

DEMOCRACY: FREEDOM TO BECOME

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While no consensus exists on how to define democracy, equality and freedom have both been identified as important characteristics of democracy since ancient times.

The most common form of modern democracy is representative democracy in which the voting public takes part in elections. If ideal democracy could be achieved, it would mean that all have an equal say in the decisions that affect them. Usually, this includes equal (and more or less direct) participation in the proposal, development and passage of legislation into law.

The democratic principle has also been defined by some, including the German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt, as "the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given... and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known." This type of freedom, which is connected to human capacity to begin anew, sees democracy as "not only a political system but an ideal, an aspiration, really, intimately connected to and dependent upon a picture of what it is to be human—of what it is a human should be to be fully human".

Democracy was invented by the Greeks in the middle of the 5th century and the word coined from δῆμος (*dêmos*) "people" and κράτος (*kratos*) "power". It was a political system in some Greek city-states, notably Athens. I will refer to Plato in an effort to examine the deeper meaning of democracy.

Plato's best known and most comprehensive work is the *Republic*. Plato had no faith in the rule of the rich, nor any confidence in the ability of ordinary citizens to run a city like Athens. The rich, as he saw, had mostly their special interests in mind, and during the time of their short-lived regimes they had shown to what length they could go to defend the advantages of the few against the majority of ordinary people. But the rule by the many was no remedy for the ills of oligarchy, according to Plato, because ordinary people were too easily swayed by the emotional and deceptive rhetoric of ambitious politicians. It was the *demos*, after all, the majority of ordinary people, who time and again had supported the disastrous campaigns of the Peloponnesian War by their votes, who had condoned numerous atrocities and breaches of the law, and who were also responsible for the questionable trial and execution of Socrates. Athenian politics, in other words, seemed an irremediably corrupted affair, and all a rational person could do was to attend to personal matters, and to pursue wisdom in the privacy of one's solitude and a small circle of friends.

(It is obviously not a foregone conclusion that whatever the majority decides is also the best—or even acceptable. The democratic election of a leader who plans to replace a capitalist democracy with a fascist warfare state, for example, is a case in point. Hitler, it is worth remembering, was elected by a democratic vote.)

According to Plato a just society must be under the control of those who are "lovers of wisdom". This is the core concept of Plato's so-called "philosopher kings." Since neither the *demos* nor

ordinary politicians can be expected to acquire this sort of competence, it will have to be the committee of philosopher kings that guarantees justice, public welfare, and peace. "Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, ... cities will never have rest from their evils," Plato suggests in the *Republic*.

In contrast to many modern theoreticians, Plato did not think that a "neutral" or "value-free" description of the world and human affairs is possible, let alone desirable. The ability to deal with valuations, therefore lays the foundation for a person's ability to give sufficient reasons for living a certain kind of life. Plato travelled around the ancient world, particularly Egypt and was inspired by the teachings of the "mystery schools" about the *world within the world*. Plato's Allegory of the Cave describes the ascent out of the cave and into the light which is not easy and it requires a persistence and willingness to change, to die to the world of *shadows*, leaving behind trivial values for the enlightened values of the *real* world. The sun in Plato's allegory stands for the idea of becoming real or living a life that is real in accordance with the ultimate real value of "the Good." To make any sense of things one needs to know something about ultimate purposes and values, and about the ways in which important matters are distinguished from trivial ones.

Democracy is not simply putting into practice the concept that "all are equal and have a right to a say", rather it is a way of living that creates favorable conditions for other to express their compassionate and altruistic spirit in relation to others.

The original inspiration for creating ICDP came from the belief that it is possible to re-ignite empathic feelings and human compassion in relation to others. All charities by definition have a currency in kind – shelter, money, food, clothing, schooling, medical help etc. In ICDP, the currency is reactivating human care and empathic communication, from the initiators of ICDP, from those who operate it, and from those in charge of the care for children.

ICDP is an NGO with a "product" - The product is the ICDP human sensitization programme and our "market" is represented by partner organizations and networks working for the benefit of families and children, particularly vulnerable ones.

Our fundamental aim is to enable children, particularly vulnerable ones, to achieve their full human potential through relationships with empathic care-givers; therefore our work is about enabling care-givers to achieve those empathic relationships with the children in their care.

With our partner organizations we share the common interest and determination to contribute to human development by implementing the ICDP programme for the benefit of children and caregivers.

Karsten Hundeide, first chair of ICDP (for 19 years), urged us to keep the "human flame alive" in all areas of our work. Democracy in ICDP can be achieved if we manage to do just that.