afghanistan, where enormous sums were spent on infrastructure and parallel governance structures such as Provincial Reconstruction Teams were put in place which contended for authority with regional governors. The result was a weak regime which crumbled extraordinarily fast as NATO withdrew in 2021 (Murtazashvili, 2022). Even where built structures increase regimes' ability to reach across their territory, this may not improve regimes' image with citizens. In Ethiopia, schools and clinics built by an NGO between 1988-2009 were seen by residents as evidence that the regime was neglecting its responsibilities (Williams, 2025).

In addition to this, some structures built by donors or NGOs can be understood as reinforcing division and separation between internationals and locals. Structures such as the Mogadishu International Airport Zone or the 'floating hotels' built for UN personnel in Timor-Leste are more likely to invoke ideas of the distinct power and authority of international actors, which may undermine regime dominance (Bakonyi, 2022; Smirl, 2015; Lemay-Hébert, 2011).

The effects of built structures on regimes are context-dependent and a key recommendation of this brief is that development practitioners need to monitor them; they cannot all be predicted or anticipated. However, there are some principles that can be used to assess whether particular built structures are likely to strengthen or weaken regimes. One key factor is the pre-existing strength of the regime, and the extent to which it can use infrastructure to consolidate its control. Regimes such as the EPRDF in Ethiopia (1991-2019) or the Rwanda Patriotic Front in Rwanda (1994-) can ensure that donor-funded infrastructure is used to enhance their reach into rural areas, but in other contexts such as Afghanistan under NATO, regimes are not as dominant and other social groups may benefit from infrastructure as much as or more than the regime.

Another vital element is whether people identify these structures with the regime or with external donors. Where infrastructure is co-branded with the state and where donors or NGOs emphasise their connections with government, infrastructure is more likely to be identified with regimes. But where donor communications and engagement with local populations emphasises their differences and distinctions from regimes, people may identify built structures with outsiders, which is more likely to undermine regimes' political dominance (Williams, forthcoming).

Ideas

Development programmes' consequences for regimes are not limited to the material sphere. Through the way they engage with people in the areas where they work, aid agency staff can have effects on the ideas people have about regimes, their international allies, and their legitimacy. These effects are particularly significant for smaller-scale projects that do not transfer large amounts of resources or build significant structures, such as technical assistance schemes which fund expert visits, scholarships or study tours. However, they are also a vital part of the effects of larger programmes.

Development programmes can potentially support democracy if they enable the diffusion of democratic norms. Democracy assistance – such as support for civil society organisations which advocate for democracy and human rights, election observation support, and technical assistance to electoral commissions, media, or political parties – involves the deliberate transmission of knowledge about democratic institutions along with democratic values (Resnick and van de Walle, 2013, p. 33). This kind of assistance has been shown to have some successes (Gisselquist, Niño-Zarazúa and Samarin, 2021). Whilst donor interest in this area is declining (Carothers, 2025), it should still be an important element of donor strategies in authoritarian regimes, though it has been less successful in closed autocracies (ICAI, 2023).

In theory, development programmes can support the diffusion of democratic norms even if they are not explicitly focused on supporting democracy. If aid agency staff model and promote democratic norms in their interactions with local populations, this can potentially help to diffuse these norms among populations in aid recipient countries. This can be done through day-to-day interactions with local populations which encourage free expression, democratic debate, and transparency (Cole, 2022; Herrold and AbouAssi, 2023). It also requires robust responses to electoral manipulation or human rights abuses. It has often been challenging for donors to maintain a robust and consistent approach in such cases. Nonetheless, this is one of the main ways in which donors can attempt to support democracy.

The flipside of this argument is that aid donors can potentially entrench authoritarian regimes if they are understood as condoning authoritarian practices such as election rigging or violent repression of dissent. If aid donors either stay silent or restrict themselves to mild criticism in response to such practices, this gives populations, as well as regimes, the impression that they are tolerated or even approved. This in turn makes it more likely that regimes will do the same again in future (von Billerbeck et al., 2025; von Billerbeck and Tansey, 2019).

A more contested question is on the effects of aid programmes on local perceptions of government legitimacy in authoritarian regimes. There have been many studies on this and their results are inconclusive. Some authors find that development programmes have strengthened support for incumbent governments. For example, a study of a NGO community health worker intervention in Uganda between 2011 and 2018 found that 'citizens see NGOs as a resource that powerful incumbents control and citizens then evaluate the performance of those incumbents more positively' (Springman, 2022, p. 526). A wider range of quantitative studies finds that aid and other non-state service provision has either no effect or modestly improves citizens' assessments of governments and perceptions of their legitimacy (see for example Blair and Roessler, 2021; Dietrich, Mahmud and Winters, 2018). In a detailed study of NGOs in Kenya, Jennifer Brass finds that they are 'part of the de facto organizational makeup of the state' and that they 'enhance state legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens' (Brass, 2016, p. 3). There are other studies, however, which find that aid programmes have undermined citizens' assessments of governments (see for example Atitianti and Asiamah, 2023; Atitianti, 2023).

What seems to be most important in determining whether development programmes bolster or undermine citizens' support for incumbent governments is not so much the fact that aid is provided, but how itis provided (Mcloughlin, 2019). As seen in the discussion about built structures above, development programmes can be implemented in ways that reinforce government authority, for example through joint branding, joint visits involving government and development agency staff, public meetings and events which emphasise partnership, and so on. These kinds of activity are likely to reinforce perceptions of regime legitimacy. However, communications which emphasise development agencies as powerful actors in their own right, which deliver services independently of the regime, are more likely to undermine regimes.

A crucial factor in determining development programmes' ideational effects is how they are received and understood by local populations. For example, local expectations of the state are vital in the question of whether aid strengthens perceptions of government legitimacy. If people expect the state to deliver services, they are more likely to form negative opinions of government if services are delivered by outsiders. But in many contexts people's expectations of the state may be very low, which may mean they are grateful to receive any services, no matter from whom. More broadly, aid programmes are often understood quite differently by local populations to how they are seen by donor and NGO staff. For example, suspensions of aid linked to human rights abuses can backfire if local leaders succeed in depicting them as neo-colonial impositions (Cheeseman, Swedlund and O'Brien-Udry, 2024). It is therefore vital that aid practitioners find ways to learn how their projects and programmes are seen locally.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper does not recommend practitioners to stop all forms of aid to authoritarian contexts. It demonstrates that assistance does not necessarily always strengthen regimes; in some contexts, it may undermine them. The challenge for development practitioners is therefore how to anticipate and track the effects of development assistance on authoritarian regimes, to minimise negative effects and maximise positive ones.

This is undoubtedly challenging. The effects of aid on authoritarian regimes are complex, context-dependent and not always visible. It is difficult for development agency staff to know the effects of their programmes on regime patronage networks or on how citizens assess the regime's legitimacy. Having close contact with citizens in the countries where they work is essential.

A further difficulty is the fact that donors are often faced with a choice between embracing a regime, emphasising partnership, and potentially contributing to legitimising it, on the one hand; or choosing to operate at arms-length from a regime, instituting parallel systems and emphasising differences, with the result of weakening state legitimacy and potentially also state capacity. Neither option is appealing to aid donors. What many would like to do is to build the legitimacy of the state, whilst avoiding giving unnecessary support to the incumbent government, and at the same time deepening support for democracy. But this is very difficult, especially in authoritarian contexts where the divide between state and regime is often blurred.

What development agencies can do is to anticipate the possible consequences of their support and to monitor effects as they play out in real time. This should be combined with a flexible and agile approach that involves quick changes to programmes if adverse consequences are identified. Importantly, the effects of aid on authoritarian regimes are generated by the sum of donor interactions in a particular country. If donors want to support democracy and avoid entrenching regimes, they need to institutionalise this commitment in all aid programmes, not only those related to supporting democracy.

With this in mind, the brief makes the following recommendations for development practitioners:

1. **Avoid high-risk forms of aid**. As shown in this brief, budget support and support to the security sector in authoritarian regimes are particularly likely to entrench regimes. Donors should generally avoid these forms of aid. Other kinds of support to the state in authoritarian contexts are also at risk. Whilst passing resources through governments in some contexts may be justified, donors should be aware of the risks of such support and should maintain strong scrutiny over resource flows. It is likely to be easier to do this if the amounts involved are relatively small.
2. **Carefully consider resource distribution practices, support reformers and avoid increasing regime patronage**. If resources are passed through state systems, they should be under the control of internal reformers, and not be integrated into wider regime patronage networks. Where possible, donors should also work with non-state actors who have the potential to engender reform. NGOs should carefully review who has influence in determining

beneficiaries at local level, avoiding this kind of programme if they are unable to prevent officials from vetting beneficiary lists.

3. **Where constructing infrastructure, minimise risks of entrenching regimes at the design stage**. When designing infrastructure projects, donors should consider the potential political implications, for example if a project is located in a regime's political base or if it would allow the regime to increase security force access to a region. In some cases this should prevent projects from going ahead, or modifications should be made to mitigate risks.
4. **Carefully calibrate communications to avoid legitimating regimes**. All communications by donors and NGOs can play a role in whether they bolster regimes or promote democracy. This includes not only formal communications such as press releases and media interviews, but also more day-to-day interactions with local populations. Communications need to be calibrated carefully to avoid the impression that development partners condone authoritarian practices. It is advisable to avoid communications which emphasise too close a partnership. Donors and NGOs should look for ways to communicate their support for democracy, subtly if necessary, or more overtly if possible. In order to make this work, it is vital to understand how development agencies are seen and understood by local populations.
5. **Monitor programmes' consequences for regimes during implementation, adapt, and evaluate**. Drawing on this brief, development practitioners can identify potential consequences of programmes for regimes during implementation and also include these in evaluations. By tracking where resources flow, what structures are built and how these are used, and how programmes are perceived and understood, practitioners can get closer to understanding programmes' political consequences. This information should be used to adapt programmes quickly where adverse consequences are found.

Foreign aid is not guaranteed to entrench authoritarian regimes. In order to make sure it does not do so, practitioners can use this brief to anticipate and track possible political consequences of their programmes. It is vital that they do – as otherwise there is a serious risk that aid will continue to bolster autocrats and erode democracy across the world.

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