

Chapter 7

Principles for international electoral assistance

These principles were prepared by Thomas Carothers, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace for discussion at the first GOVNET Roundtable on International Support for Elections: Effective Strategies and Accountability Systems on 1st March 2010. They were revised based on the discussions and subsequent comments from the roundtable participants.

Preamble

Supporting democracy is crucial for the international donor community, both because of the intrinsic value of democracy as a political system that helps foster human dignity, and because of the contributions that democratic governance make towards development for individual citizens.

Elections are only one element of democracy, yet they are an indispensable one – without genuine and credible elections democracy does not function. Elections give form to citizens' political voice, constituting both a fundamental root of political accountability and an orderly process for successions and alternations of power.

Through substantial support in many countries making democratic transitions over the past several decades, the international community has helped improve numerous electoral processes. By identifying lessons from these experiences and incorporating them into improved methods and practices, international elections assistance is evolving well.

Nevertheless, given the complexities, difficulties, and risks of electoral processes in many developing countries, electoral assistance continues to face numerous challenges. This is especially true in post-conflict contexts and in fragile states characterised by socio-political divisions, ineffective governance structures and the disenfranchisement of citizens, most often women, from electoral and broader political decision-making processes.

Principles for international electoral assistance

Marking a renewed commitment to make electoral assistance as effective and useful as possible, the major funders and implementers of international electoral assistance agree to the following strategic and operational principles:

1. **Take the local context seriously** through careful, comprehensive assessments especially in fragile situations.¹ Elections assistance efforts should be grounded in incisive political economy analyses that identify and examine the determinant power dynamics and political constraints that shape the electoral environment, as well as the specific roles that elections are likely to play in particular settings.
2. **Be alert to electoral risk.** Elections assistance providers must respond to the recent rise in electoral and post-electoral violence in conflict-prone and developing countries by giving greater attention to electoral risk and structural causes of political violence that could

ignite in election processes. These concerns should be reflected in the design and implementation of electoral assistance interventions.

3. **Don't misuse electoral aid but do promote transparency.** Electoral assistance should be based on the highest standards of impartiality. It should only be used to promote free and fair elections, not to advance other donor policy goals, such as burnishing the legitimacy of favoured partner governments or building friendly relationships with governments. Assistance should be provided transparently: information on who is providing funding and assistance should be readily available. Cost-effectiveness should be ensured so that state expenditure is in line with efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
4. **Ground electoral assistance in complementary diplomatic policies.** Electoral assistance should be grounded in complementary diplomatic policies that seek to nurture or reinforce the commitment on the part of partner governments to follow accepted electoral norms and meet the international obligations for democratic elections.
5. **Recognise the role of regional organisations.** Electoral assistance providers should take full account of the valuable role that regional organisations can play, both in election monitoring and electoral assistance, and seek the greatest possible complementarity with such organisations.
6. **Embrace a full concept of ownership.** Electoral assistance should be owned not only by the relevant partner government, but also by the broader political society in question. Electoral assistance providers should embrace an interpretation of local ownership that takes account of this political imperative.
7. **Build on donor co-ordination.** Electoral assistance providers should build on the progress they have made in creating co-operative mechanisms for electoral assistance by assessing the record of such mechanisms and seeking ways to broaden and deepen communication, co-operation, and co-ordination among all relevant assistance providers. Planning, financial arrangements, evaluation and reporting should be harmonised.
8. **Be as comprehensive as possible.** Designing elections assistance to be comprehensive horizontally across the many domestic institutions and sectors involved in an electoral process will ensure better synergies and overall coherence. Elections assistance and observation should be well co-ordinated, as observation plays a key role in effective electoral support.

9. **Think and act across the electoral cycle.** Elections assistance should be designed, planned, and implemented over the long term across the full length of electoral cycle and if possible across multiple cycles, avoiding the common tendency to focus primarily on activities leading up to election day. Donor support should encourage sustainability to ensure that local capacity is built as quickly as is reasonably possible.
10. **Push for integration.** Electoral assistance should be actively integrated into the wider domain of democracy support, especially assistance for political party development, legislative strengthening, media assistance, and civic education programmes.
11. **Emphasise citizens' understanding and engagement.** Efforts to help citizens understand the utility and significance of elections within a broader set of accountability mechanisms should be an integral element of elections assistance. Experience shows that it is important to support consultative approaches to help election stakeholders be jointly responsible and to build their confidence, and that of the wider public, in election management bodies and other institutions involved.
12. **Add the local to the national.** Electoral assistance providers should complement their traditional focus on national elections with greater attention to strengthening local elections.
13. **Make the connection with accountability.** Election assistance providers should actively connect their activities with the wider set of strategies and programmes supporting accountable governance at all levels.
14. **Don't neglect gender.** Although progress has been made to widen and deepen the role of women in politics in many developing countries, electoral assistance providers should do more to incorporate a full gender dimension in election assistance, especially to eliminate legal and practical limitations on women's rights to freely participate in electoral processes as voters and candidates.
15. **Respond more consistently to flawed elections.** Donor governments committed to advancing free and fair elections should strive towards greater consistency in responding to flawed elections.
16. **Keep learning about impact, and act on it.** Building on the important learning efforts undertaken in recent years, election assistance providers should carry out deep-reaching evaluations of the impact of election assistance in varied contexts and incorporate the learning from those evaluations into practice.

Draft action plan for further elaborating the principles

The first Roundtable on International Support for Elections agreed to further discuss and develop the *Principles for International Support for Elections* over the coming year in various international and regional fora on elections. Below are some initial ideas on next steps:

- Take the principles to a higher political level and develop them further in light of feedback from different communities and international and regional fora. The Global Electoral Organisation, organised by International IDEA in March 2011 in Botswana, was an excellent opportunity to present and discuss the principles more widely, in particular with regional organisations and electoral bodies. Other ideas on opportunities for discussion should be collected.
- Increase understanding of how to build coherence between the technical and the political level of electoral assistance. For example:
 - The challenges of electoral assistance in fragile and conflict-affected states need further exploration. The International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) and GOVNET are exploring collaboration on a workshop on elections in fragile and conflict-affected states.
 - It was agreed that the group should further explore basket funding issues, led by the EC-UNDP Joint Task Force. It may also be interesting to hold a seminar on whole-of-government approaches for elections and to reach out to colleagues working on elections in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs.
- Increase consultation with regional organisations and electoral bodies. As noted, the GEO in March 2011 allowed for considerable advancement on this front.
- Pilot the principles in an upcoming election in a developing country.

Note

1. See the *New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States* (www.pbsbdialogue.org) as well as the Monrovia Roadmap (www.oecd.org/dataoecd/23/24/48345560.pdf).



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