

**Lessons Learned in
Political Party Assistance**
Seminar Report

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1. Introduction

There exists a broad consensus among academics and practitioners that political parties are essential to the proper functioning of a democracy. Yet, in helping transition countries to become more democratic, political party development has received little attention from the international community. Being considered 'too political' and therefore 'too sensitive', political party development has for a long time ranked bottom at the list of international policy priorities for development cooperation. The growing number of professional international NGOs and foundations that are actively involved in various forms of political party and other forms of democracy assistance since the early 1990s seems to signal a change. This change is partly a response to the significant increase in the number of (electoral) democracies in developing countries during the 1990s. Nevertheless, the field of political party assistance remains fairly young and there are relatively few systematic impact assessments or evaluations on the effectiveness of this type of aid.

In order to outline the main problem areas and identify options for future research and policy, the Conflict Research Unit (CRU) convened a discussion seminar bringing together a small group of academic and practitioner experts. Without attributing comments to participants, the following report summarizes the key issues discussed and highlights the elements of a future research and policy agenda in the field of political party assistance. The annexes include an overview of the program and a list of participants.

2. What are we talking about? – Facts and Figures on Political Party Assistance

The first introductory presentation focused on the financial flows of European political party assistance. One of the most important conclusions was that with a current annual overall budget of approximately € 415 million of all NGOs combined, the field of political party development is relatively small, at least in monetary terms. Within the group of 31 European political party assistance NGOs, the six German 'Stiftungen' take up the largest share (89%) of the annual overall budget for political party support. In addition, it was emphasized that the Middle East and the Northern African region received significantly less assistance in comparison with other regions. Finally, the presentation showed that political party assistance is a relatively new field, with the majority of its international supporters being founded in the last 20 years.

During the discussion several participants noted that more research is needed to adequately 'map' the field. Such research should not only focus on further breaking down the overall categories of overall and program budgets, but also study the impact of the different channels and types of activities on political party development.

3. What have we learned? – A Review of Problem Areas

The second presentation was based on the paper specifically written for this seminar, entitled *International Political Party Assistance. An Overview and Analysis*.¹ Five problem areas were highlighted. The first one focused on the quality of political party assistance. Many recipients of aid

¹ An electronic version of this paper, published as CRU Working Paper 33 can be found at: http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2004/20041000_cru_working_paper_33.pdf

indicate that support is not always relevant to the local needs and that local ownership over programs is generally limited. In addition, there is a degree of suspicion and scepticism regarding the intentions of international democracy assistance in general. Although European organizations are generally perceived to be less biased than their American counterparts, in both cases their assistance is sometimes regarded as ‘a form of foreign imperialism from the West’. Finally, tentative research findings show that political party assistance is not always linked to broader democracy assistance programs. In many cases support to political parties is ‘a fairly technical exercise that focuses on the nuts and bolts of party organization’. As a result, most programs pay relatively little attention to the broader context of democratization, including the role of political parties in parliament, but also in community and provincial-level decision-making bodies. Support to political parties therefore has to be part of a broader package of democracy assistance that is based on a widely shared strategy for democratization. The other above-mentioned criticisms could be redressed by engaging more consultants from the region and by developing local or regional organizations that train and develop political parties on behalf of international organizations.

Another major issue concerns the often tense relationship between political parties and civil society. As a result of international bias, most assistance has gone into strengthening of the civil society sector often at the expense of political parties. Now, however, it is increasingly being recognized that civil society actors are very capable of expressing specific demands, but are less suitable to aggregate broad societal interests. Interest aggregation and other democratic functions like candidate selection and formation of government can only be performed by political parties that in most cases, however, lack the resources to do so. In this connection, one of the participants wondered:

‘whether the disproportionate international attention for civil society development has not unintentionally undermined the growth of political parties in some developing countries’?

In order to correct this imbalance, it was suggested that the international community reconsiders some of its current civil society assistance programs and identifies ways in which civil society organizations actually strengthen the role of political parties. E.g. by developing civil society think tanks that provide a discussion forum for political parties. This might be particularly relevant in post-conflict settings, where political parties are often weak and civil society organizations can help to voice popular complaints and/or ideas.

Thirdly, it is fair to say that political parties can also be part of the problem. This is especially the case with parties that do not have strong links with society but are mere vehicles for personal gain by party leaders. Then there are parties that exacerbate or reinforce conflicts along existing fault lines within society. One particular example of negative consequences deriving from political party assistance is that it may grant international legitimacy to parties with an outright anti-democratic record. Direct support to such political parties places policy makers for (moral) dilemmas. Support to political parties that operate in a dominant party system –as is often the case in Africa- was discussed as another example in which donors should be very reluctant. In that situation, the choice is between support for the dominant party, thereby institutionalising the dominant party system, or support for weak opposition parties that often have weak grassroots support. In such cases only a long-term international engagement seems helpful. However, in so doing, international agencies have to ‘allow for failures’ and accept that ‘political parties that are now in place, do not need to be in place ten years from now’.

The limited time horizon of most party assistance programs creates another problem. In contrast to long-term development programs, most party assistance programs tend to be relatively short (1-2 years) and event-driven (around the elections). Most participants concluded that this approach ignores historical lessons indicating that a country's transition towards democracy normally takes decades, not years. Realizing that most international actors also have to satisfy their short-term political needs, it was argued that political party assistance could be devised on a more balanced short and long-term basis. In the short term, a programme should address the immediate needs of political parties, whereas in the long run the focus should shift to the creation of an 'enabling' institutional infrastructure wherein political parties can grow and develop themselves.

Finally, a more fundamental question was raised:

'Does international political party assistance make any sense in non-Western societies?'

In the discussion, several participants put forward the need for a more critical approach towards the existing political party assistance paradigm. Democratization and political party development in the Western world is usually associated with an urbanizing, industrializing and modernizing society that reaches a certain level of education and economic growth. Political parties in many parts of the world face a profoundly different institutional context than exists in Western societies. The existence of neo-patrimonialism and patron-client relationships in many African countries, for example, dominates the way in which parties function. In addition, in many developing countries political parties tend to be based on so-called socio-cultural particularistics such as family origin, ethnicity, religion and/or caste that can promote a divide between 'us' and 'them'. Broader based interests like class or ideology are not prevailing. Furthermore, political socialisation is in many developing countries not limited to political parties, but also takes place in welfare centres, mosques and *madrassahs* [Islamic schools]. Western conceptualisations of political parties and party systems –normally based on ideological distinctions– are therefore not very useful as a guiding tool for interventions. This led one participant to remark that actually 'more research is needed on the nature of political parties, not per se on political party assistance'.

Although party assistance programmes have become slightly more sophisticated as a result of major gains in experience, many of these critical issues remain unresolved. In order to develop targeted international policies and more locally adapted programs, there is an urgent need for (applied) research, better communication and more discussion with local political stakeholders.

4. What other Issues are Important? – Some Suggestions for Improvement

One of the biggest problems in the field is that there are very few, publicly available systematic evaluations and/or impact assessments on party assistance programs. Apart from one or two exceptions, in general there seems to be little willingness among international party assistance foundations and NGOs to learn from past mistakes or take into account external criticism. This makes it extremely difficult to come up with concrete suggestions for improving the rationale and modalities of assistance. Nevertheless, a number of issues were highlighted.

Partnership is a good example of an issue that merits further inspection. The long partnerships that some international organizations have with their ('sister party') counterparts in developing countries are often seen as a big advantage. The assumption is that over time a certain level of trust developed,

which now enables a more fruitful dialogue with local political parties and hence more effective party support. The downside of a long partnership, i.e. its potential for becoming too favourable and uncritical, is almost never considered. As one participant phrased ‘There is a risk that the relationship becomes too cosy and that assistance becomes supportive instead of transformational’.

In addition, participants questioned whether there are situations with certain unfavourable conditions in which the international community should decide to refrain from party assistance or at least adopt a ‘do no harm’ approach. Although there are positive examples of organizations that do conduct a needs assessment of the local political party setting before ‘going in’, there are also cases in which programs are designed without a proper situational analysis. As one participant remarked:

‘Should the international community be interventionist and actively help to transform the institutional framework in which political parties operate or should it be satisfied with a more hands-off approach and just facilitate debate, training, etc., and hope that democratic leaders step forward in the future?’.

A third main issue concerned the request to ‘devote more attention to political party systems’. Instead of focusing solely on individual parties and improving their performance, international assistance programs should also target their resources to the institutional conditions in which parties operate. In some countries the institutional environment tends to be too liberal as there are virtually no limits to establishing a political party (e.g. Malawi). In other countries, however, constitutional arrangements actually forbid the functioning of nation-wide parties (e.g. Uganda). By helping to reform the legal framework and remove all sorts of informal obstacles, international actors can make an important contribution to the design of fairer rules and regulations for all political parties.

Tied to this is the need for a better ‘understanding of the political, social and economic environment in which political party assistance is given’. As ‘changes towards more democratic regimes cannot come from the outside, but have to be generated locally’, agendas for political party assistance also need to be developed from within. The challenge for donors is to facilitate the debate about this agenda for democratic transformation at the local level.

Several references were made to the valuable lessons that could be learned from experiences with long-term political party assistance to Central and Eastern Europe. In this connection, the role of political party foundations, trans-national parties and international party networks should receive special attention. As most party assistance programs to Central and Eastern Europe are nearing their end due to EU membership, now would be a good time to draw up a final assessment of that support. At the same time participants realized that the level of ‘replicability’ of these political transition support programs for other, non-EU regions might be rather limited.

In relation to this it was noted that a shift is noticeable from ‘first-’ to ‘second-generation’ political party assistance organizations. Whereas the former, often older political party foundations (like the German Stiftungen and the Dutch ‘MATRA-recipients’) primarily work with a bi-partisan approach supporting the development of mainly ‘sister parties’, the latter and younger category of organizations seems to favour a more multi-partisan approach (as exemplified in the work of the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, IMD). One participant noted that the growing interest of multilateral organizations (like UNDP, OAS but also International IDEA) in political party development provides a third, alternative approach. In absence of comparative studies on the

effectiveness of the different approaches, it remains hard to say which one works best under which circumstances.

Reflecting the difference between democracy and democratization, a distinction should also be made between ideal-type requirements and a realistic set of priorities. Especially post-conflict countries pose a number of problems here. The biggest challenge is to transform rebel or armed movements into democratically-functioning political parties. The nature of this transformation (by military victory or peace agreements) and its management (by internal and/or international actors) are crucial determining factors for democratic success. Moreover, the fragile security situation often does not allow for too sophisticated needs assessments and extensive political discussions. However, the situation in Iraq with an unrepresentative interim-government aiming at hurried elections shows that a 'quick fix security-only' approach also has its limitations (cf. the different approach in Afghanistan where there is at least some kind of agreement between the main domestic actors over the political transition process). This raises the question of what preconditions need to be in place before political party assistance can be effective and whether stability or security should actually precede political party development. International agencies can do more to consider these issues, take the political reality into account and plan and time their assistance programs accordingly.

5. What to focus on in the Future? – A Tentative Research Agenda

The debate resulted in a challenging research agenda. A first general interest concerned the completion of basic data on international assistance flows, including the breakdowns of specific program and overall budgets for political party development. A second major task is to map the different party systems, laws, regulations (e.g. gender quota), and self-management practices of political parties across the world. This work, which has already been started by International IDEA, will provide useful information to academics, policy makers and practitioners interested in planning and learning more about political party development in different countries. A third priority brought forward by the participants concerns the need to conduct a comparative study on political party development in different contexts, including stable, fragile and post-conflict states. Assuming that institutional preconditions will be different in these states, the findings from such a study could help to make international assistance programs more suitable to difficult local realities. Finally, there was a general feeling that more program evaluations and general assessments are needed in order to learn from past experiences and tailor future assistance to the needs of political parties worldwide. In closing the seminar, the Head of the Conflict Research Unit indicated that these and other related topics would undoubtedly inform the research agenda of the Clingendael Institute in the years to come.

Jeroen de Zeeuw and Steven Schoofs
Conflict Research Unit (CRU), Clingendael Institute
The Hague, 15 November 2004

Lessons Learned in Political Party Assistance

Discussion Seminar
Conflict Research Unit (CRU), Clingendael Institute
Park Hotel
The Hague, 4 November 2004

Program

12.15	Welcome and Lunch
13.00	Welcome and Opening of Seminar <i>Mr. Jeroen de Zeeuw, Conflict Research Unit (CRU)</i>
13.15	Facts and Figures About European Political Party Assistance <i>Mr. Jos van Wersch, Institute for Multiparty Democracy (IMD)</i>
13.30	Lessons Learned International Political Party Assistance <i>Mr. Krishna Kumar, United States Agency for International Development (USAID)</i>
14.00	Comments and Discussion Chair: Mr. Georg Frerks, Conflict Research Unit (CRU)
14.45	Break
15.00	<i>Discussion (cont'd)</i>
15.30	Formulation of Policy and Research Agenda Chair: Mr. Georg Frerks
16.45	Closing of Seminar
17.00	Reception at Parkhotel
17.45	End of Reception
19.00	Dinner at <i>Haricot Vert</i> (all participants invited)

List of Participants

Arjen Berkvens	Alfred Mozer Foundation, Netherlands
Peter Burnell	University of Warwick, United Kingdom
Thomas Carothers	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA
Oda van Cranenburgh	Leiden University, Netherlands
Renske Doorenspleet	Leiden University, Netherlands
Georg Frerks	Clingendael Institute, Netherlands
Luc van de Goor	Clingendael Institute, Netherlands
Roger Hällhag	International IDEA, Sweden
Jan Hijkoop	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands
Krishna Kumar	United States Agency for International Development, USA
Roel von Meijenfeldt	Institute for Multiparty Democracy, Netherlands
Marisia Pechaczek	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands
Robert-Jan Scheer	Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands
Steven Schoofs	Clingendael Institute, Netherlands
Lars Svåsand	Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway
Jan Tuit	Institute for Multiparty Democracy, Netherlands
Jos van Wersch	Institute for Multiparty Democracy, Netherlands
Jeroen de Zeeuw	Clingendael Institute, Netherlands