

Election Support: Achievements and Challenges
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Working Group II: Election Assistance

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The international community has often been keen to provide support to elections during the last fifteen years, and many positive contributions have resulted. However, donors have sometimes tended to provide assistance to elections because they have an easily identifiable and measurable outcome, provide high visibility, are politically attractive and are easy to justify internally.

This means that elections are too often supported as isolated events. Successful elections are built upon the foundation of the legitimacy of institutional frameworks. The wider aspects of constitution building, political law and electoral system design, the relationship between electoral systems and political party systems, and the need to involve stakeholders through dialogue are often insufficiently understood or considered in planning election support.

A holistic approach linking electoral assistance to the inclusive development of political frameworks and democratic culture is therefore required. Failure to do this can have a variety of undesirable consequences: one example may be the international community supporting replays of the same semi-authoritarian election scenario every four or five years, where the technical election performance may improve, but no progress towards democratisation is visible.

Worse, elections are sometimes used as an exit strategy by the international community for political disengagement in a post-conflict transition. In the real world, election planners recognise that difficult compromises may have to be made, or that timing may slip for security or other reasons. But experience shows that timing and sequencing of elections may be important, that quick elections are not necessarily beneficial, and that it is always better to back up a commitment to legitimise government through elections with complementary measures to enhance the legitimacy of interim governments.

The key principle for planning future electoral assistance needs to be a **process based approach**, prioritising electoral technical assistance, but as part of a comprehensive strategy of capacity building to strengthen democratic processes and institutions. This contains the implication that there will be occasions when no kind of electoral assistance programme is appropriate – and that observation is almost certainly not appropriate either.

Considered as a component of such a strategy, effective electoral support for the long haul includes:

- a. **Exploration of and support for longer term development of electoral processes and structures** that are robust, credible, cost efficient and affordable within recipient country budgets.
- b. **Investment in electoral administration capacity** rather than 'ad hoc' contributions to electoral events. Possible mechanisms include the availability of interactive knowledge services, electoral communities of practice and peer group support, as is being developed by the ACE 2 partnership; twinning arrangements and cooperation with leading electoral management bodies; and regional and local training networks able to use electoral training tools for long term capacity building such as BRIDGE in local languages.
- c. **Support and encouragement of planning and evaluation cycles.** Of the three classic 'time-money-quality' parameters, time is the often the most critical, as well as the most scarce, for an election administration.

Even when viewed in isolation, there are reasons to review the focus of many electoral assistance interventions. Here are ten points to consider:

1. **Avoid event driven approaches and short timelines** – Donor agencies tend to use an event driven approach, starting to think about electoral support only when they identify a polling day which may be at most eighteen months away and often much

less. Political hesitancy can lead to starvation of the key early planning and training stages of election preparation. Subsequent short timetables create great pressure to spend donor funds with little time to contemplate best practice. Coupled with lengthy internal donor procedures, the result can be 'head over heels' procurement using expensive options, such as helicopter transport of ballots or chartered plane transport of out-of-country materials, rather than more cost effective local solutions that take time to develop.

2. **Plan for sustainability** – Nor does the event driven approach sit well with the development of the human and organisational capacity to run effective elections that are both 'good enough' and sustainable within the national budget in the longer term. First elections are often visible and well funded, and may even set standards that are too high: second and third elections are equally important in developing long term electoral capability. Even when donors make commitments to follow up electoral assistance programmes, the political will may not in practice outlast polling day.
3. **Avoid reinventing the wheel** - When the only priority is to deliver an election under time pressure, with all knowledge and direction coming from outside, the result can include loss of institutional memory, lack of continuity, and lack of ownership among local stakeholders in the electoral process. Each election process should build on the previous one, with observation reports an important possible means for identifying future technical assistance agendas.
4. **Respond to the trend towards election manipulation through the media** – Attempts to manipulate elections are more and more taking place deliberately and carefully through the media in the weeks before polling day. Electoral assistance planning needs tools to respond to this challenge: a global initiative towards codes of conduct and guidelines for the role of media in elections would be valuable.
5. **Address political parties and party funding** - The key role of political party development and the issues surrounding political party funding still appear too sensitive for many donors to address.
6. **Ensure technical advice is appropriate** – The quality of electoral assistance should be assured by value for money and accountability procedures, not compromised by them. External advice of a 'home country knows best' nature is rarely helpful.
7. **Assist the whole electoral process** - The early years of electoral assistance overemphasised the election day itself. Most donors have now also recognised the importance of support for other aspects of the election process, including registration of electors, boundary delimitation, the nomination process, the count and the distribution of seats. The importance of the electoral planning process, which includes the timely drafting and reviewing of electoral laws and regulations, the development of electoral calendars and operational plans, and the drafting of forms and procedural manuals, is however not yet fully acknowledged. Nor is the critical importance of electoral dispute resolution mechanisms.
8. **Strengthen electoral processes, don't just judge them** – Funding an observation mission alone can be an easy, visible and low risk disbursement of funds allocated to an electoral process, especially where there are controversial issues surrounding it. Local stakeholders find it strange when funding is available to judge a process, but not to help make it work.
9. **Fund the basics, don't just pay for the 'plums'** – As in many other areas of development work, some aspects are more attractive than others, and some funders will only fund high profile items. This leaves recipient countries and election planners with a 'jigsaw puzzle' approach to their work.
10. **Build donor institutional memory** – The decentralised approach to electoral assistance of some donors can result in new officers being responsible for each intervention, with the knowledge and experience gained by those involved being lost as rotation takes effect.