



# CMI Policy Brief

## Funding political parties in emerging African democracies: What role for Norway?

September 2002

Vol. 1 No. 1

**Norway has been reluctant to support political parties in emerging African democracies directly as part of its democracy assistance strategy. This has, however, changed as indicated by the Norwegian Minister of International Development, Hilde Frafjord Johnson, in her statement on development co-operation to the Storting, on 30 April 2002:**

*"[...] As part of its governance initiative, the Government will in the course of the summer establish a centre for support to democracy which will help to strengthen the organization and functioning of political parties. [...] In this way Norwegian political parties will be able to contribute to democracy-building in developing countries. The parties will have to apply for funds for concrete projects. The emphasis will be on promoting multiparty systems and the holding of free elections. [...] In devising this scheme, the Government has drawn on British and Dutch experience, and has had consultations with representatives of the Norwegian political parties and associated organizations."*

This CMI Policy Brief addresses the problem of foreign funding of political parties in newly democratised African states. It argues that foreign funding of political parties might be a fruitful way to improve the overall quality of the political system in African democracies. The Brief explains why small countries like Norway should be involved in supporting political parties in emerging democracies.

This CMI Policy Brief is based on the report *Funding political parties in emerging African democracies: What role for Norway?* prepared by professor Lars Svåsand of the University of Bergen/CMI and Harald Mathisen of CMI to NORAD (CMI Report R2002:6 is available at [www.cmi.no/public/pub2002.htm](http://www.cmi.no/public/pub2002.htm)). Various funding models, among these the British and the Dutch, are assessed in the report which provided important input to the resolution by the Norwegian Government.

### Political parties and democratisation

As new democracies move from a transitional phase to a consolidation phase, there is a need to build institutions that can support not only pro-poor policies, but that can also check for executive dominance and abuse of state authority. For this reason there is a need to build functioning parties and vibrant party systems. Parties are the 'engine room' of democratic polities as they structure the competition between societal groups and interests. The main argument in favour of parties is that they provide a mechanism by which citizens can hold the political leadership accountable.

However, the political parties in African states are characterised by a dominant party system, a fragmented party system, and very weak parties.

### Cons of foreign funding

The problematic nature of political finance in general, and the particular problem associated with external party funding in particular, have led to several arguments for why this type of activity should be avoided. The most frequently used argument against foreign funding is that it is seen as attempts by actors external to a nation to influence the outcome of national political processes. This type of influence distorts a fundamental democratic principle: that the election of representatives should express the political preferences of the politically enfranchised citizens.

### Political finance:

-the way that political parties and individual candidates running for political office raise funds for election campaigns and, in the case of political parties, for maintaining themselves as organisations.

How many Western governments would allow large sums of money to be given by foreign governments to one or a few of their own parties?





Another argument is that the social basis for functioning parties and party systems is a well-organised and pluralistic civil society. If parties can rely on foreign funding, there will be no need for parties to connect to civil society. The argument is that money given directly to the party will create distance between the party and the electorate. The party will be less inclined to represent the views of the citizens, and opposition parties will have fewer incentives to challenge the government, as the party already is in a comfortable financial position. Another argument along the same line is that money given directly to the party will reduce internal democracy in the parties. When the party leadership has got sufficient funds, it can buy many of the services it would otherwise need members for. Given that influence over a party's policies is the "compensation" members seek for their efforts, it is safe to assume that a wealthy party leadership can easily become a monolithic and isolated leadership.



Another danger about foreign funding and subsequently financially self-sufficient parties is that 'party entrepreneurs' will be encouraged to establish parties in order to tap into internationally available funds. The result will be a fragmentation of the party system – a development hardly conducive to democratic consolidation. Particularly in the early phase of democratisation there will be a number of parties that will not be able to survive. Early international assistance to multiple parties may artificially prolong the life of parties that have little basis in the electorate.



And finally, many students of African democratisation point out that African parties have little in common with their counterparts in Europe and North America. European parties have originated from religious, linguistic, regional and economic cleavages that were politicised during the democratisation processes in Europe. These types of parties are not necessarily replicated elsewhere – nor can it be an objective that they should. Some *afropessimists* point to the fact that some parties have secessionist objectives based on racial and tribal agendas, while other parties may not necessarily be democratically inclined. It will not be easy to establish criteria by which one can identify the parties that will qualify for foreign assistance.

All these arguments have led many observers to conclude that foreign funding is both unethical and counterproductive, and consequently an unwanted instrument in democracy assistance.

### Pros of foreign party funding

On the other hand, there are also arguments in favour of foreign funding of political parties. There are two main reasons in favour of foreign assistance to political parties. One is that political parties are integrated components of democratic governance, and they cannot be avoided. Support for democratisation processes is incomplete if parties are totally neglected. The second is that since political parties exist, a viable party system requires a fair chance for non-governing parties to compete with incumbent parties, at least in the long run.



While ideally, political parties should develop out of national resources alone, the level of economic development in African states does not create a surplus sufficient to build mass parties from foundations in civil society. In addition to supporting the growth of civil society, organisations that are able to aggregate the interest already present in civil society should be encouraged to play the role of facilitator and mediator for the voice of the population into national politics. Democracy is not only about periodic elections but depends on the continuous deliberations of civil society. Political parties provide a direct channel into government that can transform the ideas that emerge into government action.

### Adaptation of foreign funding

Today African parties are most often fluid organisations without any clear ideology, policies, membership or formalised procedures, and they are most often based on one strong patron. In a liberal democracy citizens must have a fair chance to express their views, but this is distorted in very many African countries by an undemocratic power



structure, by a lack of knowledge about democratic procedures, and by difficulties in forming political organisations that can contest the incumbent government.

A public policy that includes funding of political parties must avoid imposing a particular set of parties from abroad, or particular organisational model, or an excessive fragmentation of the party system. The overall objective must be to stimulate the development of parties *for the purpose of enhancing democratic governance*. For this overall objective there is no particular party system or type of party that can fit all polities.

Although the objective is *not* to make African parties similar to Norwegian ones, it is nevertheless an important argument in favour of party funding that major countries like the US, Germany and Britain are engaged in this type of activity.

Just as is the case with the Netherlands, Norway represents a different kind of political system. Providing knowledge and information from political systems that are organised very differently from the big powers increases the range of possible models that can be adapted to fit national circumstances. Adaptation of models from abroad is not the same as imposition of models. No political system, anywhere, develops its political institutions in isolation from trends and models elsewhere.

However, the opportunity to select appropriate models depends on available information and knowledge of how various democratic institutions and mechanisms function. That is why small countries should be involved in supporting political parties.

One should also bear in mind the reverse effect that funding African parties may have on Norwegian parties. If Norwegian parties become involved with counterparts in African countries, this will lead to increased knowledge and understanding of developmental issues amongst the Norwegian participants. In turn, this will feed back into the formulation of Norwegian development policy.

### Suggestions for the future Norwegian support programme

The primary goal of a Norwegian funding scheme, as specified in the 2002 government budget, is to help develop functioning pluralistic political systems in developing countries. The objective is to build democratic organisational capacity based on knowledge transfers, counselling and international exchange through long-term aid projects. It is specified that special attention should be given to projects that are crosscutting and supportive of women's activities in the recipient countries. However, caution should be taken when countries come close to election times.

Three questions need to be posed when support for African political parties is considered:

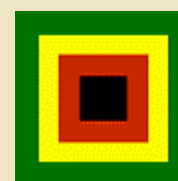
#### How should countries be selected?

Support for political parties must fit with the general objectives of democracy assistance. This is most likely to be achieved if party support is directed to countries that already receive substantial aid for other democracy building purposes. By linking party support to the main receiving countries, it will be easier to maintain a long-term programme, as well as the need for co-ordination with other activities.

#### How should support be organised?

The challenging nature of foreign funding requires a separation between the source of the funding and the receiving parties. The Dutch, British and American models all build on a joint national institution for this purpose. Presumably, this creates better national co-ordination than the Swedish model does, which channels its support through the Swedish political parties. One national institution also reduces the part of the budget that is spent by the parties on internal administration. Thus, foreign funding should be introduced following the creation of a unit on the Norwegian side

The overall objective must be to stimulate the development of parties for the purpose of enhancing democratic governance.



Party support should be directed to countries that already receive substantial aid for other democracy building purposes.

## Return to:

Chr. Michelsen Institute  
P. O. Box 6033 Postterminalen,  
N-5892 Bergen, Norway



Tel: (+47) 55 57 40 00  
Fax: (+47) 55 57 41 66  
e-mail: [cmi@cmi.no](mailto:cmi@cmi.no)  
[www.cmi.no](http://www.cmi.no)  
ISSN: 1503-3228

Support needs to be focused on a few countries if a Norwegian support programme is to contribute to develop functioning pluralistic political systems.

Parties eligible for participation in each country should be selected on a combination of criteria, rather than on one single criteria.

---

This is the first issue of *CMI Policy Brief*. The series aims at providing comments and analysis on current policy debates in the field of development and human rights. Findings from recent studies produced at the Chr. Michelsen Institute are included as well. The *CMI Policy Brief* is written for policy makers and other interested readers, and will be issued on a quarterly basis.

CMI contributes to the stock of knowledge that informs development and human rights policies. Through the *CMI Policy Brief*, the Institute hopes to increase dissemination of its work and make its research more visible and accessible.

If you wish to subscribe, please send an email to [policybrief@cmi.no](mailto:policybrief@cmi.no). The *Brief* is also available on the CMI web page: [www.cmi.no](http://www.cmi.no).

with representatives from political parties, similar to that of the Dutch IMD. This unit should not be limited to party representatives, but involve other actors with expertise in development issues and democracy building issues, such as research institutes.

The Dutch model holds many advantages. First of all it reduces the organisational overhead. Secondly, it reduces the potential for being interventionist, as money and trainers are sent to co-operating parties in the South in the name of a foundation. The Dutch have also tried to include all relevant parties in the recipient country into the support programme, with an emphasis on crosscutting support activities. In addition, the Dutch model is able to generate strong ownership among the participants on both sides, as this model is demand-driven. This means that political parties in the South are asked to submit proposals for capacity-building projects. Another feature of the Dutch model relevant for Norway is the selection of fewer countries. The Dutch, like the future Norwegian model, will have relatively modest funds available compared to the German, American or British models.

So, if an institutionalised Norwegian support programme to political parties is to reach its overarching goal of developing functioning pluralistic political systems in developing countries, support needs to be focused on a few countries.

### Which parties should be supported?

There is a potential conflict between support for individual political parties versus support for the party system, and the need to avoid contributing to party fragmentation. A possible model could be that support for parties is channelled through an inter-party unit in the recipient countries. The advantage of this model is that no particular party can be 'victimised' as being held hostage to foreign interests. Moreover, an inter-party unit could be a forum for discussion of issues that relate to parties in general, rather than to each one of them, such as electoral systems, electoral and campaign regulations. Not all funds need to be allocated to such inter-party purposes.

Parties eligible for participation in each country should be selected on a combination of criteria, rather than on single criteria. Among such criteria are: commitment to democratic government, including abstention from using violence or inciting to the use of violence. Parties that are able to nominate candidates in a minimum number of constituencies should be supported, rather than entrepreneurial one-man parties. Support could be channelled to parties that have been able to sustain themselves over some time, rather than to flash-pan parties. Parties that can demonstrate support from civil society or interest groups may be preferred over parties with no visible basis in society.

### Concluding remarks

Although there are good reasons to advocate party support as part of a general development policy, it is also worth noticing that this is a field where it may be difficult to identify immediate results. Party system development does not proceed in a linear way; long-term engagements are therefore necessary. Nor will all types of support be met with success.

The development of parties is as much a result of factors in the parties' economic, social and cultural environments as it is dependent on internal party factors. The objective is therefore not to make sure that every existing party in a given polity survives, but to reduce the arbitrariness with which parties now seem to be created as well as disappearing.

If democracy is to be entrenched in Africa, it needs to be strengthened from within. Any support for foreign funding of political parties might therefore seem a bit tainted. But support is not about imposing models from outside, but rather about giving support to national processes.

