

**Statement by H. E. Ambassador Per Thöresson on the International Day of Democracy, 15 September, 2015**

Sweden is very pleased to co-sponsor this event on the International Day of Democracy. The theme *Space for Civil Society* is also a very pertinent one. Because democracy cannot be assessed only in terms of numbers of elections and voters. A healthy democracy requires space for civil society; ideally a web of independent organizations, social movements and independent voices which make up important links between citizens and the state. Civil society is needed to channel the political will of people, to draw attention to problems and, not least, to permanently question and monitor power!

Efforts to support, defend and sustain the work of civil society organizations are fundamental in Swedish foreign policy and also in our commitment to promote global development. Our belief that civil society is a key to robust democracies is grounded on our own experience. Sweden has a long tradition of social movements and independent organizations. A continuous dialogue between the state and civil society as a way to address challenges is the longstanding base of our own democratic development.

Today we see some very worrying developments in the area of democracy and human rights around the world. For nine consecutive years, the countries where the human rights and democracy situation has worsened outnumbered those where the situation has improved. The number of countries that hold general elections has not increased since the mid-1990s. And in many cases the introduction of general elections has not been followed by a more thorough democratization, but merely served the purpose of legitimizing power.

The need to strengthen democracy from below, through the support of civil society organizations is as pressing as ever. The support for democracy, human rights and the rule of law is a core part of Swedish development aid. About 30 percent of the Swedish development budget is set aside for this area. Moreover, civil society organizations play a key role in Swedish development aid generally. More than one third of total Swedish development cooperation is channeled directly to or through civil society.

Sweden also recognizes the need for innovation in the field of democracy support. In recent years we have given support to organizations using new technologies to improve the security around their communication and to reach new target groups and networks. An example of this is "*Making all Voices Count*", an initiative which Sweden co-founded and which aims at promote political participation through IT and innovative technology.

Now, I look forward to a good and open discussion on what challenges civil society faces in promoting democracy and how we can work together to create a better space for civil society! Let me conclude by thanking the UN Working Group on Democracy, the UN Democracy Fund, International IDEA, our fellow co-sponsors and the panelists for helping to organize this important discussion.