Conducting a Baseline Assessment of Political Parties

Introduction

Regularly, an assessment needs to be conducted of the state of political parties in a particular country. This analysis is often necessary at the beginning of a political party development program and before the exact focus or target of the program has been determined. NDI's political party team receives frequent requests for advice on how to conduct a political party baseline assessment and when it is appropriate.

This document is a framework for use when undertaking a baseline assessment of political parties. It provides advice on how to approach the assessment process and outlines a range of areas that should be probed in order to give a balanced picture of the strengths and weaknesses of all of the political parties. This framework document has been used in a number of countries already (including Morocco and Indonesia) and continues to be refined. Your reactions and suggestions to Ivan Doherty or Cathy Westley are welcome.

Why Are Baseline Assessments Conducted?

A baseline assessment helps provide a programmatic starting point by identifying the needs of parties. It is very much like a stocktaking exercise where a snapshot of the party is taken outlining its current structure. Once needs are determined, NDI staff members can tailor program approaches and activities. When conducted in a collaborative manner, the assessment gives NDI an opportunity to build constructive relationships with individuals – including leaders – in the parties concerned. In other words, the party is involved in telling NDI what it needs and does not need. The process can help NDI and the party develop a mutual understanding of where the party is at developmentally, and where it wants to go.

Baseline assessments are an essential tool in continuously evaluating NDI's programs. Referring to baseline assessment reports can help provide a reality check on what is working and what is not. Baseline assessments also provide benchmarks by which NDI and the parties can measure program developments. The assessment documents the conditions that existed at the launch of the program and can help identify appropriate indicators to the success of the program.

How Are Baseline Assessments Conducted?

To achieve a mutual understanding with a political party on its development, it is not possible to rely solely on an assessment questionnaire. Instead, assessment needs to be conducted in a participatory manner that involves party leaders and activists from different levels of the party organization. Very often this is the first introduction of NDI to the party and meetings at various levels are the first "foot in the door" and give NDI staff an opportunity to give the party a greater understanding of what NDI does and what it has to offer.

Ideally, the process becomes that of a self-assessment by the party, using criteria provided by NDI, where leaders and activists reflect on their situation and needs and discuss them openly and frankly with the assessment team. The assessment process may include a series of one-on-one meetings and focus group discussions over a period of time. When done systematically and purposefully, the result can be an honest appraisal of a party's situation and needs. Occasionally, party members will present a less than honest appraisal of the party out of loyalty, fear of disclosure or because individuals may not have complete information. So, parties (and individuals) need to be reassured of the confidential nature of the discussion.

NDI and the party members may come to hold different assessments of what the actual state of development is in some respects or what is achievable or appropriate – and these differences need to be acknowledged by the NDI staff working on the program. It is also frequently the case that different members of a given party, even within the leadership or headquarters, will have different views on the same question, opportunities or goals. These differences of nuance, policy and perspective need to be reflected in the assessment. Moving the party toward an acknowledgment of these varying views, and then toward either a clarification of which view will prevail or toward a consensus, can be part of the process.

Information also needs to be gathered from academics, commentators and other sources outside of the party to help provide a reality check to the information received. While only party officials and activists can accurately reflect the structure and operation of a party, political commentators are often the best resource to offer an independent assessment of the perception of the party from the outside.

The questions in this document are not meant to be followed in a rigid manner, they only provide guidelines. This document **should not** be simply handed to political parties in order for them to answer the questions, but used by NDI staff members to organize interviews and meetings with party leaders, activists and others. All of the questions will not be relevant in every situation. For example, under the heading "Current Strategy," the question of what the party does between elections will obviously not apply where a new party has been established and is fighting its first election or where democratization is at an early stage in the country and credible elections have not been held in the recent past.

Issues to Consider When Conducting a Baseline Assessment

❶   There are inherent benefits associated with a party reflecting on its needs and a party should not be made to feel that it is under unreasonable or intrusive scrutiny by outsiders.

❷   Be clear about the assessment's purpose – which is to obtain a clear picture of where a party stands developmentally in order to tailor a program that best suits its needs. It should be explained to parties that the process is not one of prying but rather of reaching a mutual understanding of what the strengths and weaknesses of the party are and of how NDI can best assist them.

❸   Be careful not to raise false hopes, make promises or create the impression that NDI will be able to help the political party concerned solve all its problems. Rather, outline the range of programs NDI conducts.

❹   NDI staff should clarify for political parties what it is able to do in order to avoid false expectations. It should be explained that programs are conducted on a cooperative basis with both NDI and the party playing a part.

❺   Some of the listed questions are subjective, and will require the personal professional judgement of the experienced person who is the assessor or an amalgamation of several people's subjective judgements. Although many of the questions could be answered in a yes/no fashion, most answers should be in a narrative, explanatory format.

❻   The assessor's report must reflect the diverse views within the party; local party leaders responses, for instance, might differ from those of the national leadership. It must present, compare and contrast all views within the party (e.g., National vs. branches, staff vs. elected officials) and be also tempered by the views obtained from the independent commentators and others.

❼   The end result should be a concise but comprehensive picture or profile of the party that also gives a clear indication of its current strengths and weaknesses and, where possible, the views of the assessment team and the party of the priority areas of assistance (see appendix).

❽   If a commitment to share the results of the assessment with the party threatens to inhibit frankness, it is recommended that an edited version of the more comprehensive report, containing the main findings of the team, be prepared for circulation outside of NDI to the party, while the more detailed notes are retained to assist with the programmatic development.

Framework for a Baseline Assessment of Political Parties

Keep in mind that while many of the questions below are yes/no in nature, most require a narrative, explanatory answer. Always conduct a reality check on the information received to judge its accuracy. Ask the same questions twice – especially ask the same questions to different leaders and activists within a specific party. Just because questions have been asked at one meeting does not mean that they should not continue to be asked at every other meeting. A study of all of the responses will give a more comprehensive impression of the issue from the perspective of different members and units of the party.

Usually an assessment team will consist of NDI staff and at least one international political party expert. It is important to ensure that everyone is fully briefed on the country's political background in advance. While an international expert may be very comfortable with the operation of a political party, they will not, in most cases, be familiar with the local political environment or culture.

Political Environment

A short paragraph on the political environment should be prepared in advance. Staff should obtain and/or translate as many of the following key documents as possible in advance:

- political party law
- constitutions
- finance laws
- electoral law

While it is often useful to discuss these issues with the parties in order to assess their impact, the team should have a good understanding of these in advance and be in a position to discuss them knowledgeably with the parties. A team member who is not familiar with the electoral system or who raises an issue such as candidate profile where a party list system operates will create a poor impression with the party concerned. The areas addressed could include the following:

Regulatory

- Are political parties mentioned in the country's constitution?
- Is there a separate party law?
- Are there pre-existing registration criteria (i.e., what makes a party "legal")?
- What legal, political or practical restrictions are put on political parties (Code of Conduct, Campaign Finance, Disclosure)?
- Is there public funding of political parties? Are there restrictions on private funding or funding from abroad?
- Is there any national or regional legislation affecting party organization, membership and/or activities?
- Is there an anti-defection law?

Operationally

- Is there a history of government harassment?
- Is free speech and assembly restricted?
- Is there equitable access to media?

The Political Party

Function

- How does the party define its purpose (i.e., why does it exist)?
- What role does the party want to play in politics?
- Where does the party want to be in five years?
- Does the party support the country's current governmental/constitutional framework for governance?
- What are the key political issues for the party (current and future)?

Party History

- When and why was the party founded?
- Did the party begin as a political party or as a civic movement or something else (e.g. the result of merger or a split in previously existing parties)?
- Who are the original leaders/organizers of the Party and what is their background?
- What is the professional/political/personal history of key leaders?
- What is the party's electoral history in terms of vote percentage?
- Has the party ever held power nationally or regionally?
- Is the party a member of a party international?

Guiding Principles

- What is the broad ideological position of the party?
- What are the main policy positions of the party?
- What policy tendencies or diversity exists in the party?

Organizational Structure

- Does the party have a written constitution and/or code of conduct?
- Is the party organized at national, provincial/state/regional and local levels?
- Who runs the day-to-day operations?
- Research, policy making and administrative units?
- How many people work in each unit at national, regional and local levels?
- How many are full-time salaried staffers, paid part-time staff and volunteers?

Infrastructure

- National, regional and local offices?
- Technology . . . does the party have access to computers, fax machines, copiers, etc. ?
- Is there access to the Internet?
- Does the party have a web page? Party newspaper (formal or informal)

Internal Party Processes

- Is there a formal structure(s) used for policy development?
- Is this structure institutionalized or ad hoc?
- Does the ordinary party member have access to these structures?
- How are policies determined?
- Are policy documents broadly distributed and reviewed by members?
- How are leaders elected?
- Are party members subject to any disciplinary mechanisms? If so, how are they implemented?
- Are there any requirements for being elected to leadership positions?
- Are there any restrictions?
- How are candidates selected and do members at local level have a say?

Current Strategy

- Does the party have a strategic plan or the ability or intention to create one?
- What are the party's organizational priorities?
- What does the party do between elections?
- Does the party have a strategy for expanding and consolidating its political base?

Party's Leadership Profile

- What is the racial, ethnic, religious and gender composition of the leadership?
- Is this composition evolving or stable?
- Are there any formal or informal commitments to this composition?
- Are there any ideological tendencies or cliques that members of the leadership fit into?
- How much influence does each group have on party policies and programs?
- How do they exert their influence?
- Is the leadership group a (de jure or defacto) "closed" or "open" society?
- Are all or most of the party leaders committed to the party's principles and policies?
- Is there any single person or group that personifies the party? (e.g. a "big man/woman or A-team")
- Are there ethical guidelines for leadership?

Membership and Supporters profile

- How many members does the party have?
- What is the racial, ethnic, religious, regional, gender and age composition of the party?
- Is the membership of the party growing or shrinking or is it stable?
- How does the party know this?
- What about the supporters' base?
- What is the ratio of members to supporters?
- Is there a formal membership process, with dues, which separates members from supporters?
- What is the nature of this divide? (e.g. simply economic limitations or are there age limits, gender limits)?
- Does the party have women, youth and/or minorities recruitment and development programs?
- Are there any membership requirements or restrictions?
- Are there membership lists and in what form are they kept? (e.g. computer databases, written lists).
- Are the lists maintained at national, regional or local level?
- Are there strategies for reaching out to new members?

Party Legislative and Governance Profile

- Is the party represented in any national or regional legislature? Local authority?
- How many seats does the party have in legislative bodies or local authorities?
- Is it a governing party or part of a governing coalition?
- How does the party fulfil its role as a majority party, official opposition, smallest minority, extra-parliamentary opposition, etc.?
- Is it fulfilling this role adequately or not?
- What is needed in order to make it possible for it to fulfil this role?
- Is there a party caucus and does it function adequately and meet regularly? How well does internal party communication operate?
- Are parliamentary representatives "disciplined" and does a party whip apply?
- What kinds of relationships do party structures have with their Parliamentary representatives?
- How are the parliamentary representatives held accountable to the party's principles and policies?

Impact on National Politics

- What kind of role does the party play in initiating and developing the national political agenda?
- Is this role recognized and respected by other parties and voters?
- Is the party a "player" within the system or is it working outside the system (trying to change it)?

Events

- Does the party hold any annual or regular conferences, anniversaries, commemorations or conventions?
- Are these organized nationally, regionally or locally?
- Are these activities open to the public, party members only, elected/nominated delegates or party leaders only?
- How are delegates to party events chosen?

Training and Leadership Development

- What training facilities and opportunities are available to party members, leaders, staff members and parliamentary representatives?
- How is access to the facilities and opportunities controlled?
- How does the party pay for training programs?
- What other relationships or options for assistance does the party have (locally and internationally)?

Funding

- What is the level of funding?
- What is the level of private funding?
- Is the party financially sustainable?
- How does the party raise funds?

Communication

- Does the party have a communication structure?
- Does the party produce any publications? Newspaper – formally tied to the party of informally affiliated?
- How often do they come out?
- Where and how are they distributed?
- Does the party have a press office?
- Does the party have access to media outlets such as television and radio?
- How does the party communicate its views to citizens?

Electoral Campaign

- How are candidates recruited and selected?
- How is the campaign managed?
- How are candidates and activists trained?
- How are voters contacted?
- Does the party monitor polling places?
- How is the campaign organized - centrally/regionally/locally?