

WORKING WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

Why Political Parties Matter

Representative democracy cannot function without political parties. Political parties are central to achieving pluralistic, consolidated multiparty democracies, which deliver on citizens' aspirations and lead to sustainable development.

Political parties have tasks that no other actor can fulfil. They:

- Identify and represent citizens' interests
- Mediate the interests of different groups
- Formulate viable policy agendas and frame political choices
- Educate citizens about political issues
- Recruit, train, socialise and screen potential leaders
- Form governments and take responsibility or, when not in power, hold governments accountable

In other words, political parties fulfil a unique role in democratic systems by linking the state and society. Civil society organisations also have a central role in building democratic societies and holding governments accountable but they cannot replace political parties, as it

is political parties that hold legislative and executive power through their participation in parliaments and governments. By taking up their role in forming the government or the opposition, political parties can anchor and deepen democracy and foster domestic accountability.

Finally, countries with well functioning political parties are more likely to experience GDP growth than countries where political party institutionalisation is low. Party development and economic development often go hand in hand.

FACTS & FIGURES



Political parties are the only institutions that aggregate people's demands, formulate policy choices and represent people.



There is a positive correlation between party institutionalisation and GDP growth. *

0,1%

Political parties receive less than 0,1% of Official Development Aid. **

*V-Dem – Varieties of Democracy, www.v-dem.net

** Development First, Democracy Later? Anna Lekvall, International IDEA, 2013

The Need for Political Party Support

Developing democracies – and increasingly also in established democracies – political parties struggle to fulfil their democratic roles. They are often poorly organised, lack a solid rootedness in society, and are disconnected from key national and local development planning and decision-making processes. As a result, a growing number of citizens and scholars perceive political organisations as part of the problem rather than the solution to developmental challenges.

Despite their critical role and responsibility in improving responsive and accountable governance, political leaders and parties receive only 0.1% of Official Development Aid (Development First, Democracy Later? Anna Lekvall, International IDEA, 2013) Funds are primarily available for supporting elections. Although free, fair, genuine and credible elections are fundamental for a democracy, elections alone are not sufficient to guarantee the consolidation of a democracy.

Therefore, a growing number of development and democracy support practitioners agree that aid needs to take politics in beneficiary countries into account, if it is to achieve a real impact. Only by integrating technical assistance with more “politically informed” kinds of assistance, such as political party support, will the international donor community increase the effectiveness of development aid. In turn, this will significantly increase opportunities for equitable economic and human development as well as enhanced stability because conflicts can be managed internally and peacefully by dialogue in a multi-party framework.

A Quick Guide to Political Party Support

External actors can help political parties build the trust that is needed to develop an effective party system and reduce competition in areas of mutual interest. There are two main types of party support and a wide range of instruments to put such support into practice.

MAIN TYPES OF PARTY SUPPORT

Peer-to-peer party support: Support is given to parties with a common ideological platform, e.g. liberals to liberals, social democrats to social democrats or conservatives to conservatives.

The *German Political Foundations* and the *Swedish Foundations* work in this way. The *Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD)* and the *Westminster Foundation for Democracy* have mixed models where funding is available both for peer-to-peer party support and for multi-party support (see below).

Multiparty support: Support is given to all parties active in a particular country or represented in parliament. The main aim is to build trust among politicians from different parties by providing a neutral space in which they can work together towards solving sensitive issues such as codes of conduct for election campaigning or allocation of party funding. By playing the role of an impartial facilitator – or helping local organisations in doing so – external actors can stimulate greater political cooperation in the competitive arena of national politics, which is especially important in highly polarised contexts.

The *Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD)*, *Democratic Parties of Finland for Democracy (DEMO Finland)*, *National Democratic Institute (NDI)*, *International Republican Institute (IRI)* and *International IDEA* are champions of this approach.

PARTY SUPPORT IN PRACTICE

Capacity strengthening: Building the capacity of political parties and their members to formulate policy agendas and promote them vis-à-vis voters. This often involves helping political parties to become more inclusive, in order to ensure the political participation of under-represented groups, such as women, youth and ethnic minorities.

Peer-to-Peer Learning: Helping political parties to share knowledge and experience with their peers in other countries, while also openly discussing about issues of national and regional interest. This may involve study visits or workshops, but can also take place through more long-term forms of exchange.

Interparty Dialogue: Facilitating dialogue between parties in a safe environment in order to reduce political tensions and foster mutual trust. In situations where parliamentary dialogue does not allow for genuine exploration of consensus or compromise, more dynamic spaces of dialogue are needed.

Political Skills Education: Fostering a democratic culture by providing education programmes for party members and potential politicians. These programmes usually focus on the importance of equality, human rights and transparent politics, thereby contributing to open, stable and inclusive democratic systems.

Further Reading

- [Democracy starts with Dialogue](#), NIMD, 2015
- [A Decade of Supporting Democracy](#), Demo Finland, 2015
- [Political Party Dialogue: A Facilitator's Guide](#), International IDEA, NIMD, The Oslo Center, 2013
- [EU support for political parties – why does it matter and how can it be enhanced?](#) ENoP, 2014
- [Mapping and Study on Performance Indicators for EU Support to Political Parties](#), Franklin de Vrieze, 2014
- [Working with political parties in fragile and conflict-affected settings](#), NIMD, 2015
- [Politics meets Policies – The Emergence of Programmatic Political Parties](#), International IDEA, 2014