



# NAVIGATING TRADE-OFFS IN PARLIAMENTARY STRENGTHENING

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Parliamentary strengthening involves trade-offs, both in the choice between issue-based and institutional approaches, and in the choice of who a programme will include. Democracy promoters cannot avoid these trade-offs, but with systematic evaluation of past programmes they can navigate them more effectively. This policy paper draws on the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's experience in parliamentary strengthening to suggest how this might be done. In doing so it demonstrates the utility of greater collaboration between academic researchers and democracy promoters. It also illustrates the gains that can be made when those who undertake parliamentary strengthening make their experience public knowledge.

## KEY LESSONS

- There are two key trade-offs in parliamentary strengthening. The first concerns the type of approach: issue-based or institutional. The second concerns who to include: whether the scope of a programme should be narrow or broad.
- Institutional approaches target essential capacity better, but issue-based approaches provide local actors with stronger incentives to 'buy-in' to parliamentary reforms. Narrow approaches are more efficient, but broader ones avoid ignoring veto players.
- Successful navigation means identifying which trade-offs are worth it. We can use adaptation to political context as a guiding principle, but context is a compass that doesn't always point in the same direction.
- The age of the legislature and the nature and extent of social cleavages are critical contextual factors.
- In young legislatures institutional approaches help to build strong foundations while inclusive programmes build trust between different actors. In older parliaments, the enthusiasm generated by issue-based approaches is more valuable.
- Where politics revolves around identity, investment in inclusive issue-based approaches can deliver greater dividends. Narrower and more institutional strategies tend to cope better when political divides are based on ideology.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The funding environment can constrain successful navigation of trade-offs in parliamentary strengthening. Donors should not endorse a single approach: different strategies make sense in different contexts.
- Different approaches can be combined or employed sequentially. Successful legislative strengthening requires – over the lifetime of a parliament – a mixture of approaches.
- Innovation is the product of necessity; it occurs when democracy promoters are forced to take risks. Donors who want to see more innovative practice must be more tolerant of risk.

In the last few years, evaluations and reviews commissioned by donors have recommended a number of ways to make parliamentary strengthening more successful. There is now a substantial degree of consensus about what constitutes a ‘good’ parliamentary strengthening programme. It’s one that pays attention to context, adopts a long-term approach, tackles parliamentary strengthening as part of a broader democracy promotion programme, responds to local demand, facilitates local ownership, and (ideally) utilizes an issue-based approach, helping a parliament to deal with an important substantive problem.

Although these are all laudable aims, putting them into practice has not proved easy. This is because implementing these recommendations means making trade-offs. They offer advantages, but they also have disadvantages that need to be taken into account. Not all the recommendations made by earlier reviews are compatible with each other, nor are they appropriate in all contexts. This policy paper aims to help by providing a framework that can be used to think through the decisions that democracy promoters must make when designing and implementing parliamentary strengthening programmes. While that framework is built on the experience of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD, see Box 1), it has utility for other organizations that engage in parliamentary strengthening.

The framework put forward in this policy paper consists of two trade-offs and one guiding principle with which to navigate them. The first trade-off concerns the type of approach used in a parliamentary strengthening programme, the decision to adopt an issue-based approach or one that tackles institutional strengthening more broadly. The second trade-off concerns the scope of the approach, the decision about who to include in a programme. The guiding principle is adaptation to political context. Here, it might sound like we are simply repeating the lessons of past research. However, this policy paper does more than that; it spells out, in concrete terms, where this guiding principle might lead us as we navigate the trade-offs. This is valuable because our guiding principle – political context – is a compass that doesn’t always point the same direction: different situations require different interventions. With this in mind, we have designed this framework to help those seeking to strengthen parliaments to decide if a particular trade-off is worth it, and to identify how they might minimise its cost to their programme. We do not intend for this to replace the detailed political economy analysis that organizations like WFD should (and do) conduct, both before and during the delivery of parliamentary strengthening programmes. Rather, we envisage this framework as a tool that can be used to translate political economy analysis into concrete decisions about programme design and implementation.



**Above:** WFD organised a training workshop for women in Province Oriental, DRC.



**Above:** WFD supported induction training in Kyrgyzstan to help parliamentarians with their important new roles.

## UNAVOIDABLE TRADE-OFFS

There are two trade-offs that must be made in parliamentary strengthening. These are not, however, absolute. As one WFD expert put it, different approaches often need to work 'hand-in-hand.' In larger programmes, different approaches can be combined. In longer programmes, different approaches can be employed over time. The trade-offs discussed below should not be thought of as either/or choices, but (as illustrated in Figure 1) as decisions about where to position a programme along two different spectrums.

### *Issue vs Institution*

The first trade-off that arises in the design and implementation of parliamentary strengthening programmes is the choice between an approach that is issue-based, in the sense that it focusses on one or more substantive topics, and what can be termed an institutional approach. The latter refers to approaches that focus on technical and procedural issues, rather than substantive ones, aiming to ensure that beneficiaries have the basic skills and knowledge necessary to make parliament, as an institution, work. Issue-based approaches include programmes like WFD's work on women's leadership in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Box 2), which addresses violence against women. Programmes adopting an institutional approach often help parliaments to establish parliamentary committees, or to develop and implement record-keeping procedures. They aim to ensure MPs and staff are able to conduct the day to day operations of a parliament in an effective manner. WFD's programme in Kyrgyzstan (Box 3), which focussed on the procedures and practices necessary to hold regional committee hearings, is a more institutionally centred programme.

Evaluations and reviews conducted to date have strongly recommended that democracy promoters make greater use of issue-based approaches in parliamentary strengthening programmes. They did so on the basis of evidence that institutional approaches have often achieved little substantive change because they failed to take into account the interests of actors who preferred the status quo. In contrast, it was argued, issue-based approaches were more likely to harness the energies of beneficiaries because they provide them with a concrete incentive to back reforms. Issue-based approaches were best because they facilitated local ownership.

Against this backdrop, perhaps the most important finding to emerge from WFD's experience is that neither type of approach makes it impossible to facilitate local ownership, nor does either approach guarantee it. Generally, it is easier to foster local ownership with an issue-based approach. This is precisely why earlier evaluations and reviews of parliamentary strengthening have encouraged greater use of them. Yet this will only be true if the focal issue, or issues, are identified in consultation with beneficiaries. Moreover, taking an institutional approach does not automatically preclude a high degree of local ownership. In the right context – something that is discussed below – this may be exactly what programme beneficiaries want.

Issue-based approaches tend to produce more immediate impacts that can be clearly attributed to programme activities. This, however, can be a double-edged sword: while successful results at the impact level can help to make a programme popular with donors, it can also distract from the pursuit of more ambitious institutional outcomes. This prospect exists because, despite the name, issue-based approaches are not really about the issue. Instead, they seek to use an issue as a tool to embed stronger parliamentary procedures and practice. Using them entails a risk that the means become the ends, and broader, more ambitious objectives are not pursued. If they are to produce more than short-term gains linked directly to the substantive issue, changes in practice and procedure must become institutionalized.

As a result, while institutional approaches have been criticised, they remain an important part of parliamentary strengthening work. They support the (initially) less-obvious, longer-term changes that are an essential part of democratic consolidation. This means they can be more sustainable because – when successful – they leave behind lasting institutional capacity. Sometimes institutional approaches are an essential first step – addressing very basic issues like time management, staff morale and the availability of meeting spaces – before issue-based approaches can put reformed procedures into practice. This is something that WFD has built into its work in Kyrgyzstan. While the first phase of its program there had a stronger institutional element, the second phase used substantive issues raised by local actors to embed new procedures and practices.

One downside of an issue-based approach is that some issues are very sensitive; making them the focus can create a risk that a programme will be perceived as outside (and in most cases, Western) interference. There are ways of dealing with this. When a sensitive issue forms the focus of a regional level programme – as the issue of violence against women does in WFD's programme on women's leadership in MENA – variation within the region can be leveraged to generate ideas and examples that are perceived as locally owned and legitimate, rather than as the imposition of foreign values.

01

## WHERE'S THE PROOF? THE WFD'S BODY OF PRACTICE

Since 1992 WFD has worked to support and encourage the development of pluralistic democratic practice and political institutions around the world. Parliamentary strengthening constitutes a central component of this work. This policy paper draws on the body of practice that WFD has developed over time, as evidenced by internal programme reports and external evaluations, and as elaborated by key staff in interviews. It relies primarily on the experience that WFD accumulated between 2012 and 2015, a period in which WFD delivered eleven core parliamentary strengthening programmes across countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. This included programmes operating at the regional, national and sub-national level. While all of these programmes built on WFD's existing relationships and experience, they also represented a break from the past. In 2012 the way in which WFD is funded changed significantly, with both the Department for International Development and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office committing to 3 year grants. That shift led WFD to adopt a longer-term approach to programme design and implementation.



**Above:** WFD supported the Coalition of Arab Women MP's seminar on combatting violence against women

► Issue based approaches are better at harnessing the energies of local actors but may lead to short term or shallow gains. Institutional approaches are more likely to be defeated by vested interests, but can have the greatest impact on democratic consolidation in the long term.

### *Who to include?*

The second trade-off that arises in parliamentary strengthening programmes relates to scope; it is the question of who to include. In the past, programmes often targeted parliamentary staff. In many ways, this decision is defensible; staff perform essential functions in any parliament, and in a country where electoral turnover is high, staff constitute the core of a parliament's institutional memory. The latter is a significant concern in some developing countries, where it is common for three-quarters of a parliament to be replaced in each election. Yet MPs, the elected representatives of the people, cannot be ignored, so even narrowly targeted programmes tend to include them. These narrowly targeted programmes have the advantage of focussing limited resources on the most important actors. Their primary disadvantage is that they risk excluding organizations and individuals – such as senior leaders of political parties – who are in a position to block the reforms that parliamentary strengthening programmes seek to advance.

It is due to these disadvantages that parliamentary strengthening programmes increasingly attempt to bring in other actors. Local NGOs and CSOs are often included, though the nature and extent of their involvement varies. In some cases, such as WFD's programme in Kyrgyzstan, they are beneficiaries of a programme, while in others, such as the programme in the DRC's Province Orientale, they are local partners who take responsibility for much of a programme's implementation. Political parties are less frequently part of parliamentary strengthening programmes, though democracy promoters, including WFD, are now making greater use of programmes that integrate parliamentary and party work.

Expanding the scope of who is included in a programme has both advantages and disadvantages. Bringing in local NGOs and CSOs can make it easier to identify the substantive problems that could form the focus of an issue-based approach. When CSOs and NGOs are included as local partners rather than simply beneficiaries, their participation helps to insure that expert advice is adapted to local political context. Yet bringing in more actors creates more opportunities for disagreement, particularly when those actors are political parties. It also runs the risk that limited resources might be spread too thin.

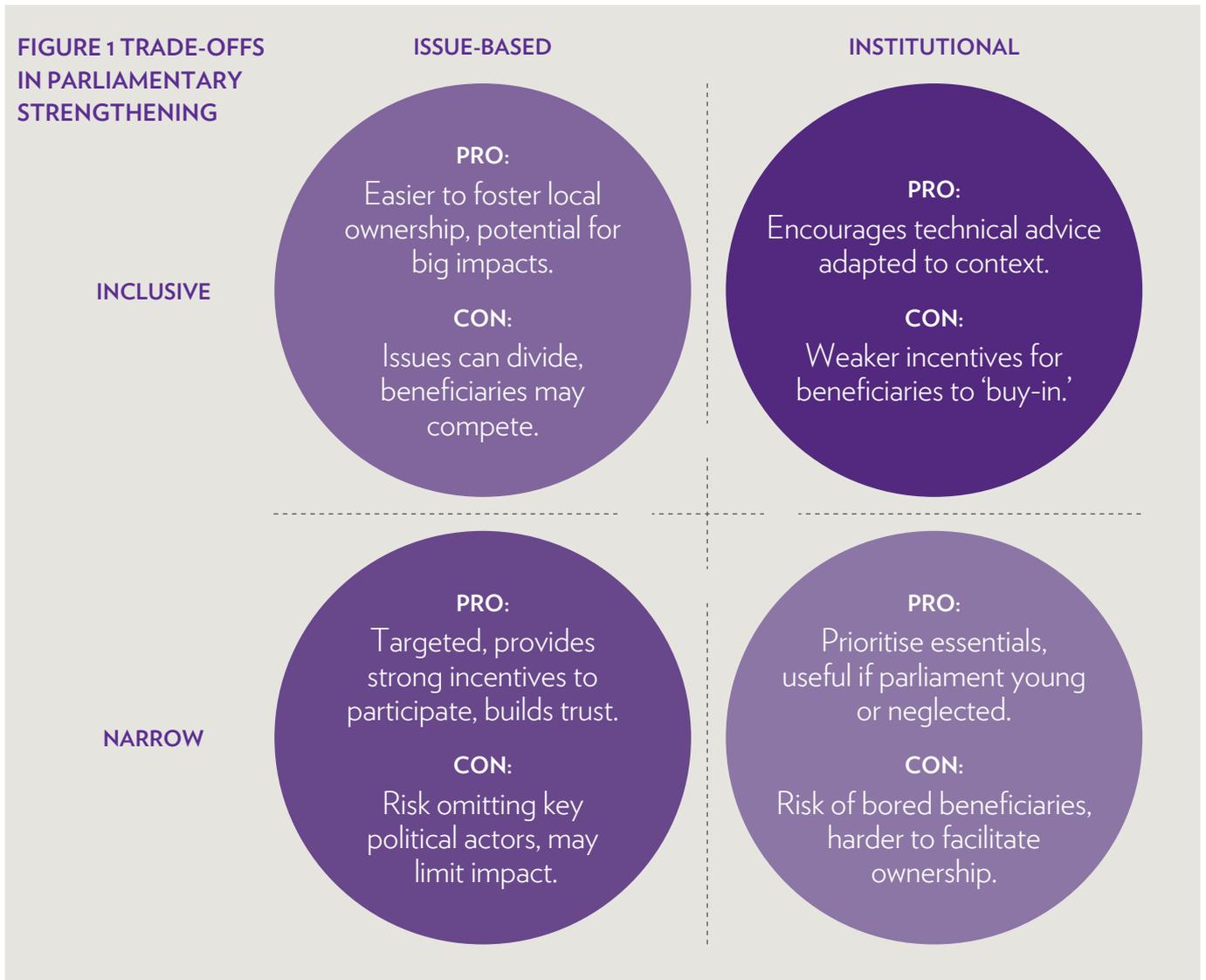
► More inclusive approaches are likely to have greater buy-in but be more unwieldy and less flexible. Narrower approaches are likely to be more efficient but may come undone if critical political actors are not included.

**Interactions**

There are certain advantages and disadvantages inherent in each of the trade-offs described above. For example, more inclusive approaches lead to gains in local buy-in but losses in coordination and flexibility. The task for policy makers is to recognize the pros and cons of different strategies, and to work out what particular set of costs and benefits is most appropriate given the aims of a specific intervention. Further complicating matters is the fact that the two trade-offs interact: project design must take into account

both focus and scope. Sometimes, as illustrated in Figure 1, the downsides involved in one trade-off can be mitigated or balanced by the upsides generated by another.

Making an institutional approach inclusive can help to avoid a ‘cookie cutter’ approach by bringing in local experts who can filter and adapt technical advice. Inclusive issue-based programmes are high-risk but high reward; disagreements and distrust between participants can make implementation difficult, but if this can be overcome there is greater potential for change. A narrowly focussed issue-based approach may seem counter-intuitive, but in fact can be quite useful when seeking to build trust with a parliament. Narrow institutional programmes mean that democracy promoters have to work harder to facilitate local ownership and keep participants interested, but they prioritise the basic skills and knowledge that some parliaments sorely need.



02

## ENHANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN MENA

This regional programme aimed to strengthen the capacity of women MPs in MENA and to enhance the progression of legislative reforms relevant to women. One of the programme's key achievements was the formation of a coalition to combat violence against women. This coalition of women MPs and CSOs from eleven different countries has developed a model law protecting women against violence and worked to draw attention to gender-based violence in a number of other ways. It has proved difficult to translate the work of the regional coalition into specific, legislative reforms at the national level. However, the attention it has drawn to the issue of violence against women is significant in a region where that topic is particularly sensitive, often viewed as a matter that should be confined to the private sphere rather than subject to public debate.

### POLITICAL CONTEXT AS GUIDING PRINCIPLE

Whether the advantages of a particular approach outweigh its disadvantages depends on political context. A trade-off that's 'worth it' in one situation, may not be in another. This is why adaptation to political context is our guiding principle. To translate our guiding principle into something more concrete, we focus on two aspects of context; the age of a parliament and the nature and extent of the social cleavages around which political actors are organized. These are not the only aspects of context that matter. However, WFD's experience suggests that these two factors have a particularly strong influence on whether the trade-offs discussed above are worthwhile.

#### *The age of a parliament*

Sometimes democracy promoters need to work with parliaments that are young, in the sense that they have only recently been established. Today, the establishment of an entirely new national legislatures is rare (a product of the rarity of succession), though the National Parliament of Timor-Leste provides one example. It is far more common to find young parliaments at the sub-national level, where they are the result of decentralization. This was the case with the Provincial Assembly of the Province Orientale in the DRC. In other cases, a parliament is not so much young as 'born again' because its role has undergone some fundamental change. In the 1990s, this meant a formal transition from dictatorship to democracy. Occasionally – as was the case in WFD's Kyrgyzstan programme – it still does. Today parliaments are more likely to be rendered young again by less dramatic constitutional changes. Both parliaments that are young and those that are 'born again' are, in the words of one WFD expert, 'in a position to overhaul or start again with institutional culture.'

When a parliament is very young it may not be necessary to employ an issue-based approach in order to facilitate local ownership. In the case of WFD's programme in Province Orientale, the fact that the provincial legislature was beginning from a low base made that task easier, even when employing an institutional approach. WFD's Senior Programme Manager for Africa explained; 'Everything was big for them. Everything we wanted to do, they wanted to do it.' This enthusiasm stemmed



**Above:** WFD supported the Coalition of Arab Women MP's seminar on combatting violence against women

not just from the fact that the provincial parliament was young; it had also been largely ignored by the international community. This is not always the case. In WFD's Kyrgyzstan programme the absence of a substantive focal point made it harder to keep staff and MPs interested in the primarily institutional programme: some complained the procedural issues it addressed were boring. Their lack of enthusiasm stemmed not only from the fact the Kyrgyzstan's parliament was 'born again,' rather than genuinely young, but also from the existence of several other large parliamentary strengthening programmes. WFD solved this problem by making their institutional approach more issue-like, focussing on regional committee hearings. This provided clearer incentives for MPs and staff to invest time and energy in the programme. It also allowed the programme to address some substantive issues – such as problems with the water supply in one region – as they were raised through that procedural mechanism.

The age of a parliament also shapes the impact of decisions about who to include in a programme. Younger parliaments are often characterised by significant distrust between MPs and CSOs. Prior to WFD's programme in Kyrgyzstan, many of the MPs described CSOs as 'spies' or 'grant-eaters', puppets of the international donors who provided their funding. Similarly, in Province Orientale, where WFD brought together female MPs and women from civil society, the relationship between the two groups was initially one of suspicion. Ultimately, however, the relationship that grew between the two groups of women turned out to be one of the greatest strengths of the programme. This example demonstrates that issue-based approaches can be an effective means of providing a broader range of actors with an incentive to work together. Inclusive, issue-based programmes are the high-risk, high-reward option.

► Inclusive and institutional approaches are likely to be more appropriate in younger legislatures with less trust in civil society. Narrow and issue based approaches are likely to be more appropriate in older legislatures that have received a higher number of donor interventions already.

**Right:** WFD supported induction training in Kyrgyzstan to help parliamentarians with their important new roles.

03

## STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENT'S CONSULTATIONS WITH REGIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY IN KYRGYZSTAN

In this programme, WFD worked to build the capacity of the Jogorku Kengesh, Kyrgyzstan's national legislature, to engage with regional communities. Regional Committee Hearings (RCH) were piloted in two provinces, Osh and Naryn, with selected parliamentary committees. In its first phase, this programme adopted a primarily institutional approach – activities included the development of regulations to govern RCHs and training committee staff on how to conduct them. In its second phase, a more issue-based approach was taken with MPs responding to substantive issues, such as problems with the water supply in Naryn, raised through the newly established RCH process. WFD also provided support to CSOs, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to engage with the parliament more effectively. One major achievement of the programme was the successful demonstration of RCHs as an effective, and potentially sustainable, channel of communication between the national parliament, local councils, and CSOs. This was a valuable achievement in a context where the relationship between MPs and CSOs is often marked by distrust and suspicion, and where civil society remains weak outside the capital city.



### *The nature and extent of social cleavages*

Democracy promoters are almost always working in divided societies. The nature and extent of the social cleavages around which political actors are organized shape the costs and benefits of the trade-offs identified above. This is most obvious where social cleavages have been linked to political violence or civil war. In such contexts programmes that are not inclusive risk – at best – being perceived as illegitimate, and – at worst – exacerbating existing social tensions. This has been a concern for WFD in several parliamentary strengthening programmes, including an integrated programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina that leveraged existing UK sister party relations. In that programme, which is ongoing, WFD recognised that the absence of a Croat sister party could create a perception that it was picking sides. In this kind of context, the benefits of inclusiveness (in particular, legitimacy) are worth more while the disadvantages (programmes may become unwieldy, less flexible and stretch limited resources) weigh less heavily than they would elsewhere.

In some cases, social cleavages may become so deep, and so strongly politicized that even an inclusive approach will not be enough to avoid perceptions of partisan bias. In such cases those supporting parliaments face a difficult decision; they can pull out of a country (ensuring that they do no harm, but sacrificing the time and resources invested in building a relationship with a parliament), or they can search for a smaller, low-profile project that allows them to maintain a presence in the relevant country. In recent years WFD has chosen the first option in Egypt, concluding that social divisions (and consequent political unrest) meant it could no longer work effectively in that country.

WFD is currently grappling with this problem in Iraq, where deepening divides between political parties in the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament preclude the continuation of direct support to parliamentary staff and MPs. WFD is exploring the possibility that targeting particular issues and working primarily with actors outside of parliament (e.g. working on corruption with the anti-corruption agency) might allow it to maintain a presence in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, it is taking a cautious approach, in part because corruption is one of the issues that has divided the political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan. As such, this example highlights that the basis of social divisions – not just the extent to which they have caused conflict – must be taken into account. Where parties are organized on a programmatic basis, rather than around identity, it can be difficult for parliamentary strengthening programmes to employ an issue-based approach while protecting their reputation as impartial sources of expertise. In contexts where political actors – be they civil society or political parties – are organized around identity, it is often easier to deliver programmes that deal with substantive topics without running afoul of partisan divides. One source of complexity is the fact that ideological and identity-based divides are not mutually exclusive bases of political organization. In some cases, it may be clear that one, rather than the other, forms the primary political divide. In other contexts identity and ideology may be interlinked, reinforcing rather than cutting across each other. The

potential for overlap between identity-based and ideological divides helps to explain why religiously based political parties, and radical Islamist parties in particular, represent such a big challenge for democracy promoters. Where such parties dominate a parliament, it can be extremely difficult to adopt an approach that includes them. In Tunisia, the existence (and electoral success) of Islamist political parties undermined WFD's attempts to engage with parties as part of an integrated parliamentary strengthening programme. In such a context, a narrower programme that engages a more limited range of actors may be more feasible to implement, but the exclusion of key political actors is likely to severely constrain its impact.

► Where politics revolves around identity, more inclusive approaches help to avoid exacerbating existing tensions. Carefully selected issues can also provide a way of working around identity-based divisions. Where the primary political divides are programmatic, narrow and more institutional strategies are likely to fare better.

04

## INCREASING DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION IN THE DRC'S PROVINCE ORIENTALE

In this sub-national programme WFD worked to strengthen the capacity of the Provincial Assembly of the Province Orientale (PAPO) in the DRC. Collaborating with a local partner, the Réseau Congolais de Personnels des Parlements (RCPP, a network of parliamentary staff), WFD adopted a two-pronged approach. The first, larger, component of the programme adopted an institutional approach, providing MPs and staff from PAPO with training on essential procedural issues and skills, including those relating to committee hearings. A second, smaller component of the programme targeted female MPs, bringing them together with CSOs. This second component evolved over time, ultimately employing a more issue-based approach as participants identified a specific substantive problem – women and traditional chieftaincies – that acted as a focal point for capacity building activities. This second component of the programme led to women MPs becoming significantly more active and confident in their roles.

### *This isn't all that matters*

It bears repeating that while these two factors have a particularly strong influence on the costs and benefits associated with the trade-offs discussed above, they are by no means the only contextual matters that have a bearing on parliamentary strengthening. Other elements of context must also be taken into account. This includes factors such as a country's level of development, its economic circumstances and the existence of external incentives, such as the possibility of accession to the EU, that might motivate reform. Additional relevant factors also include what might be termed 'micro' level contextual factors, which are specific to a particular legislature and the people who work within it. Using the framework proposed in this paper does not obviate the need to closely examine the incentives that key individuals face. Those seeking to strengthen parliaments must base their work not simply on an understanding of how a parliament is weak or ineffective, but why this is the case. The importance of this kind of analysis has been pointed out by others (see Further Reading), who have made it clear that democracy promoters need to understand the power balance and institutional dynamics within each parliament they seek to support if they are to be effective.

### CONSTRAINTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Those working on strengthening parliaments are not always free to design programmes as they would prefer. Evidence points to several external constraints that have a bearing on how democracy promoters navigate the trade-offs inherent in parliamentary strengthening. The first of these is the funding environment. Many international donors have a clear preference for issue-based approaches. This preference is in part based on evidence, but it is also based on the tendency of issue-based approaches to produce more immediate impacts; clear results that look good in reports. WFD experience suggests that while issue-based approaches can be valuable, they are not always the best option. Discussing the increased use of issue-based approaches, one WFD programme manager observed 'It might not be the right thing, but it's what funders want.'

A second constraint is security. A poor security situation limits the ability of democracy promoters to establish a local presence, as well as their ability to bring in international experts. At times poor security has given WFD no option but to expand the scope of its programmes to include local NGOs, not simply as beneficiaries, but as local partners responsible for putting programmes into practice. In the case of its Iraq programme, poor security forced WFD to innovate by investing in building the capacity of a local think-tank, Dar Al-Khibrah. This required WFD to depart from its standard approach and take a riskier option. Yet it proved extremely effective in fostering local ownership and ensuring that advice on technical issues was properly tailored to local context.

In light of these constraints, WFD's experience in parliamentary strengthening has two important implications for policy. The first is that donors should be wary of assuming that one type of approach to parliamentary strengthening is always better. Instead, they should push democracy promoters to adopt the approach that best fits the particular circumstances of a given programme. The second is that, if they want to see more innovative practice, donors must be willing to tolerate failure. Innovation has rewards, but it's a risky business.

### FURTHER READING

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