USAID Guiding Principles for Electoral Assistance

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) recognizes that elections and other political processes are pivotal to the quality of a country's governance. Elections can either greatly advance or set back a country's long-term democratic development. While democracy is more than elections, meaningful democracy is not possible without elections that reflect the will of the people.

USAID's *Guiding Principles for Electoral Assistance* are intended to enhance USAID's support for democratic elections and political processes globally. Specifically, these principles help USAID:

- ensure that its electoral assistance reflects and adheres to USAID's values, as well as to global electoral assistance principles and best practices; and

- take into account decades of lessons from USAID's work, as well as the changing nature of electoral assistance.

USAID Definition of Electoral Assistance

USAID electoral assistance entails support for a wide range of programming throughout the electoral cycle[1] to promote democratic elections and political processes. This includes strengthening election management bodies; strengthening political parties; supporting nonpartisan citizen and international election observation; promoting democratic legal frameworks and electoral reform; enhancing civic and voter education; promoting a more resilient and accessible electoral information environment; mitigating electoral violence; enhancing the role of civil society in electoral processes; addressing corruption in elections; strengthening electoral justice; and post-election and political transitions. USAID's electoral assistance programming emphasizes addressing barriers to the political and electoral participation of women, youth, ethnic and religious minorities, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized populations.

VALUES AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

USAID Electoral Assistance Values

USAID's three overarching core values in its electoral assistance are:

1. USAID aims to promote elections that genuinely reflect the free expression of the will of the people and that adhere to democratic principles, norms, and obligations.

2. People are at the center of elections and USAID's electoral assistance programs, because, at their core, democratic elections must provide people with the opportunity to have a say in how they want to be governed.

3. USAID's electoral assistance supports democratic electoral processes and institutions. USAID does not seek to determine electoral outcomes. USAID's assistance is provided in an impartial and objective manner. This value is also reflected in USAID's Political Party Assistance Policy.

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[1] The electoral cycle lays out the main components that contribute to a successful election and categorizes them into three time periods: pre-electoral, electoral, and post-electoral. Some activities, such as electoral dispute resolution, may span all three periods. The electoral cycle components are not isolated events; they interact with and influence each other over time.

USAID Electoral Assistance Guiding Principles

1. USE A LONG-TERM, MULTI-ELECTORAL CYCLE APPROACH.

USAID's electoral assistance emphasizes programming that addresses systemic electoral integrity challenges through the entirety of the electoral cycle, and ideally over multiple electoral cycles. Electoral assistance is strategically planned within a broader democratic development context well in advance of a given election.[2] Because it often takes years to foster political will, consolidate political reforms, strengthen democratic resilience, and build core electoral capacities, electoral assistance planning for a specific electoral cycle is typically embedded within a longer-term, multi-electoral cycle strategy that evolves to reinforce progress and adapts to changing threats and opportunities over time.

Generally, the earlier in the electoral cycle that an electoral assistance strategy is developed, the more programmatic options are available. Electoral assistance in between elections often provides the greatest potential to strengthen institutions and processes, build local capacity, foster local ownership, and mitigate against electoral integrity threats. In contrast, if electoral assistance is provided with little time left before election day, programmatic options are limited, and may be less impactful, cost-effective or sustainable. To the extent that short-term interventions are supported, USAID should ensure there is sufficient time to conduct the interventions credibly and that they are linked to a longer-term approach. In addition, to promote learning, strengthen the bridge between election cycles, and inform and maintain momentum for electoral reform efforts, USAID's electoral assistance supports electoral stakeholders to conduct post-election assessments, draw lessons learned, and develop recommendations for follow-up efforts.

2. TAKE A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS.

USAID's electoral assistance takes into account the valuable roles that all key stakeholders play in the entirety of the electoral process, including but not limited to election management bodies, independent oversight bodies (such as anti-corruption agencies, media regulatory bodies, and political finance oversight bodies), international and citizen election observers, political parties, traditional and social media actors and platforms, civil society, international and regional bodies, and judicial bodies. In addition, the quality of elections is affected by a wide range of other factors that stretch across broader democracy, governance, information environment and media, economic, conflict prevention, and rights spaces.

As a result, USAID takes a holistic approach to promoting democratic elections that goes beyond focusing strictly on election processes. That includes integrating capabilities, programming, and expertise on anti-corruption, political finance, information environment, governance, conflict prevention, inclusion, civic education, technology and cybersecurity, and human rights, among others.

3. EMPHASIZE LOCALIZATION AND SUSTAINABILITY AROUND ALL ELECTORAL PROCESSES.

USAID's electoral assistance is tailored to and informed by each country's unique context and is responsive to local needs, strengthening local systems and emphasizing sustainability. USAID takes a

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[2] The USAID Electoral Assessment Framework and Companion Toolkit help USAID staff assess and prioritize needs, challenges, and opportunities, and then to develop a strategy and appropriate programming options for supporting democratic elections.

consultative, locally-led approach to designing electoral assistance strategies. This may also include fostering peer-to-peer learning and collaboration across borders when feasible.

USAID's electoral assistance integrates approaches to promoting sustainability to ensure that: (1) local capacity of relevant institutions, organizations, and actors is strengthened and local agency and ownership is prioritized from the outset; (2) citizens and other key electoral stakeholders have the knowledge, skills, and agency to be fully engaged and accountable in the electoral process; and (3) core democratic values are built into the process, from the provision of initial assistance to later stages of assistance.

4. PRIORITIZE GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES.

Gender equality, women's empowerment, and social inclusion of underrepresented groups is a core objective for USAID. For this reason, USAID recognizes that democratic elections must enable all eligible citizens to fully participate throughout the electoral cycle - as voters, candidates, and election workers - without fear of reprisal, discrimination, or violence.

USAID's electoral assistance prioritizes addressing the systemic and multi-layered barriers to the safe, accessible, and meaningful participation, representation, and leadership of women, youth, persons with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, individuals in poverty, LGBTQI+ individuals, indigenous peoples, internally displaced persons, and other underrepresented groups during all phases of an election to advance governance and democratic processes that are accountable to all.

5. CONSIDER POLITICAL ECONOMY AND POWER DYNAMICS.

USAID recognizes that the political will of electoral stakeholders for holding credible elections, along with the country's domestic and regional power dynamics, are often more important than resource or technical capacity deficits.

Thus, USAID's electoral assistance is grounded in political economy analysis that considers social and economic factors, demographics, and cultural norms to inform an understanding of the incentives, interests, motivations, and alliances among the key political, economic, and foreign stakeholders in either promoting or undermining credible elections. When designing electoral assistance programs, USAID not only considers the formal, legal rules of the game around elections and politics. USAID also takes into account the accepted, de facto rules of the game in politics and elections, which are often informal and may differ significantly from the formal rules.

6. ADAPT ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE BASED ON THE GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO HOLDING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS.

USAID's electoral assistance is informed by the country's regime type and the host country government's level of commitment and political will to hold democratic elections. In most contexts, particularly where there is sufficient political will to conduct democratic elections, USAID's electoral assistance can typically include a wide range of programming with most or all key electoral stakeholders.

However, in more authoritarian contexts, where the government may be actively seeking to undermine democratic elections, USAID adapts electoral assistance to ensure the Agency is not inadvertently legitimizing fundamentally flawed elections. For example, in such contexts, USAID electoral assistance often emphasizes demand-side approaches, including supporting election observation; protecting political and civic space and human rights; strengthening civil society and independent media; and bolstering accountability and transparency mechanisms. Given the

significant risks that partners may face in such contexts, these approaches take into account the "do no harm" and risk mitigation considerations outlined in Principle 9. In certain limited cases, USAID may decide that no electoral assistance is appropriate or feasible.

7. PROMOTE CONSISTENCY IN USAID'S APPROACH TO BROADER DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE BASED ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH A COUNTRY'S ELECTIONS ARE DEMOCRATICALLY CONDUCTED.

USAID strives to promote consistency in its response to how democratically a country's elections are conducted. For example, if a country holds elections that are fundamentally flawed and fail to adhere to democratic norms and obligations, USAID seeks to reassess and, as appropriate, adapt its overall development assistance to that country, including any assistance provided to and/or supporting governance institutions and processes. Likewise, if a country holds elections that are widely assessed as genuine and democratic, USAID may also consider whether adaptations to its overall assistance are appropriate. In cases where elections lead to democratic openings, USAID may seek to help governments, civil society, and citizens leverage the opportunity to implement and expand democratic reforms.

8. SEEK COMPLEMENTARITY BETWEEN ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE AND DIPLOMACY.

USAID complements its electoral assistance by engaging with the Department of State, broader U.S. Government interagency and other like-minded donors on diplomatic actions, policies, and communication to promote democratic elections. Complementing electoral assistance with diplomatic efforts – when appropriate – can promote an environment more conducive to democratic elections; encourage a country's key electoral stakeholders to adhere to international and regional norms and obligations for democratic elections; signal U.S. government support for democratic and peaceful processes; and, when necessary, promote accountability for those who try to undermine electoral processes.

These diplomatic efforts should take into account "do no harm" principles outlined in Principle 9. In addition, while electoral assistance should broadly align with diplomatic goals, there also needs to be an appropriate degree of independence in the implementation of electoral assistance programs.

9. APPLY "DO NO HARM" PRINCIPLES AND TAKE INTO ACCOUNT CONFLICT SENSITIVITIES.

USAID supports electoral and political processes programming in a wide variety of political contexts, including those affected by conflict or transitions and those with limited political and civic space for democratic actors. The environment surrounding elections and politics is often politically sensitive and high stakes, which can inadvertently exacerbate risks for individuals, partners, and processes supported by USAID. Thus, USAID's electoral assistance integrates overarching "do no harm" principles and ensures human rights principles are considered. This includes building in risk mitigation strategies for local actors and prioritizing efforts to mitigate negative impacts on women, youth, and other marginalized groups.

USAID's electoral assistance is also cognizant of and strives to comprehensively plan for possible conflicts and/or electoral and political violence and its structural causes. It seeks to build conflict sensitivity into program design in all aspects and works with local partners to consider how program activities, communications, and partnerships take into consideration how to mitigate conflict or avoid exacerbating conflict. USAID's electoral assistance aims to take into account that women and marginalized groups are disproportionately impacted – directly and indirectly – by electoral and political violence.

10. ENSURE COORDINATION AND SEEK OUT PARTNERSHIPS.

When designing an election strategy, USAID seeks to coordinate, complement, and build partnerships with other donors, technical assistance providers, local actors, international and regional actors, and other relevant partners, such as anti-corruption, human rights, and private sector actors. USAID's electoral assistance also prioritizes coordination of activities among the U.S. Government interagency. Doing so allows for valuable knowledge sharing across existing efforts, maximizes the effective use and impact of limited resources, strengthens local systems, reduces the likelihood of duplication, and fosters more nuanced and comprehensive assistance.

11. PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY IN ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE.

USAID is public and transparent about the goals and objectives of its electoral assistance. USAID aims to promote democratic electoral and political processes, so that citizens can choose their own leaders fairly. USAID does not seek to determine electoral outcomes.[3] USAID's assistance is provided on the basis of promoting transparency in electoral assistance through open and mutually agreed upon partnerships with other democratic actors.

12. UTILIZE EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES.

USAID draws upon existing research, evidence, and lessons learned to inform its electoral assistance approaches. Given the wide array of technical approaches in the USAID electoral assistance portfolio and the varied and dynamic country contexts where USAID works, the need for learning and adaptive management is continuous to achieve the desired outcomes.

In all electoral assistance activities, USAID seeks to build the evidence base through project requirements for monitoring, evaluation, and learning, including those that engage with and collect information from local stakeholder communities. USAID also supports global technical leadership and research activities. When available, USAID draws upon a larger evidence base, including academic and applied research, as well as recommendations by credible international and citizen election observation groups. For selected countries, USAID conducts Electoral Assistance After Action (EA3) Reviews, which document USAID's electoral support and identify lessons learned about its electoral assistance programming in those countries.

13. ENSURE ANY SUPPORT FOR TECHNOLOGY IN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION IS PROVIDED RESPONSIBLY.

The use of technology in election administration can help address certain electoral integrity challenges, but it can also introduce and exacerbate problems. USAID's decision on whether to support technology in election administration in a given country is based on a number of considerations. This helps ensure that, if such support is provided, it is done so responsibly – meaning appropriately and with a "do no harm" approach.

One key consideration is whether the country's decision making process for new technologies is consultative and debated in a well-informed, transparent, and inclusive manner with all key electoral stakeholders. This should take into account the rationale, pros, cons, full costs, sustainability, and feasibility of introducing such technology. In addition, human rights considerations must be integrated to protect against the potential misuse of technologies.

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[3] USAID Political Party Assistance Policy. See: https://www.usaid.gov/about-us/agency-policy/series-200/references-chapter/201mbk

Other considerations include, but are not limited to, whether: there is sufficient time to pilot and test the new technology, as well as to train election management staff, build trust among key stakeholders, and inform voters about the technology; the election management body will have the capacity to operate and take ownership of the technology; procurement is done via a transparent and competitive bidding process; and adequate cybersecurity measures can be put in place.