



Effective Democracy Assistance

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IDEA is the only intergovernmental organisation in the world whose sole purpose is the strengthening of democratic institutions and processes worldwide. Our membership includes countries across Europe, Africa, the Americas and the Asia-Pacific region. It is balanced across the developing world and the developed world. Our member states – among whom we are delighted to count Belgium – share a commitment to democracy, to the debate of democracy, and to the value of democracy support and democracy building.

Democracy assistance has grown enormously in the volume of expenditure since 1989, but until recently there has been little assessment of what works and what doesn't. Partnership for democracy building is based on support for a process which is fundamentally political, and not just technical. I need only cite the recent events in Kenya, where questionable election results have sparked terrible violence, reminding us that free and fair elections are a key means for preventing conflict, while flawed elections can produce the opposite result.

While the international community has had considerable experience in supporting the conduct of elections in developing countries, free and fair elections do not, by themselves, provide an adequate foundation for democracy. All too often, the euphoria of elections that faithfully transmit the will of the people is followed by disappointment as newly elected governors fail to deliver on their promises. The concept of effective democratic assistance - and I emphasise the word "effective" – can and should be applied to a wide range of democracy support activities, if not all of them. I would like initially to discuss two key areas - electoral processes and political parties - which are, of course, intimately related.

While the international community has since the 1990s been tremendously supportive of individual electoral events, donors have sometimes tended to give money because they can see an easily identifiable and measurable outcome which provides high visibility and is politically attractive and justifiable internally. Some examples of this have included:

- a. *Observing elections rather than strengthening electoral processes* – international observation can sometimes play an important role in relation to an electoral process, as again shown recently in Kenya, but observation missions in the past were often a way a way to reduce political risk or to disburse a lot of money quickly. This is gradually changing today with the increased links being created between observation and assistance, especially by the relevant European Commission services, and the growing understanding that observers' recommendations can help set the agenda for a new more targeted cycle of assistance.
- b. *Inappropriate structures or material* - Be it the procurement of electoral materials or the application of new technology, the recommendations of outside consultants have often been shown to be

incompatible with the cultural, political, climatic conditions of an area. Vendor pressure may add a further complication. Money has often been spent on high cost and single use items or services that do not necessarily add a corresponding benefit to the elections.

- c. *First election focus* - The high visibility of first elections has been, and still remains in many contexts, a great attraction for donors. This creates a situation where the second and third elections are often not funded nearly as well, jeopardising high – maybe even unnecessarily high - standards set in place by the well-funded first elections. The consequent failure to institutionalise leads to the ‘reinvention of the wheel’ at each subsequent election.
- d. *Everyone wants to pay for the ‘plums’* – As in other areas of assistance, some aspects are more attractive to funders than others, often leaving recipient countries a ‘jigsaw puzzle’ approach to their election planning, especially when donor coordination is weak or nonexistent.

In the last three to four years, electoral assistance has begun to change. The building of strong and transparent electoral administration capacity is a primary and invaluable form of investment for the long-term democratic development of the partner countries. Ad hoc contributions to individual electoral events, whilst still needed and politically attractive, yield positive results only if embedded within a larger and more complex framework of democratic assistance initiatives. Some key global players in development assistance, particularly the European Commission (EC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International IDEA, have undertaken concrete steps to make a more holistic approach to electoral assistance possible in the practical implementation of electoral projects. The immediate objective behind these initiatives is the intention that emerged within the EC and UNDP to rationalise their interventions in this area and harmonise them with their overall objectives in promoting democratic development. The longer-term objective that informs all these activities, particularly advocated by International IDEA, is to provoke definitive changes in the manner electoral assistance is conceived, designed, identified and implemented by all development agencies and assistance providers. The most notable development has been the design of a new planning and training tool by the EC and International IDEA's electoral specialists, called the electoral cycle. It supports the development of sustainable and credible structures and processes throughout the electoral process that are affordable within the state budget.

It is now widely understood by all those involved that electoral assistance has to take stock of all the steps of the electoral cycle. This approach, however, presents challenges of its own that are still to be fully appreciated. Chief among these are the problems caused by post-electoral fatigue among electoral officials, institutions and development agencies' decision makers alike; and political indifference in the post-electoral period towards any type of electoral, political and administrative reform that impacts on election administration. Time and again, underestimations take place at the political level of the financial and

administrative consequences that accompany decisions labelled as purely technical (for example, the decision to go ahead with a crucial electoral administrative reform like the transition from an ad hoc voter register to integrated permanent civil registration).

In addition, electoral management bodies must cope with the typical “brain drain” that often leads the most qualified staff to move to better paid positions in the private sector or with international organisations, and the consequent loss of institutional memory. However, the benefits of training and professional development activities are not immediately tangible and offer little visibility for development agencies, unlike ballot boxes or voter education and information materials. Professional development of electoral officials must be factored in as a permanent activity by partner institutions and assistance providers. This offers the best chance of ensuring both institutional sustainability for the electoral institutions of the partner countries and a successful gradual disengagement strategy for the development agencies of the donor countries.

Considerable blame for failures of democratic governance has been laid at the doorstep of political parties. Well-known commentator Thomas Carothers has called political parties “the weakest link” in democratic governance, and perhaps with good reason as surveys usually indicate that they are the institutions in which citizens place the least confidence. However, like them or not, political parties are indispensable to democracy.

Party assistance as a field of international cooperation has existed since the 1950s and has been expanding steadily since, both in terms of money spent and the number of actors involved. Despite this long tradition, party assistance is still very weakly systematized and lacks coherent standards and principles with regard to what projects should achieve, how appropriate activities can be identified and how effects are to be measured.

IDEA has conducted regional studies of political parties, in particular in Africa, and several consistent strands emerge. In many countries, parties tend to be weakly organized, lack a coherent ideological platform, and are built around personalities rather than stable structures. In addition, unregulated and illicit sources of campaign financing can prove to be the first link in a chain of corruption that may reach the highest levels of government. These problems are not unique to new democracies, but their impact on new democracies can be more pronounced.

The question to be considered now is whether there is benefit from party assistance, and if so, how can it be effective? It is easy enough – although not always very relevant - for political friends to share the know-how of organising campaigns toward winning office. It is much more difficult to support the building of open, responsive and representative parties for the longer term.

Effective assistance to political parties, then, is the brave new world of democracy assistance, which is to say that it is a complex and politically sensitive field, and

easily open to criticism. Some efforts to assist political parties have focused on the internal organization and transparency of the parties, with an emphasis on promoting internal party democracy – even though donor countries may find they themselves fail to live up to the standards they seek to suggest to new democracies, and with no proof that internal democracy makes political parties any more capable or responsive to the citizenry.

Instead of having unrealistic, normative ideas of how parties should work, analysis of what constitutes effective party assistance should centre on the functions of political parties. I would suggest that these are basically four: (1) to develop policies and programmes, (2) to pick up demands from society and bundle them into different options, (3) to recruit and select people for executive and legislative positions (and other positions in politics), and (4) to exercise oversight over the actions and conduct of government.

We might also suggest a fifth function, one that has been neglected both by parties and the democracy assistance community: to prepare their candidates to govern effectively, which implies that they not only receive leadership and management training, but have access to best practices from relevant countries, and are trained in making realistic and realisable strategic plans that take account of the political and practical strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, that affect how they can seek to move their country forward. This last function is as yet *terra nova* in democracy assistance, but helping prepare political parties to govern effectively is an area where IDEA's international knowledge base and mission intersects with the self-interest of political parties in being elected - and re-elected. Helping political parties prepare their members to govern more effectively is a task where the international exchange of information, technical skills and political context discussion – particularly between the countries of the global South - is crucial.

With these functions of party assistance at the centre of the debate, the democracy assistance community needs to come together to develop joint principles for project needs assessment, monitoring of implementation and impact evaluation. They would allow all actors, including assistance partners, to choose appropriate remedies for specific problems and they would also make party assistance less vulnerable to accusations of partisanship or undue foreign interference. Just as in the electoral field, effective political party assistance involves a commitment to sustainability, to dialogue, to local ownership and to partnership.

I have explored two important areas of effective democracy assistance. The principles that underlie effective democracy assistance would, however, appear to apply across the board, and be just as relevant in other areas of democracy building: constitution building, judiciary support, among others. The recognition that successfully administered elections or well-run political campaigns are not enough in themselves to sustain democratic development has not been translated

yet into a coherent approach to democracy assistance. While most people are beginning to agree that the terms “effectiveness”, “sustainability” and “capacity development” are the way forward, it is proving more difficult to turn these concepts into practice as a long-term, integrated holistic approach which aims to strengthen and sustain democratic institutions and processes which should in turn go hand in hand with reaching development goals and gender equality.

But the importance of effective democracy assistance cannot be denied. In the spirit of transparency and accountability, donor agencies owe such assessment to their own stakeholders and taxpayers, and many have begun to ask the necessary questions. Even more importantly, funders have a responsibility to work effectively together with their partners, the countries and people with whom they are sharing money, materials, expertise and technical assistance towards the building of sustainable and locally-owned democracy for the long term.