



Staying Engaged in Authoritarian Contexts: Learnings from SDC Experiences

1 Background

Working in conflictual and authoritarian contexts has become the norm. Two out of three people in the world live in non-democratic regimes, or in countries that experience a democratic backslide. As a result, the proportion of ODA flows invested in autocracies reached 79 per cent in 2019 (up from 64 per cent in 2010). Particularly striking is the 19-fold increase of humanitarian aid to closed autocracies over the ten-year period, with Syria, Yemen and Jordan receiving the biggest shares.¹

This global trend of democratic backslide and rising authoritarianism makes SDC's work more challenging – but also more important than ever. Poor governance, disregard for human rights and dysfunctional relations between the state and citizens are causes of poor basic services and lack of market development and therefore lie at the heart of Switzerland's development cooperation. Today, 25 of SDC's 35 priority countries are considered autocratic.² This has been accompanied by an increased risk of abrupt and illegitimate regime change in partner countries (with a peak of military coups in 2021/22).

The purpose of this paper is to assist SDC field offices in preparing their response to rising authoritarianism. It is the final product of the SDC

Staying engaged in fragile vs. authoritarian contexts

Authoritarianism is part of the broader OECD fragility framework. Staying engaged in authoritarian contexts has similar challenges to other fragile contexts, with one important particularity: development partners are exposed to political authorities with limited or no domestic and international legitimation. This requires a political positioning *vis-à-vis* these authorities, carefully weighting political and reputational risks with humanitarian and development needs. Therefore, questions regarding how to engage with the authorities, how to channel funds, how to adapt working strategies, and how to lead policy dialogue gain particular importance.

Learning Journey on Working in Authoritarian Contexts.³ SDC's conceptual understanding of authoritarianism covers two dimensions: democratisation (institutional change that allows for political competition and opposition) and liberalisation (process of institutional change that increases political rights and civil liberties).

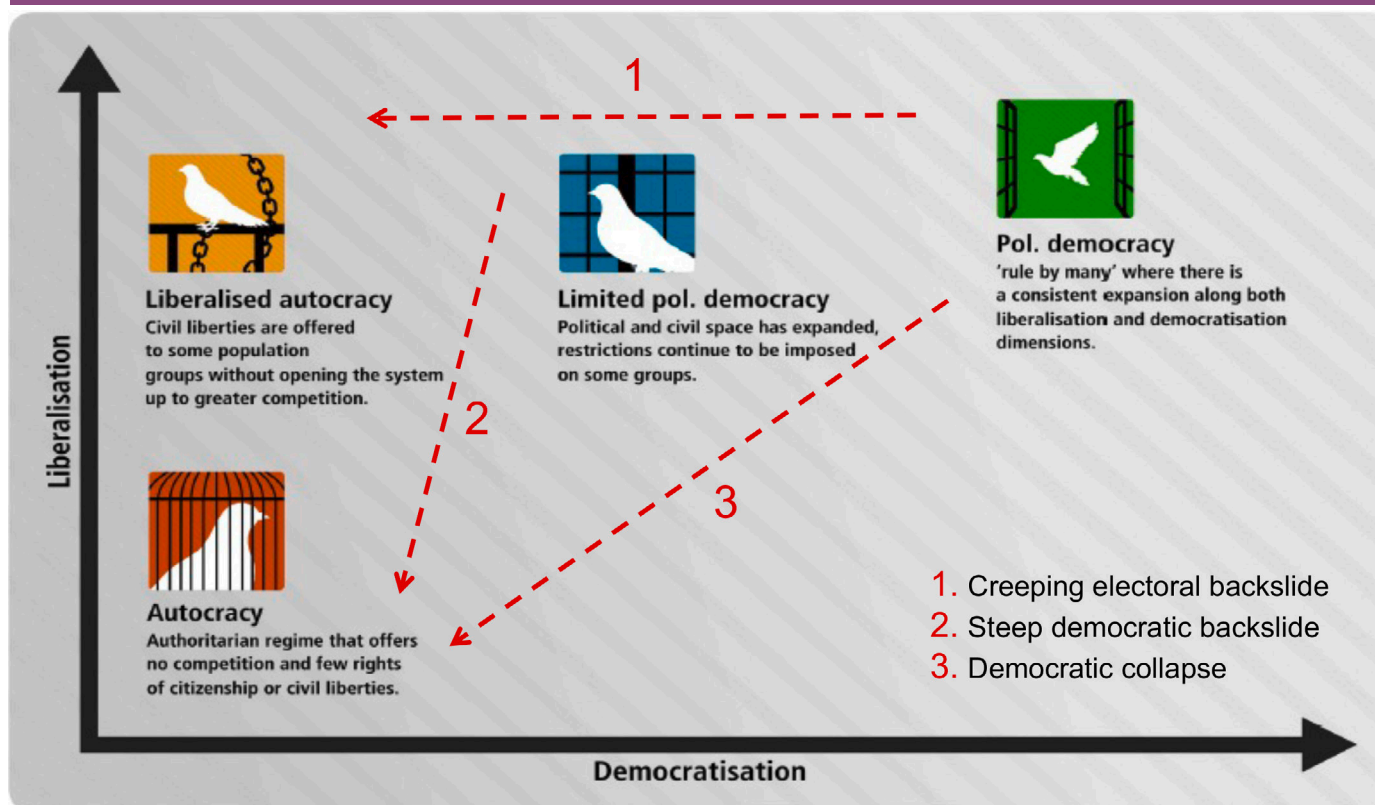
Trajectories of democratic reversals and increased authoritarianism are manifold – and context-adapted responses are therefore needed. An analysis of five SDC partner countries reveals three distinct patterns: (1) creeping electoral backslide:

1 Official Development Assistance by Regime Context (2010–2019). OECD Development Policy Papers, No. 44, July 2022.

2 Interesting to note that 19 SDC priority countries are also considered fragile according to the OECD, with 16 being classified both autocratic and fragile. Hence, autocracy and fragility are closely interrelated: autocratic rule is a key factor for fragility, and the one may lead to the other or vice versa.

3 The Learning Journey resulted in several products: The SDC's policy note on Governance in Authoritarian Contexts provides a conceptual base and proposes approaches and entry points to work on authoritarian states. Three issue papers and synthesis notes (*Examining Authoritarian Developmental States, Do Autocracy and Fragility Connect?* and *Gender and Authoritarianism*) highlight specific aspects of engagement in authoritarian contexts. Finally, a reflection note based on learnings from five country cases that faced either rapid or slow backslides in both political liberalisation and democratisation (Serbia, Tanzania, Nicaragua, Burundi, and Myanmar) was produced, and served as central source for this document.

Figure 1. A typology of regimes and trajectories of increasing authoritarianism



Source: Adapted from *A Typology of Regimes and Trajectories of Increasing Authoritarianism*, SDC Policy Note.

countries that experience a slow but steady reduction of democratisation without a big decline in political liberalisation, (2) steep democratic backslide: countries that experience a drastic event where the state clamps down violently on its citizens' freedoms (after a period a few years of creeping electoral backslide), (3) democratic collapse: countries that see a drastic reduction of democratic gains in both contestation and political liberalisation simultaneously.

2 Why stay engaged?

The challenges of working in autocratic (and often fragile) contexts are immense. Planned results may be achieved only partially, and investments over several years of cooperation might be reversed completely when the political context changes fundamentally. Furthermore, there is an increased risk of doing harm.

There are however a number of good reasons to resist withdrawing:

- 1 **Mandate:** It is essential to uphold our duty and mandate towards the people that Switzerland want to support, to leave no one behind even when the situation becomes complicated and costly; and to convey democratic values through development programming.

- 2 **Sustainability and effectiveness:** By staying engaged, SDC can sustain the Swiss investment and networks in a country, on the basis that remaining, even at a reduced scale, is more effective and efficient than withdrawing and re-entering in a country.

- 3 **Credibility and confidence:** Switzerland can remain a relevant political actor, maintain the local network and keep channels for dialogue open. SDC's development or humanitarian interventions contribute to credibility and confidence building, while providing opportunities to protect democratic spaces in an indirect way.

Staying engaged comes with dilemmas and requires trade-offs. Firstly, how can we continue providing support according to our mandate, without appearing to legitimise and reinforce illegitimate governments? Secondly, can we insist that democratic and human rights principles are upheld as a condition for providing this support? Thirdly, when working with civil society and other civic actors, rather than partnering with governments, how can we, on the one hand, ensure safety and prevent overburdening of civil society partners, and on the other hand, avoid creating parallel structures and ensure the sustainability of our intervention?

3 SDC's approach to staying engaged

3.1 Risk parameters

Rising authoritarianism or violent political upheavals – independent if they are happening gradually or abruptly – profoundly affect international cooperation. Staying engaged in such contexts comes with elevated risks, mainly with regard to security risk, political/reputational risk, programmatic and fiduciary risks. The following risk parameters require particular attention:

- **Exposure of staff/partners (and assets) to security risks:** Violent political turmoil as well as rising authoritarianism increase the risk for reprisals or violence against international and local staff or partners.
- **Government exposure:** Depending on the level and nature of cooperation with government authorities, political upheavals and rising authoritarianism increase the political and reputational risk for Switzerland (supporting or legitimising de facto authorities).
- **Financial exposure:** In authoritarian contexts where the rule of law is challenged, there is an elevated risk that funds are not used for the intended purposes and the absorption capacities for transparent and accountable use of funds usually are significantly reduced. This risk is particularly high in contexts with large budgets and where funds are implemented through country systems with government(-related) counterparts (fiduciary risk).
- **Programmatic exposure:** Fundamental changes in context/framework conditions affect the underlying assumptions of programmes and can negatively affect the successful implementation and the achievement of objectives.

3.2 Build on SDC's standard practices/principles

In order to respond to such developments, Swiss development cooperation can build on well-established practices that remain relevant and often gain importance. This includes, inter alia, the following principles:

- **Context first:** Good contextual knowledge and continuous monitoring of the political situation (including through instruments like MERV, political economy and conflict analysis, steering of country programmes, scenario planning) build the foundation for context-sensitive actions.

- **Conflict sensitivity/Do no harm:** Acknowledging that development cooperation partners are part of the context, it is crucial to anticipate and monitor the intended and unintended impact of our activities in order to avoid contributing to instability and violence, and – where possible – contribute to conflict transformation and peace.

- **Coordination:** Cooperation in integrated embassies, with all involved offices of the federal administration at headquarters (Whole of Government Approach – WoGA) as well as donor coordination and exchange with national and local partners contribute to coordinated and coherent action.

- **Nexus programming:** Foreign policy instruments, including development cooperation, humanitarian aid, peacebuilding and diplomacy, are deployed based on the context needs for best possible outcomes.

- **Diversification of partners:** A diversified and balanced network and portfolio of partners reduces the risk of one-sided dependence or instrumentalisation.

4 Learnings from SDC's Practice: Preparing and reacting to deteriorating political contexts

4.1 Responding to different trajectories

Based on previous SDC experience, the trajectories of autocratic backslide influence SDC's response.

In situations of creeping democratic backslide, SDC offices opted for incremental adaptations of their programme: partnerships with the government were reviewed, without stopping them altogether (cancelling only programmes with high political exposure, continuing more technical/sectorial interventions or engagements with government counterparts at a local level). In parallel, SDC started to diversify its portfolio of partners, working more with CSOs, NGOs, international organisations and independent media. Coordination between SDC and embassy staff as well as with donors increased to reassess the context, and define a rationale for staying engaged.

In situations of steep democratic backslide, which come with a significant drop in political rights and civil liberties, SDC offices took bolder decisions. These included an initial freezing of programmes (particularly the ones delivered through the government), followed by a renegotiation and reduction of the portfolio with

the government (with the aim of having government accompanying programmes but not managing funds). In parallel, working with CSOs and the private sector was increased (although this proved difficult because of government clampdowns). Internal and external coordination increased and rationales for staying engaged were prioritised.

In situations of democratic collapse, SDC offices stopped working with the government altogether. A minimum of communication was however maintained, to promote dialogue. Programmes were shifted drastically away from government to CSOs and the UN, particularly enhancing humanitarian aid. Internal and external coordination increased, and the offer of support to staff was prioritised.

4.2 Eight Areas for Action

Independent of the course of action and the individual trajectory, the following Eight Areas for Action provide an overview of fields that require the attention of SDC field offices.

The table below outlines key questions and options as well as insights from peers for each Area for Action. The questions and options are to

Eight Areas for Action

- Security: put staff safety first
- Understand the changing context
- Define Principles of Engagement
- Reinforce coordination
- Review programme orientation
- Review relationship with government and other partners
- Review funding modalities
- Invest in staff capacity

be understood as support in defining a tailor-made response. These measures can serve both as preparation in situations where the context is deteriorating gradually, as well as immediate action in cases of rapid change.

The eight Areas for Action are interconnected. The order presented here does not represent a hierarchy.

Areas for Action	Questions/options	Insights from peers
Security: * Put staff safety first	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the security risks for Swiss staff, local staff and partners? • Is it safe for staff to come to the office? How can flexibility in the workplace contribute to staff safety? • Is there a need to provide psychosocial support? • Is there a need to temporarily freeze programmes until everyone is safe? • Can IC programmes be continued, and in what way? • Is our communication happening through safe means? 	<p>Be prepared for everything. In Afghanistan, most donors had the intention to keep a presence during the Taliban takeover in 2021. Nevertheless, the dynamic changed very quickly and most development partners withdrew their staff. Being prepared for this scenario was essential. SDC prepared its staff through a mock exercise on how to handle grave threats such as a direct attack on the offices, hostage situations, and/or a sudden collapse of government.</p> <p>Psychosocial support: SDC Myanmar established an optional support line, available 24/7, that provided psychological support to staff members.</p> <p>Language matters: SDC Burundi changed the language used and no longer mentions terms like 'civil society' and 'human rights' which could result in repression for programme members as well as their partners.</p>
Context analysis: Understand the changing context Tools: MERV, PEA, CSPM, scenarios, risk matrices	Context analysis and monitoring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the space for cooperation? • Do we still have access to the poorest? • Is the current CSPM still relevant given the context change? • With whom can we operationally and politically cooperate? • How can the knowledge of NPOs and local partners be included in our context analysis? • Does the rapid context change require adaptations in the use of the MERV/ other tools? 	<p>Participative approaches to assess the fast-changing context gain importance; as a process and a means to an end to foster joint understanding, within Swiss representations (political and development actors), including local staff and experts and their intimate knowledge of the context.</p> <p>Adaptive use of tools: In situations of quick democratic backslides and collapses, the standard context analysis tools may not be 'fast enough' to react, and tools assessing the exposure to risks seem more appropriate to guide the SCOs' response and adaptation. SDC Serbia introduced mini-MERV, while SDC Myanmar used a traffic light system (risk matrix) to categorise projects according to its level of exposure in terms of collaboration with the state and other relevant risks.</p>
Principles of engagement: Define rationale for staying engaged in view of coherent communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the reasons to stay/to withdraw? • What are the (reputational) risks to stay/withdraw? • What principles need to be respected when staying engaged? • What indicators need to be monitored that might lead to a revision in the decision to stay engaged? • Do we work 'on the conflict' or only 'around the conflict'? 	<p>Swiss positioning: SDC Nicaragua elaborated an internal note on staying engaged, which defined indicators and a framework to assess them periodically, as a basis to decide about its continued engagement. The four fields of observations were: (1) Quality of the policy dialogue; (2) Space for civil society; (3) Access to the poorest; and (4) Security. A 'follow-up group' (composed of members from the desk, country office, regional division, embassy, WoGA) met every two months and monitored the four dimensions.</p> <p>Joint positioning with other donors: After the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, four principles of engagement were defined with other donors and partners: (1) Direct support to the people of Myanmar, in particular to the most vulnerable populations; (2) No collaboration with state structures (exception: where collaboration is inevitable or in order to provide essential services to the population, it should be restricted to the technical level); (3) Preservation of the foundations for a more inclusive and accountable Myanmar; (4) Respect for the 'do no harm' principle and continuation of peacebuilding efforts. These principles are not set in stone and should be regularly reviewed.</p>
<small>* The FDFA's security management abroad is subject to specific rules and procedures under the lead of the Center of Crisis Management (KMZ). The questions and options here are complementary and do not replace the directives of the KMZ.</small>		

Areas for Action	Questions/options	Insights from peers
Coordination: Reinforce coordination with WoGA and other development partners	Internal coordination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there a need to start/increase the frequency of regular internal meetings (including NPOs) at COOF level? Is it indicated to create a WoGA crisis coordination group (SCO, desk, embassy, regional)? Relations with other donors and partners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate and engage with international multilateral partners to create collective voice Try to engage with non-DAC countries (possibly through more technical and politically neutral activities) 	Intensifying coordination: Generally, coordination between SDC and political staff at the embassy intensifies, with joint periodic reviews, ambassadors participating in MERVs and in discussions on reprogramming needs. This allows for joint understanding of the situation and needs, and stronger and unified communication to Bern. <p>Donor coordination vs. Swiss neutrality: Coordination with donors can reduce reputational/political risks, but needs to be carefully balanced with other Swiss interests, for example maintaining a certain independence to keep channels for dialogue open with de facto authorities.</p>
Adapt programme to ensure viability and relevance of Swiss interventions	Review themes/domains <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is our thematic and strategic orientation still relevant? Review focus/approach <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How adequate is our overall approach and focus of work (i.e. system orientation)? Consider shifting the focus from duty bearers (governments, authorities) to right holders (population, citizens, communities) Consider shifting the focus from system orientation (use of country system) to people-centred community-based approaches Consider shifting focus to decentralised/local, or (cross-) regional level? Consider shifting the focus on cooperation at technical level/focus on transversal or sectoral governance? Review modalities and IC instruments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What mix of modalities and instruments is adequate in the current context? (Direct implementation; contributions and mandates to international, multilateral partners; political dialogue, mediation and peacebuilding, etc.) Adjust ongoing projects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How ambitious can we be? How are partners' abilities to implement programmes and spend budget affected by the context? Which projects might need to be substantially adapted, or suspended? 	Shifting focus to right holders: When the Taliban overran Kabul in 2021, SDC modified the modality and strategy of its programmes. Some of the programmes that supported the national government were discontinued and SDC started to support local NGOs and CSOs. <p>Going local: Due to several <i>coup d'états</i> in Mali (2012, 2020 and 2021), budget support to the Government of Mali remains suspended by most IFI and development partners. Switzerland has a long tradition of providing decentralised sectorial budget support, transferred directly to the accounts of subnational entities, which was continued.</p> <p>Going regional: In Tanzania, when local partners came under more and more pressure due to restricting laws, SDC began to cooperate with regional organisations based in neighbouring countries. Communication with partners in Tanzania continued at a more informal level to avoid endangering them. The media programme adapted its outcome from building advocacy capacity to the safety of journalists. In Nicaragua, adaptation of the portfolio involved strengthening the focus on human rights by supporting supranational institutions to monitor the human rights situation and offering technical assistance to the state to promote reforms.</p> <p>Reducing ambitions and being more realistic and pragmatic regarding the objectives and achievements that can be made in these contexts is paramount, for adequate steering, but also for the communication with headquarters and government counterparts. Many COOFs feel that the reduction in ambition happened too late, and that there is a need for higher tolerance for risks and costs. In a context that has become even more fragile, results must be judged within a longer time span.</p> <p>Nexus response: Although a humanitarian framing might seem a more justifiable way of continuing operations in Myanmar after the military coup, this would risk the top-down humanitarian response not enhancing the capacity of communities and civil society. To misread the context and provide a merely humanitarian response to a complex phenomenon could generate a significant backlash, creating dependency on humanitarian aid and supporting the authoritarian government.</p>

Areas for Action	Questions/options	Insights from peers
Reconsider relationships with government and diversify partners	Relationship with government <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with host governments: How can we work/communicate with government? Formal/informal, focus on line ministries, local level, etc. Who are acceptable partners for policy dialogue? • Funding channelled through host government: What amount of funding is channelled through government entities? Is there a need to freeze disbursement to state organisations? Do we have budget support to national or subnational level? 	<p>Governments are not a monolith: Stopping work with government at the centre does not mean stop working with government altogether. There might be more legitimate counterparts (soft-liners) at the local, technical or sectorial level with whom collaboration can be continued.</p> <p>Multi-level dialogue: Multi-stakeholder and multi-level dialogues can be a useful strategy when staying engaged. It allows COOFs to engage with authoritarian governments, while other WoGA partners push for respect of human rights, democratic rules and inclusive development spaces ('good cop – bad cop').</p> <p>Use reprogramming for policy dialogue: The reorientation of programmes can be an opportunity for political dialogue, and is often used to reinforce (implicitly) governance and human rights considerations.</p> <p>Keep entry ticket: Keeping a small percentage of the portfolio in partnership with sectorial government authorities – with more rigid restrictions on its implementation – allowed an open dialogue channel with the authorities in Nicaragua to be kept.</p>
	New actors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there space for civil society, and are there any possibilities for support? • Are there new/emerging actors with whom we could cooperate, i.e. private sector, think tanks? • Who are the reliable CSOs in a given repressive environment? 	<p>Non-conventional actors: SDC Myanmar strengthened the collaboration with Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), which fulfil government functions in territories under their control.</p> <p>SDC Serbia increased its collaboration with credible CSOs and independent media not only in order to diversify its portfolio, but also to counter the threat of development funding being subverted or appropriated by implementing partners that were allied closely with government functionaries.</p>
Funding modalities: Review funding modalities to reduce financial exposure and increase operational agility	Financial planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should we and can we continue with the same size of programme? • Elaborate/utilise a small action fund for quick reaction. • Consider small disbursements to reduce exposure of funds. • Is the allocated budget still adequate considering the changes in the context? <p><i>See 'Reconsider relationships with government and diversify partners' above</i></p>	<p>Downsize budget: SDC Myanmar reduced the budget of the cooperation programme after the military coup in 2021 to reflect the shrinking operational space.</p> <p>Additional security measures: SDC Burundi introduced additional requirements to release payments to avoid financial frauds especially at the local level.</p>
Staff: Invest in staff capacity to deal with changed context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider different training sessions for the team to adapt to the context, including on security issues, management of risk situations, conflict-sensitive programme management or humanitarian assistance. • Consider recruiting experienced staff members who have the skills and ability to work in crisis situations to share the knowledge and experience of other COOFs. 	