

Overview of key findings

Elections are a central pillar of any democratic political system. But across the developing world, particularly in emerging and young democracies, they have been marred by allegations of corruption, disputed results and, more alarmingly, electoral violence. The violence that attracted high profile media coverage during the Kenyan political crisis of late 2007 is a recent case in point. Supporting electoral cycles so as to avoid conflict, help to embed locally-owned and sustainable democratic processes, take sufficient account of technical lessons learned from a decade of electoral assistance, and enhance opportunities for donor co-ordination, are all major concerns for donors and researchers alike. This brief overview pulls together the key findings from a series of recent GSDRC helpdesk research reports on elections in conflict-prone and fragile situations.

In spite of its prevalence and high-profile nature, election-related conflict (specifically, violence aimed at disrupting the electoral process) is a relatively under-researched area. Such violence has been linked to; social structural conditions; electoral system choice and the political stakes; the neutrality and competence of electoral administration; and the nature and functioning of the security sector. The choice of electoral system design is a fundamentally important consideration for preventing conflict; most agree elections should provide adequate mechanisms for the representation of different groups to avoid the potential for 'winners' and 'losers' and 'spoilers'. The relative benefits of majoritarian versus proportional representation systems are a long-debated subject, and different systems have been used in different contexts with varying degrees of success. The potentially influential role the media can play in mitigating, quelling or continuing violence is another key issue.

All of these considerations force donors to adapt their strategies for supporting free and fair elections in different contexts according to local socio-cultural settings. Lessons from electoral assistance in the last decade or so are voluminous, and context-specific, but a major common theme is the need for increased focus on capacity building (of electoral management bodies (EMBs)) to support sustainable processes. Many argue that whilst electoral assistance has been mostly successful in supporting the technical aspects of elections, such as drafting electoral legislation, electoral administration and observation, these interventions have been insufficient for entrenching good governance or democratic politics. But there are indications that donors are moving away from this technocratic approach. Recent years have seen a positive move towards viewing elections not as one-off events, but as an ongoing process which should be locally owned in order to become sustainable (the 'electoral cycle approach', championed by UNDP).

Elections in fragile or conflict-affected countries pose even more complex challenges. In countries emerging from conflict, elections can spark a renewal of violence. How to co-ordinate the disarmament of groups, provide adequate security, appropriately timetable elections, and considerations about how/whether to include former combatants are major concerns. Support for political parties in newly emerging democracies also needs careful consideration, so as to counter parties appealing to ethnic, religious or regional aspects that contributed to the conflict. Allowing sufficient time for voter education is also vital. Lack of confidence in the legitimacy of elections can also renew violence, so adequate electoral monitoring is necessary.

An ongoing technical consideration is how to co-ordinate the support of several (sometimes dozens) of donors around the same electoral process. In such circumstances there is obvious potential for duplication of effort. Pooled funding, or basket funds, are being increasingly used to enhance the quality of electoral assistance by increasing donor co-ordination, and simplifying management arrangements. Whilst pooled funds are seen as an important demonstration of consensus among the international community, they are not without their pitfalls; and have experienced weak coordination and consensus among participating donors,

limited involvement of key stakeholders, and/or weak communication among the various international actors. In spite of these challenges, there have been successful cases where this financial co-ordination has enhanced the efficiency of electoral assistance.

For a summary of some of the best literature available on these issues, see the following GSDRC helpdesk reports:

- [Electoral assistance lessons](#)
- [Election-related conflict](#)
- [Multi-donor funding for elections in fragile states](#)

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