INTERNATIONAL IDEA
INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

Overview

Political parties are fundamental pillars of democracy. In young and post-conflict democracies in particular, they have important tasks of undertaking reforms that promote democracy, development and resolve conflicts in a sustainable manner. Political party dialogue is often the only sustainable way to address head-on the underlying structural and/socio-political bottlenecks for political reform. In polarized societies, political party dialogue is the best path to achieve inclusive solutions to institutional weaknesses, or politics of identity and religion/region.

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with a mission to support sustainable democracy worldwide.
www.idea.int

© *International IDEA*

Political party dialogue: important for sustainable peace, democracy and development

Democracy is based on the belief that effective representation is the basis for citizens to govern themselves. Political parties play a key role in this because they are able to represent different political interests and views in their policies and decisions in government. Yet competitive political processes such as elections are not enough to reach agreement on the complex socio-political issues facing governments and policy-makers. This is especially true in post-conflict countries which are deeply polarized. Political party dialogue often provides an essential path to achieve consensus on critical development and democracy issues.

Strengthening or repairing relationships, and nurturing a sense of political parties as competing colleagues—not enemies—underpins political party dialogue. It allows the participants to reflect, exchange views, outline their respective positions, and undertake steps towards reconciling these positions in order to achieve a common vision. Political party dialogue can take place in formalized settings—such as (permanent/semi-permanent) party forums—or informal consultations on specific thematic issues.

How effective is political party dialogue?

Intra-state conflicts have been the dominant form of violent conflict since the end of the cold war. They damage the social fabric by deepening distrust between different communities, and seriously undermine confidence in national governance institutions. Political party dialogue contributes to peace building, democratic consolidation and sustainable socio-economic development by rallying political parties around a shared national development agenda. In this way it can safeguard post-conflict initiatives such as capacity building for public institutions.

The evidence suggests that political party dialogue has been successful in driving reforms to transform societies in a number of cases. But it has not been used enough by national and international actors. Dialogue can be aimed at achieving specific results: such as drafting a constitution, to reform institutions or systems, or to prepare a national development plan. Or the focus can be more intangible: such as building social cohesion and trust.

Policy recommendations

Political party dialogue should allow parties to move beyond short term electoral or narrow party interests and contribute to sustainable peace, democracy and

development. If this is to occur the following are needed:

1. Adopt a long term, holistic perspective

Political parties need to see dialogue as part of their democratic culture rather than a one-off event to address a given political crisis. They need to take a long term view if they are to find sustainable solutions to decades old social and political conflicts, or if they want to address complex policy and institutional reforms. A long term approach is crucial to build the trust required for a change of political culture from one of confrontation to dialogue—and to allow time to resolve the complex social, economic and political causes of past conflict(s).

2. Ensure ownership

Political parties, together with civil society, must lead all phases of the dialogue. This starts with conducting comprehensive analyses of the political situation and selecting the participants, but also includes institutional design of the dialogue, agenda setting and determining the rules of the game. In a conflict or post-conflict scenario, political parties have the best insight into the root causes of conflict and how trust and reconciliation of communities and political parties can be built. Political parties must commit to taking responsibility for this process. The role of donors and party assistance providers should be limited to facilitating, by providing the required technical and financial support.

3. Be inclusive

Political party dialogue success depends on broad participation including civil society and all political actors. In principle, all political parties relevant to the conflict should be included. At the same time potential spoilers have to be dealt with, such as clearly anti-democratic actors. Excluding certain parties (e.g. former rebel movements) can make dialogue results fragile because the excluded parties can revert to violent means to get attention and power. Women, young people and civil society must be included if the dialogue process

is to be successful, legitimate and, most importantly, have sustainable outcomes.

4. Combine political party dialogue with intra-party dialogue

Too often, the decision to hold dialogues and what to discuss in those dialogues are made by a few individuals within political parties (usually leaders), with little or no internal consultations with their fellow party members. This can lead to a breakdown in the dialogue process, or non-implementation of agreements due to lack of ownership. Therefore, intra-party dialogue is important to ensure buy-in from both the party leadership and a broad section of the party membership.

5. Combine political party dialogue with party capacity building

Effective party dialogue relies on a highly specific skill set. Many participants only learn to listen and share, to understand the topics at hand, to define policy positions, to work toward consensus and to focus on the interests of the group as well as their own through continuous practice and training. Political parties should therefore invest in internal strengthening of their dialogue capacities. Donors and assistance providers working on political party dialogue should consider including capacity building in their dialogue programmes.

6. Balance transparency with creating a safe space

Openness of the political party dialogue process to citizens through other democratic means, such as parliaments and the media, is important. It avoids the public perception of dialogue as a way for political parties to make secret deals. On the other hand, openness needs to be balanced with confidentiality. When politicians feel constantly monitored they cannot be at ease to have frank and open conversations—which is essential to building trust. The media and civil society should be adequately briefed on both the intentions and the outcomes of dialogue as well as on the need for a safe space to build trust; this is easier when participants do not feel monitored.

> *... successful political party dialogue must be built on three pillars: a firm system of values, a conciliatory approach and a willingness to maintain continuity in the efforts to improve the situation of the citizens, even if these efforts should require difficult and unpopular reforms.*
>
> Jerzy Buzek, Member of the European Parliament, Former President of the European Parliament, and Former Prime Minister of Poland
> (from the Foreword of *Political Party Dialogue: A Facilitator's Guide* (2013))

7. Ensure credible facilitation

Party dialogue is a political process and should be approached as such. Facilitators must be equipped with knowledge about the local political context (its institutions, interest groups and opinion leaders) and have acute political antennae. They should be able to deal with each party's complex web of interests, and strive to ensure that the dialogue process is fair and even handed. Irrespective of size or political influence, all parties must be treated equally.

8. Manage expectations, be flexible

The indicators of a successful dialogue must be clearly defined by the parties at the beginning of the process. For those providing support, it is important to understand that dialogue is not the goal in itself but rather a means of reaching the goal(s). Political parties on the other hand should be mindful of the trust that their citizens have in them, and the responsibility that comes with this so they are not tempted to deliberately derail the dialogue. Unavoidable disruptions to the dialogue—such as elections, waning political will of parties, or even outbreaks of violence—may occur. Meaningful change takes time and so continuous adjustment of the pace and focus of a dialogue may be required.

9. Develop a realistic implementation road map

A political party dialogue outcome that has to be reversed later because it cannot be implemented or one that is based on unrealistic expectations seriously damages the credibility of the entire process. Lack of implementation may reduce public trust in dialogue, thus undermining the long-term support for a culture of dialogue. Developing realistic road maps means ensuring that dialogue outcomes are financially, practically and politically attainable. Funding for political party dialogue should therefore be ideally multi-annual.

Sustainable peace

In the aftermath of Kenya's 2007–08 election-related violence, political parties were at the forefront of a national dialogue that culminated in a new constitution and the transformation of key institutions such as the Electoral Commission. After the 2013 elections, sustaining political party dialogue is crucial to ensure that the causes of political and social polarization are discussed openly and addressed adequately.

National development agendas/plans

In Guatemala and Peru, political party dialogues resolved political stalemates and adopted all-party-owned national development agendas that have given those countries the political stability needed for economic development.

Preventing political polarization and conflict

In Malawi, political parties used dialogue to agree on an electoral code of conduct and an amendment of the electoral law, which led to improved transparency in the elections. In Mauritania in 2003–04, dialogue between political parties averted a looming conflict at a time of widespread poverty, corruption, uneven development and social exclusion. Constitutional and institutional reforms brought about by dialogue in other countries, such as Bolivia and Kenya, are also mechanisms for conflict prevention

Establishing or strengthening political party systems

In Zambia, political party dialogue helped to re-establish multiparty democracy after decades of one-party rule. In Nepal and Ghana, political party dialogue platforms formed the basis for more inclusive debates around constitutional reform.

10. *Involve parliaments*

For dialogue agreements to be transformed into policy or law, they usually have to go through formal legislative or policymaking processes. In a dialogue, the facilitator must draw the party delegates' attention to this reality, and ask parties to think about ways of 'translating' the dialogue agreements into real party commitments that can be debated and eventually enacted as laws by parliament. This includes links with the parliamentary committees and involving parliamentarians at regular intervals during the dialogue process, and not just presenting the dialogue results to them as a *fait accompli* afterwards.

11. *Be mindful of timing and coordinate with electoral management bodies*

It is important to be aware of looming political events—such as party leadership changes or national elections—and assess their impact on parties' internal dynamics and inter-party relations. Elections stimulate competition and are likely to create higher levels of polarization. Election time may therefore not be the most fruitful moment to initiate inter-party trust, although the call for it is often greatest then. It is also crucial for political parties to engage in a timely fashion with EMBs on matters such as electoral law reforms and key electoral preparations. Dialogue between parties and EMBs should continue throughout the electoral cycle, not just around election time.

12. *The Post-2015 Development Agenda*

If properly conducted, political party dialogue can generate consensus and buy-in from citizens and other stakeholders in a country's development agenda. This is highly relevant to the UN Post-2015 Development Agenda, which will rely heavily on the capacity to create local political consensus and ownership for successful implementation at country-level. Once all political parties have agreed on a common development path, it is more likely to be implemented by the relevant government institutions. Engaging political parties in this important debate through country-level dialogues should be given prominence to ensure that the outcomes are home grown, locally owned and sustainable. Facilitators should not see political party dialogue in isolation, but coordinate with key development actors and align their work with development processes ■