PARTIES & PARLIAMENTS NEXUS

Political parties and parliaments are widely regarded as key actors for development and peace in addition to their role in representative politics. Donors have therefore supported both political parties and parliaments in performing their core functions for the benefit of inclusive development, peace and democratic societies. However, according to researchers, programmes have usually treated political parties and parliaments as isolated units, despite their high interdependence.

Some experts have therefore called for integrated programmes that work with both parliaments and political parties simultaneously to strengthen the performance of both. Such integrated programmes seem hard to come by in practice, as there are few examples to follow and they require an in-depth understanding of local power dynamics. This fact sheet therefore outlines the political parties-parliaments nexus and how to go about programmes that integrate both.

Ideally, programmes successfully integrate support to all relevant actors and processes for building inclusive representative democracies, including civil society, media, local and national authorities, and electoral management bodies. That being said, this fact sheet limits its focus to political parties and parliaments as these are two less researched sectors of democracy support that are particularly interdependent.

Key messages

- **The nexus between political parties & parliament**s is shaped by the informal practices of power, the party landscape and formal political context in the country.
- **Integrated support is increasingly needed** as many of the challenges associated with parliamentary strengthening and political party support can be overcome by approaching both in an integrated manner.
- Political parties and parliaments can be important allies in **improving international cooperation efforts e.g. on the effectiveness of budget support**, by holding the executive accountable on fiscal management and by contributing to greater inclusion in the policy process.
- There is **no off-the-shelf solution** for a truly integrated programme. This factsheet gives ideas for effective programming by looking at design (issue-based, multi-actor) as well as the key principles for programmes (researching power dynamics, understanding political change, appealing to interests of participants, acknowledging the role of politics, local ownership, measuring results).

THE FOUNDATIONS OF REPRESENTATION

Political parties and parliaments are two of the fundamental pillars of representative democracy, ensuring government policies reflect citizens' concerns and needs. Both institutions are thus crucial for any democracy.

Political parties

Political parties should form the link between the state and society, ensuring inclusion, pluralism, contestation and the representation of citizens' interests:

- Identify and represent citizens' interests;
- Mediate conflicts of interests of different groups in society;
- 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.

Parliaments

Parliaments are crucial in balancing the power of the executive. Parliaments have 3 core functions:

- **Representation**: the elected body reflects the society in its diversity, allowing different groups and communities to have a voice in all the issues that are translated into policy;
- **Legislation**: parliaments can introduce, amend or reject legislation;
- **Accountability**: MPs monitor and hold the Executive accountable for its actions and push for the implementation of policies. Importantly, this includes budgetary oversight: checking the spending and income of the executive.

WHY SUPPORT POLITICAL PARTIES & PARLIAMENTS?

Development: Donors have long recognised that both parliaments and political parties play a critical role in reaching development goals. Parliaments can ensure efficient spending of aid budgets through their oversight role and guarantee the representation of minority group interests in national developmental policies. Moreover, they are critical allies in the development of poverty reduction strategies and anti-corruption agencies. As the link between citizens and the government, political

parties are in the best position to inform policy-makers of the development needs of their supporters, so development strategies are in line with the needs on the ground.

Peace: In societies emerging from conflict, one of the key challenges is finding a non-violent way of reconciling all conflicting interests in society. To this end, parliaments are often a key forum for national dialogue, mediation and reconciliation. To participate in formal politics, rebel groups have to transform into political parties to channel their grievances and demands in a non-violent way. External support can greatly facilitate these transformations.

Democracy: Political parties and parliaments are critical actors for ensuring good governance that is inclusive of all citizens. However, in many young democracies political parties and parliaments fail to live up to citizens' expectations and perform their basic tasks. External actors can play a critical role in helping these institutions build up the capacity and infrastructure to overcome the obstacles to real representation of citizens' needs.

Budget Support: the role of political parties and parliaments

Budget support is a direct financial transfer from the donor to the partner country aimed at supporting the latter in designing and implementing a set of agreed-upon objectives and policies. As the institution overseeing the executive's spending, parliaments have a mandate to hold the executive accountable for the management of funds and progress on the agreed-upon objectives. In their representative role, parliamentarians should voice their constituencies' concerns over the policy process. Specialised standing committees like budget offices or thematic committees on development issues can be catalysts for making budget support more effective.

Likewise, political parties have a major role to play in representing and involving citizens in the policy process. Opposition parties can also hold the executive accountable to the conditional agreements for budget support by calling the government out on mismanagement and thereby influencing public opinion. Political parties and parliaments can be important allies in improving the effectiveness of budget support, by holding the executive accountable on fiscal management and by contributing to greater inclusion in the policy process.

POLITICAL PARTIES & PARLIAMENTS NEXUS

Political parties and parliaments do not operate in a vacuum. They are highly **interdependent institutions** of democracy. Parliamentarians look to their parties for advice and guidance on their legislative activities, based on the party's agenda. Through their parliamentarians, political parties channel the interests of their support base to affairs of. Political parties provide parliamentarians with a platform for campaigning for election and re-election. To the extent that parties will partly be judged by their parliamentarians' performance, parties have a stake in the quality of their MPs' performance.

In addition, the **internal organisation of parliaments** is an important aspect of the parties-parliaments-nexus. Parliamentarians are elected on the basis of party affiliation and organise along party lines in parliament, which allows parties to shape the organisation of interests in parliament. In principle this means that parties bring disagreements from the political sphere and certain cleavages within society into the policy sphere in parliament. As some have put it, "while standing orders or parliamentary by-laws provide the rules of the game, the **parties determine the games within the rules,** providing the vehicles for negotiation between government and opposition over legislation and parliamentary business" (Power and Coleman, 2011). In other words, political parties are fundamental to qualitative parliamentary performance, which is in turn crucial to achieving higher levels of sustainable human development.

In practice, there is no universal mechanism of interaction between political parties and parliaments. The relation is largely shaped by the **four critical contextual factors** below. The way these factors influence the linkages between political parties and parliaments also greatly depends on the **informal rules of the game** and the interests of political actors. In sum, the political parties and parliaments nexus is shaped by the informal practices of power and formal political context in the country, and as a result, the linkages vary in different countries.

Party system

The level of **party discipline, party institutionalisation and the size and number of political parties** have a great influence on the relation between political parties and their parliamentarians. For instance, in a dominant party system, strong **disciplined political parties** can result in party dominance over both the legislative and the executive.

However, a **fragmented party landscape** can lead to uncoordinated policy-making without any vision. In addition, **highly personalised politics**, where parties are simply a vehicle for a prominent personality to gain influence, greatly weaken the ability of parties to influence their MPs. In turn, heads of government elected on an independent ticket may struggle to get any policy through parliament in a fragmented party system.

Political system

Presidential and parliamentary systems differ in the degree of power parliamentarians and opposition parties can exercise and which functions they perform. The mandate the constitution sets out for parliaments also determines parliaments' powers and as a result the importance of strong support in policy development from their political party.

When the mandate of **MPs in the constitution** is weak in terms of their obligations to their party, this may erode party discipline and incentivise *political nomadism*, where MPs switch parties for personal gain. Such practices weaken political parties and destabilise parliamentary groupings. This impacts on the ability of both political parties and parliaments to develop and amend policies effectively.

Electoral system

A **first-past-the-post (FPTP)** system incentivises parliamentarians to be accountable to their regional constituency rather than their party. It is also likely to reduce the number of parties with seats in parliament.

In contrast, **proportional representation** systems tie parliamentarians more strongly to their party. When parties decide the electoral list order, MPs need to uphold the reputation of their party through good performance for their own political future. This can therefore incentivise party discipline and performance on policy development.

Party finance system

In countries with **public party funding** arrangements, political parties have some financial autonomy which may enable them to support MPs more effectively. However, it may also incentivise a multiplication of non-performing parties, leading to a fragmentation of the party system.

At the same time, a **lack of public party funding** may weaken political parties, by leaving them dependent on the goodwill of their elected MPs to receive a share of their parliamentary benefits. However, it may also result in reduced loyalty from MPs to the party in case they finance their own campaigns or pay to be on the party ticket.

NEED FOR INTEGRATED PROGRAMMING

Not every aspect of parliamentary and party work needs to be integrated, but programmes need to more effectively exploit synergies in the parliaments-party nexus for more effective programmes. This is because interventions that work with political parties and parliaments as isolated, independent units often treat the symptoms of deficient political systems rather than the causes. Yet many of the challenges associated with parliamentary strengthening and political party support can be overcome by approaching both in an integrated manner.

The case of training MPs exemplifies this need. A well-known problem in parliamentary strengthening is the high turnover rate of MPs at each election in many developing countries, which makes training MPs an endless task. However, political parties have a longer time horizon and can therefore build up institutional memory and shape the parliamentary performance of all their elected MPs. Likewise, certain issues can only properly be addressed through both entities simultaneously, like issues of 'crossing the floor' and tensions about MPs' party mandates.

By working with both entities, practitioners are in a position to recognise potential synergies, shape the incentive structures, shift the balance of power to level the playing field and build up a political culture amongst the political actors closest to the people.

PROGRAMME DESIGN

As the way political parties and parliaments interact differs greatly depending on the party landscape, political system, electoral system and party finance, there is no off-the-shelf solution for a truly integrated programme. However, the following entry points can be considered when designing an integrated programme; examples include:

Issue-based support

Issue-based support is an effective way to create trust and strengthen cooperation between parliaments and parties on matters where political parties and parliament have a clear common interest or are highly interdependent:

- Structuring and organization of parliament, including rules of procedures
- Public political party funding and other reforms that address the political party landscape
- Electoral reforms and other reforms to the political system
- Election campaigning
- Research and policy development
- Forums for inter-party dialogue in parliament

Fostering cooperation on one issue can then change attitudes of MPs towards their political parties and strengthen the relations between political parties and parliament. Parties may then become more willing to support parliamentarians in policy development. This may in turn incentivise MPs to remain loyal to the party agenda and not cross the floor or vote against the party line for personal gain.

Electoral reform in Mali

In 2016, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) and the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa (AWEPA) supported an inclusive review process of Malian electoral law. A number of recommendations for improving the electoral law were formulated through a dialogue session between political parties, civil society organisations and MPs. A follow-up committee was established to lobby for these recommendations and sensitise the parliamentary committee in charge of reviewing the draft law. Out of the 92 amendments they submitted, 88 were passed by Parliament, including some of the recommendations formulated during the dialogue session. Working through political parties, civil society and MPs effectively made the legislative process more inclusive and contributed to a culture of dialogue and inclusion in all actors involved.

Multiple entry points

Both political party support and parliamentary strengthening are most effective when they involve multiple entry points. This is especially important in parliamentary strengthening where there is no

one person in charge and certain actors' behaviour is contingent on that of others. Some entry points are (Carothers & Power, 2018):

- **Political party leaders** are critical partners for fostering cross-party cooperation in parliament.
- **Youth or women in political parties** may be supported to make political parties and parliaments more inclusive and representative
- **Parliamentary leaders** are the best entry points for organisational and procedural reform.
- **Parliamentary committees** are a good entry point for capacity building to strengthen their legislative and oversight roles
- **Parliamentary staff** support helps develop institutional memory
- **Constituency services** can be supported by strengthening the MPs' constituency office, or through constituency development funds
- **Civil society** support can reinforce such organisations' ability to hold MPs and political parties accountable and ensure transparency
- **Regional networks and multilateral partners.**

All these actors work together and are interdependent in different ways. Different types of activities directed at different actors may thus have spill over effects on the system as a whole.

Deepening Democracy Programme in Uganda

Partners for Democracy and Governance (PDG) developed a multiple intervention project, which ran from 2008 to 2011 in Uganda. The success of the programme lay partly in the way different actors in political parties and parliament were involved in the implementation of the different activities for reaching the same outcomes. Civil society produced radio clips on parties' stance on policies, parliamentary committee leaders drew from research funds for policy development, and political parties applied for direct grants to improve their own capacity. The result was that political parties were drivers of parliamentary strengthening activities. In turn, party support strengthened parties' organisation, thereby strengthening the party system and making parties have credible and legitimate in their parliamentary work.

INTEGRATED SUPPORT IN PRACTICE

There are multiple ways of integrating support to political parties and parliaments through the themes and actors described above. Truly integrated programmes are rather cutting-edge democracy support and as a result there is no trodden path to follow. There are, nevertheless some good examples of how programmes can integrate support to political parties and parliaments effectively.

1. Facilitating cooperation & exchange

Interventions can facilitate and institutionalise structured cooperation when the lack of interaction inhibits the efficient functioning of parties and/or the parliament. When there are strong rivalries between different political parties, for instance, this may result in an ineffective parliament where MPs from different parties do not respect each others' views. This impedes any meaningful debate on policies, consensus-building between different interests in society and any impactful coordinated action to hold the executive to account. Helping actors bridge that divide can then greatly improve parliamentary performance.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) in Macedonia

In Macedonia, there is lack of dialogue in parliament which stems from the ethnic tensions that antagonise political parties and lead to a virtual paralysis of the parliament. As a result, a WFD programme focused on creating mechanisms for communication, coordination and dialogue between different parties in parliament. The programme increased commitment to parliamentary functions and created channels for constructive multi-party policy debate to inform and facilitate policy development. WFD took a facilitator role in the whole process, letting MPs and party leaders set the agenda. The downside of such strong local ownership was that it made the project vulnerable to changes in commitment. When cooperation mechanisms broke down as one party pulled out, they lost the interest of other local actors. Ownership comes with the necessity of ensuring buy-in from and a clear value added to all participants.

Such interventions can take the form of weekly meetings to coordinate parliamentary activities or a neutral space for multiparty dialogues, amongst others. Such exchanges and cooperation build trust and foster a culture of dialogue. They can also help break political deadlocks or shift the balance of power in parliament to strengthen its oversight capacity. This will in turn have a positive effect on parliamentary performance.

2. Capacity building and technical support

Integrated and politically savvy programming can also take the form of more traditional forms of technical support when this is desired, like:

- **Technical support**: improving institutional infrastructure and technical capacity (i.e. computers, furniture, library, staff training, research services)
- **Capacity building**: seminars for thematic expertise, trainings on policy development, trainings on advocacy and lobbying; training on campaigning, internal democracy within parties; sessions on parliamentary and party functions in democracy
- **Civic education**: Televised & radio debates on policies; promoting women's participation

A lack of skilled MPs and parliamentary staff, and poor technical knowledge are often identified as major weaknesses of parliaments. These can also be addressed in an integrated way, by establishing MP training and resource centres in political party headquarters. Likewise, joint thematic trainings on particular policy-issues can bring together the relevant parliamentary committees, parliamentary staff and the party staff who work on policy development. This in turn can create a culture of dialogue, institutional memory and institutional capacity that can last beyond an MPs' term. Some more innovative forms of technical support are long-term mentoring of MPs, a research fund for parliamentary policy research, or even direct grants to political parties. Simple low-cost interventions can create pockets of good practice that have a ripple effect throughout the system, when well targeted.

A critical factor for the success of such technical support is that it responds to the root causes of parliamentary or political party disfunction. A political party may, for instance, have the capacity to support MPs but no incentives to put in the effort. Capacity building will then have a limited effect.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR INTEGRATED DESIGN

Research power dynamics

The nature of the political parties and parliaments nexus varies greatly across country contexts, as mentioned previously. Therefore, the necessary starting point for an integrated programme is a solid understanding of the formal and informal power relations and processes in a specific country. This happens in the planning phase of the programme and needs to be the foundation on which the programme strategy, approach, objectives and interventions are built.

To this end, a **Political Economy Analysis (PEA)** can be undertaken, to identify the potential scope for a project, as well as the most appropriate entry points, potential synergies and pressing needs for intervention. A PEA studies the **power relations** and system-wide **incentive structures** that shape the behaviour of political actors to promote or impede change. This includes the formal political institutions and processes, as well as the underlying factors that influence parties' and parliamentarians' behaviour. Nevertheless, these dynamics change over time and must be reviewed periodically by programmes.

Understand political change

Political change is not a fast and linear process, but messy, haphazard, incremental and unpredictable. A study by Power and Coleman pointed out that the most successful programmes supporting parliaments and parties are the ones that diverged from their original planning documents, precisely because of the nature of political change. The following principles need to be at the heart of project design:

- **Long-term engagement**: Ideally, projects stretch across two or more electoral cycles and have the flexibility to be extended. As one participant in a project by Westminster Foundation for Democracy said: "what we need is less money and more time" (Power & Coleman, 2011).

- **Flexibility**: Project activities need to be responsive to political processes of change and ad hoc issues. While the strategic vision and objectives remain constant, activities and interventions are continually adapted. Flexibility also means allowing for the results of the PEA to be used as a basis for project design.

- **Realistic expectations**: External actors can only support internal processes of change, making them very dependent on internal drivers of change and vulnerable to internal boycotts. Donors can thus not expect guaranteed system-wide, quantifiable changes from 3-year projects.

Appeal to interests of participants

For behavioural change, programmes need to appeal directly to the interests of participants and provide incentives for better performance for development. This requires that programming is grounded in a strong PEA. In addition, two other ways of sustaining involvement have proven to be successful:

- Sequencing of benefits to participants
- Packaging reforms

Acknowledge the role of politics

Addressing the incentive structures of politicians will always tip the balance of power in favour of certain political actors at the expense of others. For instance, political party support will have a differential effect on opposition parties and the ruling party.

Explicitly acknowledging the role of politics at the outset of a programme is crucial, as it allows tensions arising from the level of political sensitivity to be addressed squarely from the start. That way, risks involved in political programming can be mitigated from the start. For example, should the party system be clientelist in nature, support to parties in parliament may be counterproductive. In this case support would be more effective in encouraging 'programmatic' parties with clear policies on specific issues.

Lastly, acknowledgement of the political nature of a programme encourages donors to accept the implications of their actions. To this end, multi-stakeholder consultations can serve to get buy-in from all political actors on particularly sensitive matters.

Local ownership

The aid effectiveness principle of local ownership has a tenuous relationship with democracy support, as political actors will typically ask for money and exchange visits rather than activities that affect the balance of power. However, external actors' role in political change is fundamentally one of encouraging and supporting internal drivers of change.

A critical starting point is ensuring **sufficient buy-in** from all actors involved. This can be established through exhaustive consultations or by ensuring political actors have an interest in sustained participation in the project.

An innovative method used by NIMD was letting political parties bid for direct funding. By letting them produce project proposals for the funding, they retained a sense of ownership and responsibility for it.

Measuring results

Political change is not easily captured in ex ante off-the-shelf logframes or quantitative indicators. The most important political changes are qualitative, like behavioural change or a more democratic culture. Setting inappropriate indicators drives an output- rather than outcome orientation, leading projects to fail to meet their politically smart objectives in order to achieve quantifiable technical outputs. The right indicators and monitoring and evaluation methods are thus critical for achieving change. Some methods for capturing political change are:

- A **triangulation of opinions** from local and external stakeholders, recipients, and observers, in combination with quantitative data
- **Most-significant-change**: this is a participatory monitoring and evaluation technique where stories of change are recorded and systematically evaluated.
- **Outcome Harvesting and Outcome Mapping** are evaluation methods that help to identify the behavioural changes of beneficiaries.

CASE STUDY

Women's representation

Women's participation and leadership in politics is crucial to inclusive and development-oriented politics. Political parties and parliaments are critical actors in improving the representation of women in policy-making. Political parties are the **gatekeepers** to women's participation in political processes. Likewise, parliaments are key platforms for **gender-sensitive policy-making** and changing socio-cultural barriers to **women's political leadership** by setting a potentially powerful example.

In other words, women's representation is not just a good entry point, but a necessary component of any integrated programme that wants to achieve a level playing field.

Supporting both parties and parliaments on women's representation can take many forms, like cross-party women's caucuses for instance. Supporting a **women's caucus** can increase female MPs' capacity and influence to adopt policies that promote women's empowerment and stimulate institutional reform in favour of gender equality. At the same time, this strengthens female MPs to take greater leadership positions in their own parties and creates a platform for multiparty dialogue and exchange of expertise.

A similar but wider type of women's coalition are **cross-party women's wings**, which bring together women at the parliamentary and local party level to discuss policies to advance gender equality. These then aim to inform parliamentary work whilst also building trust and a culture of dialogue between different parties and parliamentarians.

Female MPs may also be supported to **train or mentor** young female party members. Given their experience in overcoming the obstacles for women in politics, they are in the best position to boost young women's confidence and strengthen their leadership, campaigning and negotiation skills.

Women inclusion in politics in Zambia

Since 2013, Zambia National Women's Lobby (ZNWL) and Political Parties of Finland for Democracy (Demo Finland) have been strengthening the inclusion of women in politics in Zambia. Support for political parties has been successful – five out of eight parliamentary patties have created a gender equality for their party. In addition to capacity building and support for parties' programmatic work, multiparty collaboration in form of multiparty dialogue platforms are supported for women politicians both nationally and locally. The platforms provide valuable networks and increase solidarity among women as well as function as a safe space for the women politicians to cooperate across political party lines. The multiparty platforms have enabled dialogue between female politicians even during political deadlock between the ruling party and main opposition party. As work is done in a cross-party manner involving people within and outside parliaments, they have achieved more than advancing women's participation through policy work for the parliament.

FURTHER READING

Carothers, T. & Power, G. 2018. *Guide to working with parliaments and political parties for sustainable development.* for the Department for International Development (DFID).

De Vrieze, F. for the European Commission. 2014. *Mapping and Study on Performance Indicators for EU support to political parties.*

European Commission (2010). *Engaging and Supporting Parliaments Worldwide: Strategies and methodologies for EC action in support to parliaments.* Tools and Methods Series. Brussels: European Commission.

Menocal, A. R. & O'Neil, T. (2012). *Mind the Gap: Lessons Learnt and Remaining Challenges in Parliamentary Development Assistance – A Sida Pre-Study.* Commissioned by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

Power, G. & Coleman, O. for International IDEA. 2011. *The challenges of political programming: international assistance to parties and parliaments.*

Power, G. (2008). *Donor support to parliaments and political parties: an analysis prepared for DANIDA.* Commissioned by Global Partners & Associates.

Power, G. (2011). *The Politics of Parliamentary Strengthening: understanding political incentives and institutional behaviour in parliamentary support strategies.* Published by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and Global Partners & Associates.

Power, G. & Coleman, O. (2011). *The Challenges of Political Programmes: International Assistance to Parties and Parliaments.* Commissioned by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance; Global Partners and Associates.

Tostensen, A. & Amundsen, I. (2010). *Support to Legislatures: Synthesis Study.* Oslo: Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD).