



GEO March 29 2007 Effective Electoral Assistance - Paul Guerin, International IDEA

Effective Electoral Assistance

What do we mean when we say effective electoral assistance that it is done in partnership, it is targeted and appropriate, and has impact but the objective of effective assistance is to develop sustainable and credible electoral institutions and processes.

What are the lessons learned?

The international community has often been keen to provide support to elections during the last fifteen to twenty years, and many positive contributions have resulted. However, development partners 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. Acceptance of this principle in practice has, however, not proved easy and there is a need to clarify for and assist development partners in recognising the benefits of this approach. 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.

Development partners have tended in the past 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 funds with little time to contemplate best practice.

If the early years of electoral assistance overemphasised the election day itself, now most development partners have also recognised the importance of support for other aspects of the election process, the timely drafting and reviewing of electoral laws and regulations, boundary delimitation, voter registration, the development of electoral calendars and operational plans, and the drafting of forms and procedural manuals, electoral dispute resolution mechanisms and results tabulation.

So where do we want to go - we want to break the negative cycle of too much money spent on one-off electoral events and focus on new and sensible ways to support robust and credible electoral institutions and processes.

In the long run, IDEA aims to help develop global effective electoral assistance principles and encourage the development partners and the international community to agree to them. 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.

What are the Recommendations?

The objectives of the conference on effective electoral assistance last year in Ottawa sponsored by Canadian International Development Agency were:

- to explore a common understanding and the best ways of redirecting electoral support from the electoral event to the process.
- to identify guiding principles for effective electoral assistance
- to establish methodologies for the adoption of good practice in the design and implementation of electoral support;
- to develop training and other source material for development partners

Some of the Recommendations which were produced from this conference were that:

1. The discussion of effective electoral assistance needs to be widened to include other stakeholders in electoral processes, (political parties, legislators, civil society organizations and the media).
2. Links between development partners and implementers of assistance programmes need to be strengthened
3. Assessment tools are needed which acknowledge the interdependency of tasks through the cycle and identify the real needs to formulate, implement and evaluate assistance programmes that complement democracy support in a sustainable manner.

4. The need to identify appropriate technology early in the cycle together with necessary capacity development
5. An electoral assistance handbook and common assessment guidelines should be developed.
6. Electoral assistance training courses should be developed (what, when and how to assist).
7. Enhance abilities of regional election networks/associations to adopt guiding principles for effective electoral assistance and provide peer support.

By the way you can find these recommendations in the conference report on IDEA's website.

How are we implementing these recommendations?

While recommendations are useful, the real challenge - that of developing tools and mechanisms to implement them - remains. There have been recent efforts to address this need.

Realising the need for a more harmonised approach, last year the European Commission and UNDP signed Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of Electoral Assistance with the objective of making their extensive partnership in this area more effective. Many recently jointly designed assistance programmes now reflect the electoral cycle and process support. While this trend is a positive one there still remains a need to orient many assistance providers.

One of the ways this has been approached is through training. IDEA has worked closely with the European Commission and UNDP in developing a joint training course orienting staff to a more process-driven approach supporting all parts of the electoral cycle. IDEA has also conducted a similar course for bilateral development partners such as the Canadian International Development Agency.

The decentralised approach to electoral assistance of some development partners 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 thus emphasizing the need to build institutional memory.

Some of the key elements of electoral assistance are emphasized such as an investment in electoral administration capacity by providing the availability of interactive knowledge services, electoral communities of practice and peer group support, such as ACE Electoral Knowledge Network; and by providing Professional Development Courses such as BRIDGE which seek to strengthen electoral institutions and their staff beyond the electoral event.

To recap, each election process should build on the previous one. Let's look at the electoral cycle, we need to take stock of lessons learned and acknowledge that post-election and inter-election periods are as crucial as the build up to the elections themselves which means electoral assistance has to be available at all the steps of the electoral cycle. In order to move away from event-based support to process support the most crucial period is the in between election period, development partners and EMBs need to overcome these inhibitors and furthermore advocate what steps can be supported. Recommendations from post-election reviews, peer reviews, observation reports, performance audits, consultations with stakeholders can feed into internal EMB policy and procedural reform, *and* EMB advocacy for electoral framework reform throughout the electoral cycle.

It's an easy choice we need to move away from ad hoc assistance, ensure continuity, we need to think ahead rather than react and pay more attention to the role of EMB and other stakeholders beyond the electoral event. To conclude by linking electoral assistance back to the theme of this GEO - a more effective assistance means more robust and credible institutions and processes providing a better service which ensures that every vote counts which will in turn sustain a better democracy!