



*Peacebuilding and Statebuilding: Peace in a Ballot? The Opportunities and Challenges of Elections in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Societies.*

**Interpeace Annual Advisory Council Meeting  
Interpeace Partners' Forum Meeting**

**Summary Report December 2010**

## **Introduction**

This report provides a brief summary of the discussions that took place at Interpeace's Partners' Forum Meeting on 1 December 2010 in Geneva, Switzerland. The meeting was conducted under Chatham House Rules and so none of the input or views, other than introductions and welcoming remarks, have been attributed.

The purpose of the discussion was to identify perspectives and discuss strategic approaches on how to connect statebuilding and peacebuilding processes. Elections are an example of a commonly used statebuilding tool that can make or break the peace in fragile societies. The Interpeace Partners' Forum provided a platform to exchange experiences from the perspective of national actors on the ground and experts from the international community.

## **WHY elections? WHEN elections? HOW Elections?**

The analytical framework for this discussion looking at elections through a peacebuilding lens was centered around three key questions:

- 1. WHY elections?**
- 2. WHEN elections?**
- 3. HOW elections?**

The following summarizes the discussions and debate through these three questions.

### **1. WHY elections?**

***Elections are necessary conditions for democratic change, but only one component of democracy***

We know that elections are necessary, but not a sufficient condition for democracies. However, all too often in practice, elections are equated with democracy (elections=democracy).

***The international community should seek to find better indicators to gauge progress in the political process, not relying upon elections as the only indicator of success.***

The primary focus of much of the international community has been on delivering free and fair elections with little emphasis on continued institution building and evaluation of the electoral process. The international community also has a tendency to focus on elections as an indicator of whether or not a country is democratic. Elections need to be seen as **one element of democracy** among others including: human rights, universal suffrage, freedom of speech, the right to run for office, etc...

***Democratization should not only be seen as a statebuilding process but also a peacebuilding process.***

Peacebuilding was defined as a process of strengthening the systemic capacities of societies to manage their own conflicts without resorting to violence or coercion. Therefore elections need to be understood as opportunities to enhance these capacities. If statebuilding is defined, using the OECD-DAC definition, as a "process of strengthening the capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state, driven by state-society relations", then political processes and relations between state and society

are at the heart of statebuilding. Peacebuilding is often seen as statebuilding when in fact it is the bridges towards peace that must be built.

***Legitimacy and trust are keys to success; elections should be seen as opportunities to contribute to the socio-political fabric that holds societies together.***

Elections can function as an instrument that can help societies to deal with violent conflict and provide a means to resolve their issues peacefully by **building trust and legitimacy**. Elections are a step in the democratization process of a country, but also are a fundamental element in creating legitimate institutions. These institutions can therefore function as a building block in the peacebuilding process by adding **credibility** and **responsiveness** to the political process. It was mentioned that elections indeed provided a new kind of **legitimacy**. In Guinea-Bissau for example, legitimacy has often been created through war in the past, while elections are clearly a more peaceful means to transfer legitimacy to political institutions.

## **2. WHEN elections?**

Elections are competitive by nature and can be challenging processes within a society. Therefore elections within divided societies can contribute to more violent conflict. The **timing of elections is crucial**: If elections are held **too early, the danger of violent conflict** breaking out increases. If elections are held **too late, the peacebuilding process may have stagnated** as the window of opportunity might already have passed.

### ***Pushing for early elections***

There is a trend towards **pushing for early elections** in countries emerging from conflict. This trend can either be driven by internal or external factors. Internally, the elite wants to position itself strategically to gain access to power as early as possible. The local population can also push for early elections as it is keen to participate in decision-making processes in its country. Externally, the international community wants to see results - the elections - as soon as possible in order to establish 'legitimate' authorities to whom it can 'hand over' responsibility..

Holding elections too early is one of the main reasons why elections fail to provide stability and trust. The international community often attaches conditionality to financial contributions to electoral process. This argument was illustrated with an example from Guinea-Bissau, where it was stressed that **external factors** had a significant influence on the election date.

On the other hand it was highlighted how **internal factors** in Somaliland have contributed to the timing of elections. The electoral process was threatened because the election date had been postponed by the government several times. This created tensions between the government and the opposition.

A representative of a donor country explained the dynamics in terms of the need for donor governments to be accountable to their taxpayers, who want to see the payoffs of their investments. This adds to the pressure to be results-oriented. Until now elections have functioned as benchmarks for success.

It was emphasized that elections should be thought of as a process as opposed to an event, and that the electoral process itself should be thought of as part of a larger process of democratization. The challenge for the international community is to develop new indicators that go beyond "check the

box” that elections were organized and that can reflect a slower, more organic method of building a peaceful society.

### ***Pace of electoral process***

The pace of the democratic transformation process is key to success. One participant argued that transformation processes have to move slowly. However the question is how to keep the balance between sensitivity and progress.

Each country’s situation will dictate the pace of the transformation process. Whilst it is important to move forwards slowly there is also a danger of patronizing local people. Also with new technology and media, it is not, possible for the international community to control the pace of transformation processes.

### ***Two basic tensions***

When dealing with the timing of electoral processes, two basic tensions were highlighted:

-The first is the tension between **‘chronological time’** and **‘historical time’**. Historical time represents the time in which social and political processes take place in a society; chronological time is the timeframe used and often imposed by the international community. When the elections need to take place according to the internal development of a society’s socio-political processes, and when they need to take place according to the chronological needs of the international community, the timing can often be at odds.

- The second is the tension between **western models of democracy** and **local forms of governance**. More than the values and principles of democratic rule, international assistance often emphasizes particular institutional models that are the result of the historical experiences of the donor countries. This can lead to missing, ignoring or marginalizing local elements of governance that could be integrated into a locally-developed institutional framework, and that could help root democracy in society.

It was noted that these tensions can also be used as an excuse by authoritarian leaders or non-democratic international actors to prevent or de-rail democratization, with the excuse that “it’s too early” for elections, or that “it’s an imported institution”.

The challenge for the peacebuilder is how to understand the need for and development of gradual, flexible and adaptive approaches that contribute to consolidation of peace and democracy, without playing into the hands of anti- or un-democratic actors.

*“A country does not have to be deemed fit for democracy, rather, it has to become fit through democracy” Amartya Sen*

In other words, it is not about waiting for the right conditions for elections, but about using the electoral process to create better conditions.

### **3. HOW elections?**

It is in the “how” an election is carried out that it can become more than simply a technical event, but rather a constructive process contributing to legitimizing institutions and good governance in

society. It was pointed out that the technical aspects of elections receive more attention than their wider political implications. This is self-defeating: elections can be technically successful, but can fail completely to contribute to democratization or to consolidate peace in society. They can even have negative effects in both areas.

A consensus was reached that the international community needs to change the way it looks at elections.

***It is time to change the model of how the international community thinks about elections. They should be thought of as a process and not an event.***

Currently the international community tends to apply an **event-oriented approach** towards elections forgetting that democratization is a **process**. Rather than focusing attention on election day, emphasis needs to be given to the run-up to elections and the period following elections as these are the times when tensions can arise. Promoting honest partnerships and transparency between the international and local communities is the only way to build trust and legitimacy and to ensure that pre-, mid- and post-election phases remain peaceful.

***It is not the “What”, it’s the “How”***

It was emphasized that most of the comments made about elections and democratic processes expressed in the workshop are not new: they are well known and discussed in technical and academic literature. **But there is a gap between what is known and what is practiced: international actors often act against lessons that have already been identified, and ignore good practices.** There is a need to understand why such a gap between understanding and practice continues, and to act effectively to correct it.

***Solidifying the path to democracy***

To solidify the path to democracy, there are many essential factors that must be incorporated into the preparatory stages of electoral processes. Some of these include:

***Economic resources***

It was stated that the economic base in Guinea-Bissau was not sufficient to have a successful democratization process. It was argued that if people don't have equal economic resources there is no equal opportunity to run for office. At the same time it was emphasized that democratic transition and economic development have to happen simultaneously.

***Creating a common vision of democracy is of critical importance. People must be allowed to have a voice and participate in an inclusive platform.***

Unity of purpose is a key to success. A consensual vision of what democracy means for society provides motivation for all the actors involved in the electoral process and helps them to resist all the pressures to boycott, manipulate and disrespect the results.

***Civic education should be used as a tool to help move society's understanding of political processes***

Civic education is a way to develop a shared vision for democracy and a way for the population to have realistic expectations of the transformation process. In order to create this vision we must listen to the voices of the people, provide opportunities for dialogue.

### ***Inclusion of all groups***

Participants stressed the importance of including all groups of society into the peacebuilding process, so that excluded groups do not become spoilers in the peace process. It was also considered important to bear in mind that any kind of organized group is not uni-dimensional and within it there are factions.