Chapter 8

Principles for political party assistance

These principles were prepared by Thomas Carothers, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace for the Seminar on Trends in Support of Accountability: Political Party Assistance, co-hosted by GOVNET and International IDEA on 9 December 2011, and to the 14th Plenary Meeting of the OECD/DAC Network on Governance on 10 December 2011. They have been revised based on discussions and subsequent comments by GOVNET members.

Roles of political parties in democracy and development

When functioning well, political parties can play a number of fundamental roles in democratic politics, including:

- aggregating citizens' views and interests;

- providing structured political choices to citizens;

- engaging citizens in the democratic process;

- training and socialising political leaders;

- developing policies and taking responsibility for implementing them; and

- facilitating co-ordination within legislatures and between branches of government.

In addition, political parties can help advance governmental accountability. Opposition parties have a direct interest in monitoring the actions and checking the power of ruling parties and putting forward viable policy alternatives. Parties are also held accountable for their performance by voters. Compared to individual politicians, parties tend to have longer time horizons and a stake in maintaining a long-term reputation. Any individual politician who ignores the electorate or abuses his power can face pressure from within the party to reign in his or her behaviour.

Although it is most common to think of political parties in terms of their role in democratic politics, they can also be key players in promoting sustainable development. Parties can initiate pro-development policies which reflect the interests of key social sectors and can gain public legitimacy for these policies through electoral competition. Parties can then ensure the necessary co-ordination within government to implement these policies. The long-term interest of parties lies in promoting sustainable development to continue winning popular support. Thus, the important roles that parties play in establishing political accountability potentially contribute to positive socio-economic development.

Common shortcomings of political parties

Two striking facts stand out about political parties in developing countries: first, parties are exceptionally unpopular – on the whole they are the least-respected public institution in most countries; and second, the complaints that citizens have about parties are remarkably similar across different countries and regions. Taken together these complaints form what I call the "standard lament" about parties in new and struggling democracies:

- that parties are corrupt, self-interested organisations dominated by power-hungry elites;

- that they do not stand for anything and only hold to ideological positions opportunistically;

- that they waste endless time and energy squabbling with each other over petty issues;

- they only become genuinely active at election time; and

- they are ill-prepared for governing and do a bad job of it when voted in.

Although the characteristic shortcomings of parties are very common throughout the developing world, the overall party systems vary considerably. Some of the major types include:

- dominant party systems: one party holds most of the political power and occupies most of the political space, with scattered opposition parties at the margins;

- inchoate party systems: most political parties are unstable organisations that come and go from the political stage; and

- stable distributed party systems: in which a small number of relatively stable parties trade power back and forth across successive elections.

The causes of the standard deficiencies of parties in developing countries are complex and multiple. They include:

- compressed transitions: the relatively rapid movement from authoritarianism to multiparty politics characteristic of democracy's "third wave" has left parties with little time to develop a broad grassroots base; instead they were thrown immediately into electoral competition and forced to become electorally-focused, with negative consequences for their long-term organisational development;

- weak rule of law: the weak rule of law characteristic of many developing countries works against party development by providing an inadequate framework for regulating the financial and other activities of parties;

- poverty and inequality: widespread poverty and high inequality in many developing countries contribute significantly to the rise and endurance of neo-patrimonial, clientelistic politics marked by high levels of political corruption and politically-passive citizens;

- anti-party legacies: in many new or struggling democracies citizens have a deeply anti-political outlook based on their previous experience with authoritarianism. Withdrawn, cynical citizens make it very difficult for political parties to establish successful representational links; and

- presidential systems: the presidential systems that predominate in Latin America, the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Asia tend to encourage top-down leader-centric parties and weak parliaments.

The party aid domain

Initial phase

Various international actors have provided assistance to parties over the last three decades in response to the disjunction between the potential importance of political parties and their weak state in most new or struggling democracies. From the mid-1970s to the middle years of this decade, such aid was dominated by the German political foundations (*Stiftungen*) and the US party institutes (with USAID playing a significant role as the largest funder of these institutes). Some other European political foundations were also active, the largest of these being Olof Palme International Center (Sweden).

The most common type of assistance was training – seminars for party cadres on all aspects of party development, usually carried out by outside trainers. The assistance often also included a wider menu of support as part of a general partnership approach between the party aid providers and the target parties – strategic advice, provision of consultants, exchange visits and study tours, minor material assistance, logistical facilitation, and the provision of political polls.

Some of the assistance, including most of the European assistance, took a fraternal approach – party-to-party partnerships based on a common ideological identity. Other assistance, including most of the US's, followed a multiparty approach – in which the party aid provider worked with all of the main parties in the country simultaneously. Debates over the relative advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches are common; each has particular strengths and weaknesses, depending on the context.

New phase

From the middle years of this decade, international party assistance entered a new phase of expansion and diversification, characterised by:

- the entry of new actors into the party aid domain, including: 1) multiparty party aid organisations (*e.g.* Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy – NIMD, Demo Finland and the Danish Institute for International Multi Party Co-operation); 2) multilateral organisations (*e.g.* UNDP, International IDEA, the OAS); and 3) at least one major bilateral aid agency (DFID);

- a broadening of types of assistance to include direct funding of parties and a greater focus on strengthening party systems rather than individual parties, including efforts to build interparty dialogues, help reform party finance systems, and support constitutional reform processes;

- a wider geographic reach: much more party assistance is now going to non-Western countries – in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia – as opposed to the earlier concentration of party aid in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America.

This expansion of party assistance reflects the widening realisation within the development community that political parties are often the weakest link in attempted processes of democratisation and in development more generally. It also reflects growing recognition, after the surge of attention to civil society development in the 1990s, that no matter how vibrant it becomes, civil society is not a substitute for political society. Political parties play some crucial roles that civil society organisations cannot. Despite this expansion of political party assistance, however, significant parts of the development community remain wary of giving political party assistance, uncertain about the links between political party development and socio-economic development, concerned about the political sensitivities of such assistance, and worried that working with political parties will entail engagement with corrupt, tawdry politicians.

Evaluation

Throughout the first phase of party assistance, party aid groups paid relatively little attention to evaluation. They felt convinced about the importance of political party development and the value of their core methods. This situation is changing in the new phase of expanded, diversified party assistance, which coincides with greater attention generally in the development assistance community to evaluations. This attention is naturally spilling over to party assistance – the earlier sense among some providers that party aid was a kind of reserved domain sheltered from the everyday bureaucratic imperatives of development assistance is fading.

In addition, some of the new actors in the field of party assistance have brought with them much greater attention to evaluation. NIMD, for example, has always emphasised both programme and institutional evaluations, and made these evaluations available on its website. DFID has sponsored reviews of party assistance as well as a major workshop (co-sponsored with International IDEA at Wilton Park in March 2010) to bring together party aid practitioners to reflect on the lessons of experience. International IDEA undertook significant efforts to disseminate the findings of a searching external evaluation of its own political parties programme. USAID has recently commissioned a major review of party assistance, which is being carried out by a team of experts at the University of Pittsburgh.

As with other areas of democracy and governance assistance, finding highly precise ways to measure the impact of party assistance is difficult. Problems of causality or attribution are significant. If a party that has received external campaign-related assistance does better in one election than in a previous one, many different factors could have caused that improvement beyond just the injection of party assistance. More importantly, settling on the relevant indicators of successful party development or party system development is a challenge. What may appear obvious indicators – such as electoral performance – can be misleading. If, for example, a party with significant deficiencies with regard to internal democracy and the inclusion of women performs better in an election thanks to campaign assistance, but without ameliorating such deficiencies, the improved electoral performance is not necessarily a positive step in terms of democratic development. Some of the most important elements of political party development, such as effective representation of citizen interests, are hard to measure in any productive, quantifiable fashion.

Results

Previous research of mine pointed to two major conclusions about the results of political party assistance (Carothers, 2006). First, it is very difficult to find examples of transformative effects of such assistance. I did not find any examples of countries receiving international party assistance whose parties had made clear progress in resolving the various shortcomings listed above. Despite three decades of party assistance, political parties are in bad shape almost everywhere in the developing world.

Secondly, however, I did find evidence of many small to medium-sized changes in parties that seem to have been facilitated by party assistance – parties that have learned to deliver campaign messages more effectively, that are allowing a greater place for women, that are experimenting with more democratic methods of internal selection, that are using polling to

better understand citizens' desires, and so forth. I was also able to observe meaningful interparty dialogues that were facilitated by international assistance, some system-wide reforms on party financing, and some efforts to develop ethical standards for parties. Given that party assistance is on the whole not a very expensive enterprise compared to the larger pool of official development assistance, these modest changes seem to be worth the effort.

Nevertheless, frustration and disappointment are characteristic of many party aid efforts. Many parties absorb significant amounts of aid for many years without showing important signs of positive change. Expectations about what party aid can accomplish are often too high. The very modest results of most party assistance can be ascribed to two main factors. Firstly, political parties are very difficult organisations to assist. Many parties are highly resistant to reforms. They are leader-driven vehicles, serving the interests of a narrow party elite willing to use any methods to gain and maintain power. For the leadership of these parties, the reform agenda of international party aid providers is largely unappealing and even threatening. Almost every element of that agenda – whether greater financial transparency, more internal democracy, greater inclusion of women, more role for youth or more rational management systems – represents a potential reduction of the power of the entrenched party elite.

Moreover, the rational assumptions that international party aid providers hold on the basic aims of parties with which they work – that parties seek to represent citizens' interests, to elaborate a well-conceived, technocratic political platform, to compete hard but fairly, to emphasise substance over personalism, and so forth – often are not shared by the party elites in question. They see their own parties in very different terms, as vehicles useful for advancing particularistic interests of the elites themselves. Even when party elites look beyond their personal interests, they often do not believe that donor suggestions will serve the overall interest of the party. In an electoral environment which rewards charismatic leadership and patronage ties, the party may consider strengthening internal democracy or financial transparency to be detrimental to its ability to effectively compete in elections.

Secondly, few of the main deficiencies of parties in new or struggling democracies are rooted in a lack of knowledge. Therefore, the provision of technical assistance, which is by far the largest element of party assistance, does little to ameliorate parties' shortcomings. Instead, as noted above, the principal causes of the weak state of parties in most of these countries are much deeper structural factors, such as the wider lack of rule of law or the socioeconomic conditions that fuel patronage-based politics. These factors are not very easy to improve through conventional party assistance. This gap between the nature of the assistance offered and the full nature of the

underlying problems is of course not unique to political party assistance, but it is strongly felt in the party aid arena.

Special challenges

In addition to these various issues, political party aid also faces two significant additional challenges. Firstly, party aid is fraught with an unusually high level of political sensitivity. All aid relating to the core political processes of recipient countries – elections, parties, and legislatures – is inevitably politically sensitive. But party aid is especially so given that parties are the institutions that are competing for power and, when successful, assuming power. Training parties to campaign more effectively, to build their membership, to refine their party programmes, and other typical elements of party assistance all easily raise questions about political favouritism and interference. Given how tightly most established democracies restrict any foreign assistance to their own political parties, it is not surprising that party aid often encounters questions in developing countries about its legitimacy and appropriateness.

In the context of the current backlash against democracy assistance which emerged in the middle years of this decade, party aid is facing an even higher level of political sensitivity and suspicion than before. Party aid programmes have been a target of governments pushing back against Western democracy assistance in the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and South America. Nevertheless, party aid continues in dozens of countries in these regions and elsewhere.

The special sensitivity of party assistance turns up not just in the recipient countries but also in the donor countries themselves. Depending on how donors are engaging with political actors, party aid programmes often provoke doubts and questions within political circles and among the citizens of donor countries. The most common doubts that arise are: 1) are we interfering in the legitimate political processes of other countries by assisting their parties?; 2) are we engaging and possibly helping corrupt politicians?; and 3) are our own parliamentarians using the party assistance to go on frivolous trips abroad? As one example of this domestic sensitivity, Norway established a political party assistance organisation and then closed it several years later as a result of criticisms within Norway about how that assistance was being used. Furthermore, a part of the development aid community remains concerned about political party assistance being part of the ODA system. They argue that support to political parties and party systems could undermine official bilateral development co-operation and should therefore be left to the sphere of diplomatic relations between countries because of its highly political nature.

Secondly, party assistance must live with a relative lack of confidence about its underlying institutional model. Given the many flaws of established Western democracies, people in aid-receiving countries often ask what basis Westerners have to come to their country and offer solutions. This question hits especially hard with regard to party assistance. Only in a few established democracies can it be said that political parties are in a good state of health and closely resemble the rather idealised political party model that party aid providers implicitly seek to re-create abroad. In at least some established democracies, political parties seem to share many of the deficiencies of parties in new or struggling democracies, especially with regard to legitimacy among citizens, internal democracy, and transparency of financing. In simple terms, it is hard not to ask how political party aid providers can be confident that they know how political party development can be nurtured or whether the party model they seek to export is already fading from the global political scene.

Principles for political party assistance

Common principles for political party assistance could be helpful in alleviating some of the suspicions and doubts about party assistance both in recipient and donor countries. They could also be useful as a way of capturing important lessons learned for a field in a period of expansion and diversification.

Yet identifying – let alone agreeing on – such principles is not simple. Different aid actors are taking quite divergent approaches to this work and there remains a weak base of understanding of the results of such efforts over the years. Moreover, what might seem like obvious principles at first sight are often untenable. For example, it might be tempting to suggest that party aid should strive to be non-partisan. Yet this would not work for those party aid organisations that use the fraternal approach, in which party aid actors link up with and favour particular parties in partner countries. Or it might be suggested that party assistance should not entail direct financial transfers to recipient parties. Yet some of the new entrants to the party aid domain have been using direct grants to parties and believe that the results are positive. With these caveats in mind, the following principles have been developed based on the discussion at the OECD-DAC-GOVNET and International IDEA Seminar on Political Party Assistance, 9 December 2010 (Box 6.1). These principles can be used as a starting point for discussion on the role of official development co-operation in political party assistance.

The value and place of political party assistance

1. **Recognise the value of effective political parties,** not just for democracy but also for development. Political parties play potentially crucial roles in articulating policy alternatives, helping spark public engagement in and legitimacy for pro-development policies, and establishing governmental accountability.

2. **Be aware of but not paralysed by the sensitivities of party aid.** Party aid is inevitably politically sensitive given its reach into core political processes and institutions. At the same time, however, it has a legitimate place in foreign assistance if pursued openly in genuine pursuit of democratic and developmental goals.

3. **Build on the interconnections between party aid and other elements of political aid.** Political party work connects naturally to other forms of assistance for strengthening democratic processes – including work on legislatures, elections, civic advocacy, and local government performance.

4. **Don't confuse party diplomacy with party aid.** Western political parties sometimes engage abroad to build political alliances or coalitions in multilateral organisations, or to enhance bilateral diplomatic relations. Such party-to-party diplomacy is legitimate, but is significantly different from party assistance.

Operational issues

5. **Base party aid on a sophisticated understanding of the political economy of the relevant parties and party systems.** Given the wide range of party types, roles and systems, it is imperative that party aid providers develop deep knowledge of the actual nature, history and function of parties within their national contexts before undertaking party assistance.

6. **Don't assume common goals between providers and recipients.** Party aid providers must be careful not to take recipient parties at face value in terms of their political role and goals. Aligning the goals of party aid providers and party aid recipients is crucial to success. Party aid providers should pay attention to actors within political parties who may share their goals more closely than party leaders because this will foster local ownership and contribute to sustainable results.

7. **Stress co-operation rather than competition among party aid providers.** As party aid increases, so does the need for party aid providers to communicate with each other and avoid overlap or

competition. New entrants to the party aid domain should take special care to ground their work in a thorough analysis of what other aid actors are already doing in the same countries.
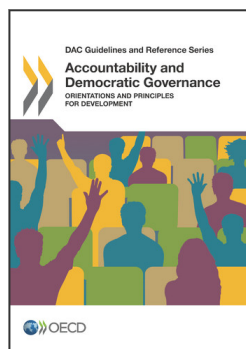
8. **Embrace transparency.** Operating transparently is crucial to managing the political sensitivities inherent in political party aid.

9. **Emphasise gender and youth issues.** Fostering greater inclusion of women in political parties has been an element of many party aid programmes. Encouraging progress has been made in this area in some countries, more so than for many other aspects of party change. But this focus must be sustained and even deepened. In addition, as the Arab Spring demonstrated, young people are playing a critical role in driving behavioural change. Support to youth participation and inclusion must continue to be encouraged in the future.

Monitoring and evaluation

10. **Pursue realistic, incremental goals.** Given the uncertain and often troubled state of political parties – even in established democracies – political party aid must be based on very modest, realistic, and incremental goals, rather than on ideal models. This will require in-depth studies of the local political environment. Local realities on the ground change rapidly in often highly complex political environments. Setting realistic goals and being flexible in implementing them will enable party aid providers to respond swiftly to realities on the ground and avoid losing the momentum for change.

11. **Keep strengthening evaluations, but don't overemphasise numbers.** Whether and how party assistance works have been insufficiently examined empirically. Party aid organisations should continue to deepen their evaluation efforts and support research and other learning exercises. At the same time, however, funding organisations should recognise that any efforts to reduce the success of political party development to strict quantitative indicators are likely to be unhelpful.

12. **Recognise the long-term challenge, but focus on tangible outcomes.** Problematic features of political parties and party systems are not amenable to quick fixes and party aid is most effective when pursued on a long-term basis. Nevertheless, party aid programmes should define tangible medium-term outcomes to define the path of such longer-term engagement.

Reference

Carothers, T. (2006), *Confronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, New York.

From:

Accountability and Democratic Governance
Orientations and Principles for Development

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264183636-en