



THE OSLO CENTER

Peace • Democracy • Human Rights

Strategy 2016 - 2020

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1 - Introduction

The Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights was established in 2006, by former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik and former member of Stortinget (the Norwegian Parliament) and Cabinet Einar Steensnæs. Their objective was to create a new platform in Norway for international peace and human rights efforts, where – together with staff members and partners – they could put to good use their experience and competence and the networks they had acquired over many years in domestic and international politics.

Since its establishment in 2006, the Oslo Center has developed into an independent, professional and politically relevant democracy assistance center and a meeting place for experts, change agents and political actors. The Oslo Center provides comparative knowledge and shared practical experiences, and creates meeting places for strengthening democracy, good governance, conflict prevention and dialogue.

The Oslo Center considers the Global Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals to be a common project for the world. We see our work as especially aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 16: “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”

The Oslo Center views democracy as the only sustainable system of governance that, over time, can guarantee people’s basic rights and at the same time secure the peaceful development of a society. We see a democratic society with strong institutions as conducive to human, social and economic development *and* to maintaining peace.

We have formulated an overarching Vision and Mission for the Oslo Center and describe here the basic assumptions, approaches and priorities that will guide our work during the coming years.

2 - Vision

A world consisting of stable democracies respecting equality, human dignity and human rights.

3 - Mission

The Oslo Center is an independent, non-partisan democracy assistance center that assists the strengthening of democratic political institutions and processes.

4 - Basic assumptions

Integrity – we acknowledge that democracies are home-grown and based on local ownership, and emphasize the importance of building trust through relationships based on respect;

Commitment – we take a practical, long-term approach to democracy assistance, acknowledging that democratic change takes time;

Inclusivity – we highlight the importance of inclusivity and equality in political representation and participation; stress the importance of human rights; and pay special attention to gender equality, the rights of minorities, and the rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups.

5 – The Oslo Center approach

The Oslo Center takes a holistic approach to democracy assistance, working with political institutions and processes including political parties, governance actors, civil society and independent commissions and offices. A well-functioning, sustainable democracy must include a balance between competition and cooperation among the actors, where dialogue is crucial to achieve sustainable results. The aim of dialogue is increased understanding and trust-building that may lay the foundation to identify challenges and common solutions.

The Oslo Center approach to democracy assistance can be summarized in four key components:

The first key is maintaining the highest possible level of local knowledge and understanding of the political, cultural, historical, security, social and economic context. This means knowing and understanding the actors and all relevant processes including identifying the ‘drivers of change’ and the ‘barriers to change’, always seeking ‘doing no harm’.

The second key is the issue of local ownership, which is fundamental in all our programs and activities. Our approach is request-based and includes sharing knowledge-based options, and presenting practical comparative experiences, looking at pros and cons, but acknowledging the rights and responsibilities of the relevant decision makers to draw conclusions.

The third key is the issue of good timing, i.e. we remain sensitive through an understanding of the context to “do the right thing at the right time”. Flexibility, including ‘rapid response’ and tailored activities responding to requests, challenges and opportunities, is important. Hence sequencing the activities in order to secure the highest level of relevance is crucial for successful processes.

The fourth key is combining theoretical knowledge with practical experiences. So called ‘best practice’ and ‘lessons learned’ are included in the dialogue with partners, as the process is often as important as the outcome.

The Oslo Center is assisting our partners in their institutional and organizational strengthening, rather than offering prescriptive programs and activities.

6 - Main priorities and focus areas

Our main area of work is democracy assistance implemented through dialogue. The work focuses on:

6.1 Providing context-sensitive knowledge and practical comparative experience

When responding to requests or initiating work the Oslo Center assesses the political context, acknowledging that democracy assistance to political institutions and processes is political and therefore sensitive. Our approach is to acknowledge this and thereby design programs that will not rekindle recent conflicts or spark new ones. We map power dynamics and identify the important actors, so as to better understand the political events and assess the events of change. Based on this, we provide context-sensitive knowledge and practical comparative experience.

We appreciate that there are fundamental principles of democracy including inclusive participation, equal opportunities and accountable representation, transparency, and openness towards a diversity of views. The Oslo Center recognizes that the rights of women and gender equality are at the core of democracy. The Oslo Center also realizes that in many countries the youth population is often excluded from decision-making processes. Gender sensitivity and youth inclusion are therefore cross-cutting issues permeating program design and implementation.

6.2 Supporting intra- and inter-institutional mechanisms of cooperation in the context of political competition

Democracy is multifaceted and requires many institutions to perform their respective roles and fulfil their responsibilities. The Oslo Center assists individual institutions, including but not limited to political parties, electoral management bodies, governmental and/or independent

commissions and civil society, to strengthen their internal democratic design - i.e. the intra-institutional processes.

Similarly, it is important to work with the inter-institutional mechanisms i.e. the processes involving more than one institution: executive (Government), legislature (Parliament) and political parties, electoral management bodies, governmental and/or independent commissions, and civil society.

Political competition is an important component of a democracy. Credible and accepted free and fair elections are fundamental to accommodate diversity and provide for political solutions and policy alternatives. However, equally important is political cooperation within and between institutions. This is of particular importance in relation to strengthening political trust and stability, as well as agreeing on issues of national importance and in pursuing reforms.

6.3 Assisting democratic reform through the development of political institutions and legal frameworks

In acknowledging the importance of legal frameworks, the Oslo Center assists in the development and revision of constitutions, election laws, political party laws and laws regulating the financing of political parties and election campaigns. Additionally, the Oslo Center assists in the process of operationalizing legislation through documentation such as regulations, guides and handbooks. The Oslo Center underlines the importance of adhering to international legal obligations and humanitarian standards in constitutions and other legislation. This includes the dissemination and implementation of legislation, assisting political actors in their compliance with and ability to operate within the legal framework.

In this regard, the Oslo Center takes a holistic approach where all legislation is seen as part of the same overarching framework and all laws need to be drafted in synergy with each other. This requires that the political system, including the governance system, the political party system and the electoral system, are all taken into consideration when drafting or amending a law. The key issue of participation when drafting legal frameworks includes the immediately concerned government institutions and stakeholders who will have to comply with the law, and input from civil society that functions as both a mobilizer for change and as an integral part of the implementation of the legislation. In addition, the Oslo Center emphasizes that all laws need to be adjusted to the particular context, but at the same time they must comply with international legal obligations and universal human rights.

6.4 Promoting confidence building between various actors in civil society, political parties and governmental / state institutions, providing meeting places and facilitating dialogue

In a democracy, two key words are 'trust' and 'confidence'. The Oslo Center focuses on developing and maintaining relations with both the political majority and minority, with the government, the opposition, and civil society. The Oslo Center recognizes that democracy requires both a change of behavior and a change in people's mindsets. Independent media

are also key actors in vibrant democracies and should be included in a democracy assistance program. To promote and enhance democratic governance, a strong civil society is essential.

To support political cooperation and work with political actors, the Oslo Center creates meeting spaces and venues for dialogue. Mechanisms are created in order to share experiences of consensus-based politics and how to reach compromises. Dialogue between individuals and institutions, including civil society and political leaders, aims to bridge divides. Such dialogues are important tools to build trust between individuals and groups in civil society, between civil society representatives, political parties and government / state representatives, as well as within governmental and state institutions.

Working with youth organizations and women's organizations is given particular attention. Our purpose in establishing meeting places is to strengthen the capacity of civil society actors by increasing knowledge and building confidence, and to enable the formulation of innovative political solutions in order to promote peace, cooperation and reconciliation.

6.5 Promoting respect for equality, human dignity and human rights

The Oslo Center promotes human rights, including women's rights, children's rights, and the rights of minorities and traditionally marginalized groups. Additionally, the right to assembly, the right to freedom of expression, and the right to freedom of religion or belief are fundamental aspects of a democracy and are therefore among the Oslo Center's human rights priorities.

Respect for human rights is promoted by emphasizing the importance of including human rights provisions in all legal frameworks for political parties, political institutions and political processes. This is done by facilitating dialogues and workshops with political and civil society actors and other stakeholders, including representatives of national and local governments. The Oslo Center will also raise concerns and draw attention, when possible, to equality, human dignity and human rights when meeting government representatives and key political leaders.

Education plays an essential role in securing human rights, peace, democracy and the rule of law. More specifically, education is important to counteract against the rise of racism, extremism, discrimination and intolerance.

6.6 Good governance in managing natural resources

Good governance of natural resources is important not only for a democratic development and political stability, but also for ensuring fundamental rights of citizens such as the right to healthcare and the right to education.

Whenever opportunities and resources permit, the Oslo Center will continue to seek ways in which management of natural resources can be incorporated in the work of the center.

6.7 Conflict resolution and peace mediation

Resolving violent conflicts is important to create a conducive environment for democracy development and to be able to provide democracy assistance. The Oslo Center believes in the use of dialogue in conflict resolution and peace mediation. Many conflicts are difficult to resolve due to lack of trust between the conflicting parties or lack of an independent and impartial third party to facilitate and mediate in the conflict.

A key principle in a peaceful conflict resolution is that all parties are willing to compromise, and that no-one feels they are the losing party. It is important to understand the background and the root causes of a conflict, and to build confidence and trust between the conflicting parties. The responsibility to solve the conflict rests mainly with the conflicting parties, but will quite often require assistance from the outside to facilitate the processes.

The Oslo Center is internationally recognized as a democracy assistance center, but we are also available to assist in facilitating peace processes and to mediate in conflicts using our competence and experience in dialogue and working in complex political environments.

7 – The Oslo Center Kenya (OCK)

As a result of the Oslo Center's extensive work in Kenya, a strategic decision was made to establish an office in Nairobi – the Oslo Center Kenya. In line with the Oslo Center's approach emphasizing local ownership, tailored activities, knowing and understanding the local context, OCK is being set up as an independent non-governmental organization under Kenyan law, with its own Board of Directors.

8 – The Oslo Center gender strategy

In order to develop a functioning democracy, it is key to have active participation among both men and women. Gender equality is prioritized when developing, implementing and evaluating democracy assistance programs. The aim is to ensure that women are equally represented in all spheres and therefore are equipped with the same tools to perform in official positions, in politics and in the society as a whole.

The women's own ideas and perceptions of how they want to promote, and address gender equality is crucial when the Oslo Center tailor-makes its programming to specific country contexts.

The Oslo Center gender strategy contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 5: “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”.

The Oslo Center works with a twin-track approach:

Track 1: In the mainstreaming component the project, the responsible person / project manager reviews his/her projects/programs, seeking possibilities for how the program can generate space for women and gender equality issues. This goes beyond numbers and seeks to find ways in which women can not only be equally represented, but also have equal opportunities in regard to power and decision-making positions.

Track 2: The Oslo Center works on specific programs for women to maximize their involvement and relevance in the public and private spheres. This work includes designing specific programs/projects in areas such as ensuring gender equality in legal frameworks, processes and systems, capacity building of women in key positions, and the need to introduce gender quotas.

9 – Our advantages

Extensive leadership experience from politics, experience-based knowledge of the ‘nuts and bolts’ of political cooperation and a broad international network are hallmarks of the Oslo Center. The founders of the Oslo Center and other key staff have built trust and confidence among leaders worldwide and enjoy unique access to the leadership level in international politics.

Staff with diverse professional backgrounds give the Oslo Center a unique opportunity to occupy a niche in enhancing political cooperation, dialogue and responsible leadership. We have strategic and operational relationships with other relevant centers, institutions and networks in Norway and internationally. This includes a pool of former politicians and diplomats with international experience who can provide resources for our work and be engaged according to demand and availability.

Our access to political leaders, government institutions and grassroots organizations provides an opportunity to address divisive and politically charged issues in relation to peace, democracy and human rights. A hallmark of the Oslo Center’s method is the ability to bring the needs of the grassroots up to the highest levels of government. Many organizations may have to choose one or the other, while the Oslo Center’s network has given us the opportunity to address all levels of society.

As an independent organization the Oslo Center can play a role that is sometimes difficult for government authorities to fill. However, we are a small organization and will not go about our tasks

alone. We work in partnership with, and seek to complement the efforts of, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations (UN) and research institutions.

10 – Working in partnership

We believe we can achieve more to enhance political cooperation and responsible leadership through long-term cooperation and working in partnership with governments and other actors. We have two main groups of partners:

- (1) Partners with whom we implement programs and activities; and
- (2) Partners with whom we collaborate from a strategic perspective.

In addition, we maintain contact with a wide range of other local, national and international networks, organizations and individuals that are regarded as important in the execution of our programs and activities.

The Oslo Center's focus on partnerships is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 17: "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize global partnership for sustainable development", highlighting the importance of working together to achieve the 2030 Global Agenda.

10.1 Implementing Partners

The Oslo Center works closely with well-recognized international democracy assistance organizations and draws on the experience and competence of several sources in our work. Our main implementing partners are the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International IDEA. Other implementing partners are identified depending on the projects and programs in which we are engaged. The Oslo Center has signed Memoranda of Understanding or Partnership Agreements with all implementing partners to reflect the mutual scope of cooperation and the fact that we work together as equal partners.

10.2 Strategic Partners

In order to expand our knowledge base, anchor activities broadly and develop synergies at the interface between cooperation with leaders in politics and broader institutional development / capacity building efforts, the Oslo Center collaborates with relevant bilateral and multilateral donors and organizations, international NGOs and other agencies.

The Oslo Center collaborates with national and international academic and expert institutions in order to be better placed to offer advice, raise awareness and strengthen knowledge of human rights standards, legal instruments and policies.

10.3 Networks

Working in partnerships, ensuring synergies and cooperation between the democracy assistance providers and development actors is important to the Oslo Center. We are therefore members of several networks, to also ensure highest relevance in our work. The Political Party Peer (PPP) Network is a network of international democracy assistance providers and development actors which have joined ranks to take stock of international assistance to political parties and determine how assistance to these core democratic institutions can be delivered more effectively, targeting not just institutions but also the context within which they function. The Oslo Center is in the Steering Committee of the PPP Network. The Oslo Center is also a member of the European Partnership of Democracy, which is conceived as a “Community of practice”, with a group of organisations which work together because, by doing so, they can substantially improve the way they operate in the realm of democracy support.

10.4 The Oslo Center US Foundation (OCUSF)

The Oslo Center US Foundation was established in 2008 to assist in building networks in the United States for the Oslo Center, and develop possible funding sources.

The working relationship between the Oslo Center and the OCUSF will be evaluated during the strategy period.

11 – Funding strategy

Ever since the Oslo Center was established in 2006, we have focused on being independent from government, the business community, and other special interests regarding the priorities and content of our work. The Oslo Center will continue to look for a stable and long-term financial basis to secure and develop its professional competence and capacity as an internationally recognized democracy assistance center.

The Oslo Center will increase engagement and support from existing partners while seeking relationships with new ones. Framework agreements will be developed towards strategic engagement towards multi-year, flexible and high-quality funding.

Recognizing the importance of partners in supporting the work of the Oslo Center, we will strive to achieve high levels of donor stewardship and coordination to ensure that partners have a positive experience when working with the Oslo Center.

Project funding from donors and implementing partners will be secured to cover longer-term activities and programs. The Oslo Center aspires to develop systems for basket funding from groups of donors.

Private funding contributes to the administration and running costs of the Oslo Center and non-earmarked activity funds.

Identifying potential private sponsors and maintaining the sponsor relationship is the responsibility of the leadership at the Oslo Center. Internal guidelines determine what we can offer sponsors in terms of sponsor care and payback.

Private donors should demonstrate a business profile and employment ethics according to recognized international standards on respect for human rights. They should have a corporate social responsibility profile that supports human rights and democracy development. Donors should not make restrictions on how the funds are used except that they are used within the framework of the Oslo Center strategy.

To explore new strategic relationships, the Oslo Center will use networking events to seek prospective partners and develop long-term relationship. In the strategic period the Oslo Center should broaden its view on partnership to look for opportunities with multilaterals, governments, private and corporate actors, and foundations.

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