

International Political Party Assistance: Relevance and Challenges



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Political parties are a vital element of representative democracies and a major actor in the process of democratization. They engage citizens in democratic processes, represent their opinions and interests, develop policy, and take responsibility for its implementation. Yet, in recent decades, political parties around the world have been held in low regard. For a wide variety of reasons, ranging from the hostile populist discourse to the general loss of public trust, people tend to question the relevance and value of political parties.

Recent surveys show that 76 percent¹ of respondents in the European Union do not trust political parties, while in Africa, no to little trust, is placed by more than 50 percent of the surveyed population in ruling parties and by 60 percent² in opposition parties. This crisis of legitimacy raises a great concern for representative democracies as it impedes the fulfillment of political parties' essential role – to mediate between civil society and political institutions.

¹ Eurobarometer

² Afrobarometer

The continuous power struggle, together with recurring issues of corruption, clientelism, self-interest, and ideological incoherence label political parties as 'the weakest link' in the democratization process. Their role goes beyond elections. Political party programs raise the totality of social, political, and economic issues and suggest policy alternatives. Recruiting and training party members who eventually assume governing positions and political party leaders who ensure government accountability is essential. The presence of broad parties with active members does not only provide the electorate with a pluralistic representation but also stipulates the necessity of political consensus-building, which leads to more responsible competition and policy continuity.

Over the past fifteen years, the support of the Oslo Center to political parties in different countries has proven to be effective in strengthening internal party processes, promoting efficient interparty dialogue and cooperation that is conducive to political inclusion and democracy development. The question remains, however, how can political party assistance be effectively carried out? What are the prerequisites and the means for successful cooperation with political parties?

The Oslo Center approach

All the Oslo Center programs incorporate our essential values and holistic approach. Focusing on political expertise, analysis, and experience, our work is always based on preliminary in-depth study of political context and dynamics. Because the Oslo Center is a non-partisan organization, and because the impetus for change must come from a party itself, our programs are request-based. Together with partners, the Oslo Center does the assessment of necessities in a form of consultative meetings to define the areas that seek strengthening. This allows partners' particular needs to be elaborated into tailor-made programs with the suitable solutions. Our process-oriented approach also emphasizes the principle of local ownership from beginning to end and is based on a trusting relationship.



Political party assistance in young democracies

The following areas outline the areas of focus for political party support:

Institutional and organizational capacity

The Oslo Center addresses the challenge for political parties in young democracies, including the lack of well-functioning structures and organization processes. Our program in Kenya assisted six parties, for example, in revising their party constitution and internal procedures that guide party operations. This work was supported by trainings and technical meetings, which clarified the operations and coordination of party organs, and enabled the implementation of party constitutions. As a result, Kenyan parties have now adopted practices for

strengthened political processes, such as transparent candidate selection and mechanisms for internal dispute resolution.

In the case of Uganda, where personality-based representation and long-standing practices dominate the political landscape, there is a need for strengthened membership management, democratic representation, and enhancement of internal participation within parties.

In a centralized system, people from remote regions tend to be marginalized. The Oslo Center works to enhance communication between political parties and local branches. Our support helps establish rules and technical committees to guide members of local assembly groups and enable them to report citizens' needs. In Somaliland, for example, a focus country for the Oslo Center, support of regional structures would strengthen regional outreach and political representation across the country, contributing to enhanced citizen engagement and participation.

Inclusive participation

Effective democratization of society and comprehensive response to citizens' needs implies inclusive representation and participation in political processes. At the Oslo Center, political inclusion is ultimately integrated into every support program. In Kenya, our collaboration with political parties also comprises gender policies. We have assisted in the institutionalization of Women Leagues inside political parties and Interparty Women League to build women's confidence and capacity and increased their participation. Our ongoing work aims to strengthen women's electability and capacity in office. Similarly, our work with the Youth Leagues' development also aims to increase democratic space and youth participation in party development.

In some countries, youth and women are mobilized for political purposes and systematically excluded from political processes instead of meaningfully included in decision-making. The development of youth leagues allows, therefore, the articulation of youths grievances and strengthening of youth leadership to put the next generation's concerns on the political agenda.



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Independent institutions

Independent institutions are fundamental for the growth of viable and effective political parties. In Kenya, the Oslo Center works with *the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties (ORPP)* on various occasions to enable proper fulfillment of its oversight, accountability, guidance functions, internal cohesion, and cooperation amongst institutions. Since then, the ORPP has successfully addressed parties' needs and continuously worked on institutionalization to respond to the Kenyan political context.

As articulated by one of our partners below, the Oslo Center supports political dialogue, dispute resolutions mechanisms, and coalition building to further strengthen democratic practices.

*“We have developed very good dialogue among the political parties. We talk and exchange ideas, because we believe that **we are not enemies, we are competitors**, and we help each other in many ways.”*

Margaret Ndanyi

Executive Director of Amani National Congress

In Uganda, inter-institutional cooperation and coordination is a prerequisite for the development of a multiparty democracy. Support to regulatory bodies to strengthen political party regulation would contribute to stronger institutions and provide a dialogue platform for different political actors to better understand common issues and enhance consensus-building.



Policy cycle and programmatic capacity

The Oslo Center does not touch questions of ideology as we are a non-partisan organization and believe in healthy and peaceful diversity and multiparty systems. It is, however, important that political parties have the policy development capacities to present their agenda forward. In Kenya, the Oslo Center has provided policy development mechanisms for policy reports, monitoring, and evaluation. Our program guides political parties to self-identify by adopting policy-oriented approaches that guide accurate decision-making, policy implementation, and citizen responsiveness. It is important that parties clearly articulate and identify their policy-orientation and political identity to provide voters choice.

In Uganda, political parties are accused of failing to offer concrete alternative policies, even during their electoral campaigns. The institutionalization of policy-oriented politics and strengthening of policy development processes are therefore important to encourage transparency and policy accountability.

International status of political party support

Despite the abovementioned aspects of political party assistance, its priority is still relatively low on the list of democratic assistance. The annual share of international political party aid amounts to 5 – 7 percent of overall democracy support funds. In general, these donations are either provided by multinational organizations, such as the United Nations, the European Union, or the United States and European member states. The lack of donors



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and actors in political party assistance can be explained by the sensitivity of the work. Political party development and donors' result-oriented approach do not always coincide as political and democratic development usually require long-term engagement. Yet, political party assistance is in ever-growing demand in emerging democracies and merits more attention than it has received.

Democratic change in developing countries

The political party work of the Oslo Center has been fostering positive impact in emerging democracies. In Kenya, we have conducted 17 party constitution seminars and 24 institution-building initiatives in 2020. As a result, parties have enhanced their management and established new party organs, including those for persons with disabilities. Additionally, parties also developed online membership recruitment platforms, which opened new avenues for broad party membership. One party representative gladly shared that youth constitute 60 percent of people working in their national secretariat. These developments have been beneficial in enhancing party legitimacy and democratic role. In Uganda, to address the issues of political mistrust and weak policy development, there is a need to strengthen parties' responsiveness to citizens' needs and consolidation of party identity amongst their membership.

With our assistance, Kenyan political parties have developed training manuals to further strengthen women's participation in politics. After the training facilitated by the Oslo Center, the number of women running for elections, integrating decision-making organs, and election boards have increased. More women are also appointed to chair party committees. In Somaliland, gender imbalance in politics could be addressed by further integrating women into decision-making structures to influence the political development agenda.

As stated by our partner on the right, political party assistance contributes to democratic development by strengthening citizen's interactions with representative bodies that aim to represent their voice at the highest government level.

*"The work that the Oslo Center has done [contributes to] moving forward in terms of **advancing democratization** within the political parties, but also to the larger space of governance in the country."*

Tony Moturi

Legal Director of the Orange Democratic Movement



Recommendations

- **Promote process-oriented approach.** Democracy assistance is often event-based and short term, but working with political parties requires longer engagement, continuity, constant support, and consultations. The results of such assistance tend to be discovered in the long run.
- **Pay attention to individual party needs and local political culture.** Every party is at a different stage and might have different priorities and needs. Every political culture is unique and calls for flexibility in terms of assistance to achieve desired results.
- **Prioritizing accountability.** Implementation is crucial. Drafting rules and building structures need to be supported by political will, capacity, and accountability. They have to become essential to political party functioning.
- **Encourage inclusivity and strong public engagement.** Strong parties are broad parties with inclusive representation. They are vectors for public engagement and comprehensive needs identification.



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