



■ In Profile – Johan Lilja and Björn Möller, Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD)



Johan Lilja

Johan Lilja is the Secretary General of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD). Before joining the ICLD, he held the position of Secretary General / CEO at Swedish Medical Aid (Läkarmissionen), a large development organization in Sweden for 8 years. He has held several management positions within engineering (Managing Director Gunnebo Industries South Africa, Vice President for Gunnebo Industries Lifting). Johan has been working in the field of development and project management since 1988, and also has a background in local government politics since the 1990's. Johan was project manager for Sida funded projects in Kenya from 1995-1998 and had a short term employment at the Swedish Ministry of foreign affairs. He has a Bachelor's degree in economics and science and a Master's degree in business management related to sustainability and leadership.



Björn Möller

Björn Möller is the Quality Assurance Manager at the ICLD Knowledge Centre and has been working within the field of local democracy and local governance for the past decade. Apart from coordinating various quality assurance activities and implementation of the result-based management system in the organization, Björn is also part of the research and development unit at the ICLD, working mainly on research funding and dissemination of research results. Björn also has experience from training programmes in Africa and South East Asia.

Between 2016 and 2019, Björn served as a local government auditor at Region Gotland in Sweden. His academic background is in public administration, where he has a Master's degree in public policy from the School of Public Administration in Gothenburg, Sweden.



Dear **Johan**, dear **Björn**,

Thank you both for taking the time to answer our questions today and for providing us with an insight into ICLD's work in the area of local democracy development.

Johan, according to V-DEM's recent Democracy Report 2020 many countries in the world are currently experiencing a surge in autocratic rule. Their study indicates that the global share of democracies has dropped from 54 % in 2009 to 49 % in 2019 and that the share of the world's population living in autocratising countries has increased from 6 % in 2009 to 34 % in 2019. What is your take on these observations and how is ICLD responding to these trends of democratic decline? How do these developments challenge your understanding and approaches to democracy assistance?

JL: These questions are of great concern and worrying. ICLD has received numerous signals from our partner countries confirming the reports from V-DEM and Freedom House. For an organization like us, with a goal to promote democracy and processes for participation at local and regional level and a development where local democracy is institutionalized, a decline of democracy is challenging and requires a review of strategies and plans to be able to increase the impact. From ICLD perspective the shrinking democratic space is related to a growing disregard for the conditions that form the foundations of democracy such as: equity, participation, transparency and accountability, but also the shrinking space for critical dissent, free press, freedom of expression on social media, etc. This is something we unfortunately experience in Europe as well as in North America today. International co-operation between municipalities is part of Swedish development assistance and with a conviction that the fight to eradicate poverty in the world and begins at home - in the village, the city or the municipality. All good forces need to work together to make a change. It is a dark sky, but some sun is shining through the clouds in some countries in Africa and the recent resistance from Hong Kong and Belarus are promising signs of reaction towards the violation of democratic principles.

Since the world fell prey to COVID-19 in early 2020, countries all over the world have implemented far-reaching response measures to contain the spread of the virus. Some of these measures infringe on the collective and individual rights of citizens. Therefore, concern has been voiced that restrictions of fundamental rights may be used by governments with autocratic tendencies as an excuse to increase control and consolidate their power. In your opinion Björn: To what extent does COVID-19 pose a risk to democracy and what countermeasures should be taken by international organizations like ICLD or networks such as DeLoG? To what extent are we obliged as international stakeholders to get involved?

BM: The pandemic has indeed put democracy to the test. And it has certainly put many governments in a tough spot. There are expectations that national, regional and local governments act swiftly, decisively, and effectively, while they may be bleeding financially as a consequence of the pandemic. At the same time, we see popular protests against measures being taken. As mentioned above, some governments, perhaps more at national than at local level, sadly use the situation to impose restrictions, for example on the freedom of assembly and the freedom of expression. This is communicated in terms of banning information that contributes to panic or the spreading of false information and restrains the work of journalists. There are other cases where governments have granted police authorities the right to obtain telephone and internet operators' data on clients, and further examples of infringements include elections being postponed, curfews, organisations being outlawed and their assets seized and communication being censored. There is obviously an obligation in this situation for absolutely everyone, not least including international organizations, to get involved. I wish there were



an easy answer to the question, the situation is truly a cause for major concern. Perhaps – hopefully – by supporting the development of mechanisms for increased equity, participation, transparency and accountability at the local level we can contribute to strengthening pockets of democratic resistance. For many people working in local governments that may not be sympathetic towards the opportunistic infringements taking place at the national level, international networks of democratically minded colleagues could provide the breathing hole they need.

Taking these overall developments into account, how do you believe that the DeLoG Network and ICLD can intensify their cooperation Björn? How can both bodies benefit from each other's expertise and knowledge and what activities can we pursue together?

BM: First, we have to be realistic when it comes to the time at our disposal at this pressing moment in time. I know that many, probably most, organizations in the network are very busy with adapting to this new situation in various ways and so is the ICLD. On the other hand, we are all learning more and more about how to engage with partners and networks without physical contact, which, although many important things are lost, is a quite efficient way of working. Physical distance has become much less of an obstacle. The ICLD is currently developing methods and exploring new platforms for e-learning, digital workshops etc. and I am sure many others are doing the same. These tools can be used to exchange ideas within the network. So, in concrete terms, what can be done includes sharing experiences of different digital tools for engaging with partners, methods and co-production of training materials and co-arranging workshops.

The rapid development of digital tools and the knowledge on how to use them has lessened the importance of partners being in nearby geographic locations. This opens up opportunities for easier and more affordable co-arrangement of for example digital workshops with partners. It can also provide a good opportunity for merging networks. We all tend to be interested in similar stakeholders, given the theme of the DeLoG network, and the advantages of growing our local government networks are obvious.

ICLD works on strengthening local government capacity through sharing of experiences and financing of research projects and supports dissemination of good practices and is very happy to showcase good examples within the network. We have seen that work carried out by our partners within our programmes has proven valuable during the pandemic. For example: J.B Marks municipality in South Africa, in their partnership with Växjö municipality in Sweden, gained tools for improved cooperation between the political majority and opposition during crises. These tools enabled a quick response to reduce the spreading of COVID-19. Another example is the early warning systems for dengue fever developed by Yogyakarta City Council in Indonesia in cooperation with Region Västerbotten in Sweden. Yogyakarta adapted the tools to support communication and coordination of efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Turning back to you Johan, ICLD's work focusses on poverty reduction through local democracy assistance. As ICLD's Secretary General, please provide us with an overview of ICLD's programmes and main activities like Municipal Partnerships, International Training Programmes and Research projects and help our readers understand how local democracy assistance and poverty reduction are connected? Do you believe that your local programmes can have national-level impact?

JL: Let me first describe ICLD's definition of poverty. Poverty refers not only to the lack of material resources but also to the lack of power, influence and other conditions for people living in poverty to improve their living conditions. All of ICLD's programmes contribute to poverty reduction by increasing



people's access to the service for which local and regional politically controlled organizations are responsible and increasing people's ability to participate in local political processes. In this way, conditions are created for the development of democracy.

ICLD's programmes include the following ones: The Municipality Partnership programme is a SIDA funded programme that allows Swedish Municipalities and regions in partnership with a municipality from one of our partner countries to apply for funds for a project that can address any challenge but also involves the core values of ICLD such as equity, participation, transparency and accountability.

Our international training programmes aim for the same thing, to strengthen the core values that constitute the foundation of local democracy, but in this case the municipality from any of our partner countries doesn't require a Swedish partner. ICLD provides training and mentorship for 18 months to assist the participating team to reach the change they indicated they had an ambition to implement in the local government.

Our research funds are distributed towards research that will be able to increase ICLD's and its partners understanding of certain conditions related to local democracy. We make terms of reference and send out a call for researchers to send in their applications. We allow the researchers to formulate their take on the subject, and we use an external Advisory Group (senior researchers and professors with well recognized knowledge) to be part of reviewing the applications before ICLD takes the final decision.

Our ambition is to make all our programmes more integrated to make sure that we are utilizing funds, experiences, and knowledge as effective we can to make a real impact on the local society.

Like DeLoG ICLD places great emphasis on the importance of knowledge exchange and learning events. Björn, ICLD just issued a call for applications for three of its Advanced International Training Programmes: "Women's Political Leadership", "Public Financial Management and Local Economic Development" and "Leadership in Local Governance". How do participants benefit from these learning programmes and what long-term impact do they have for local democracy development? Are these topics that you would also like to pursue in your cooperation with the DeLoG Network?

BM: Like all ICLD operations, the training programmes aim at strengthening key people in local governments in and around countries of cooperation. Usually each programme is open to participants from around five countries, although some programmes target participants from all 20 plus cooperation countries. The political leadership programmes belong to the latter category. The aim of these programmes is to strengthen the participants as political leaders by facilitating sharing of experiences and knowledge about democratic political leadership, but also to add to their knowledge on how to carry out reform processes to enhance local democracy and sustainability and their skills to co-create solutions with their communities to make local governance more equitable and more inclusive.

The Public Finance and LED programme is somewhat different from the political leadership programmes in a few ways. First of all, it is a cooperation between ICLD and a fellow DeLoG member the UNCDF. It is also geographically limited to five African countries, and furthermore aimed at civil servants rather than politicians - participants apply in teams consisting of individuals who have key positions in local and regional governments who are actively involved in strategic decision making.

There is evidence of long-term impact of the programmes. In several cases, the processes that the participants work with while in the programmes leads to improved institutional performance in the shape of new and more democratic policies and working methods. There is an explicit focus on organizational, rather than only personal, development in the programmes. We try to make sure that all participants have an explicit mandate, and optimally also the budget, to carry out the changes they



describe in the applications to the programme. This leads to institutional ownership and improves the chances of the initiatives leading to sustainable and long-term results. An important aspect of partaking in any of the training programmes is of course also the expanded local, regional, national, and international network that the participants create. In many cases, the networks live on a long time after the programmes are finished.

From ICLD's experience, the training programmes provide a good opportunity for cooperation between members, as we have already seen in the case of the ICLD-UNCDF public finance programme. The ICLD has had a tremendous advantage of connecting to the UNCDF's rich knowledge in the field of local finance and LED in the programme, and hopefully the UNCDF appreciates ICLD's experiences of running local government training programmes. The cooperation has been going on for several years and must be described as successful.

Björn, DeLoG's 15th Annual Meeting just concluded. Due to COVID-19 the meeting had to be held virtually for the first time. In the past ICLD has already served as a host to these meetings. In 2014 ICLD and SIDA hosted the event in Visby, Sweden. What positive recollections do you have of DeLoG's Annual meetings and what value do you attribute to them? How does the Network and how do its members and partners benefit from these exchanges?

BM: The importance of the physical meetings cannot be overstated even though we are discovering alternative ways of cooperating digitally. The secretariat at DeLoG should be praised for its ability to create an atmosphere of collegial sharing at the annual meetings. This may sound easy, but it is something that does not come free. Sharing both success and failures takes trust and a key to building this trust is in the careful design of the meetings. In the meetings that I myself have taken part of, there has been a great mix of presentations and discussions and also good opportunities for social activities, which tightens the network. The composition of the network is another positive factor. We are similar enough to be able to communicate efficiently and at a qualified level but different enough to make us all leave the meetings with new knowledge, perspectives and ideas.

Before we conclude, is there anything you Johan or Björn would like to add?

JL: Perhaps a short message of encouragement. In practical everyday life, ICLD sees municipal partnerships around climate, education and social services. In other partnerships, we can note that environmental measures create cleaner local environments and work on policies strengthens equality and gender equality. Other examples are the fight against corruption and the possibility for citizens to demand responsibility from their decision-makers. The truth is that even in countries where development is moving towards increased centralization and more authoritarian regimes, we note that the individual's desire to be able to shape its own everyday life and future is strong, and that gives me hope for a reversed trend and a world with a stronger local democracy and respected human rights.