Introduction

The year 2010 has been dubbed the biggest election year in Africa given the quite unprecedented high number of countries on the continent having elections and the increasingly higher population of Africans ready to vote this year.

African elections have become more robust and competitive, yet in the same vein, they are increasingly challenging given the increasing level of sophistication in their rigging and manipulation especially in some countries. This is a challenge for the majority of African voters who want to hold their leaders accountable through elections and also want their elected leaders to translate election promises into public policies which engender democratic governance and development. Similarly, international development partners, UN agencies included, regard credible elections as a key avenue for citizens to exercise their democratic right on how and who should rule over them. They further regard competitive elections as critical for promoting socio-economic policies which are responsive to people’s needs and aspirations and which aim at eradicating poverty and expanding the choices that all people have in their lives.

This presentation will attempt to highlight the achievements and challenges of elections in Africa, explain why elections in Africa remain problematic, and how the international community and local actors can work together to democratise and enhance the credibility of elections on the continent. The presentation will address role of the UN in promoting credible elections and will also unpack some of the UNDP electoral support activities, those of others and also those the UNDP is

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undertaking in partnership with national and regional actors in Africa. The presentation will further seek to flag some good practices and principles in promoting international cooperation to support free and fair elections. Similarly, the presentation will address some not-so-good practices which international development partners should eschew at all cost in order to ensure that electoral support contributes to democratic consolidation.

**Context**

Africa has over the last few decades seen good and bad elections which have put different African countries on different trajectories in terms of the quality of development, democracy and governance. A significant number of elections have produced good results and place several countries on a firm path of recovery and peaceful transition following years of civil conflicts: these include elections in Namibia which led to independence in 1989; South Africa and Mozambique in 1994 to end decades of civil conflict; Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 2000s. Countries such as Ghana and Mauritius have had successful successive elections leading to peaceful alternation of power, even more than once. Yet on the other hand Africa has seen elections in a host of other countries which have stalled democracy and precipitated political instability: Ivory Coast in 1999, Kenya in 2007 and Zimbabwe in 2008.

**Why are elections problematic in some African countries?**

Elections in some countries in Africa have remained problematic and some reasons account for this situation. Elections in most African countries, just like in other fledgling democracies, take place in a high-stake environment, i.e. an environment in which winning an election is tantamount to capturing the state and monopolizing access to its resources (jobs, tenders, etc). This is a zero-sum game in which the
“winner takes all and the looser looses all”, meaning the latter will have to contend with five long years of drought without access to the means of survival which can only be dispersed by the state. The weak private sector and concomitant limited economic activities in most African countries makes the state the only employer, producer and distributor of economic goods and opportunities, and hence winning elections gives the winner unfettered access to state resources which are in turn used to entrench and perpetuate one's rule. Such resources include state institutions (including the media, security forces, election management bodies, parliament and the judiciary), laws, and also financial, material, and human resources which are mobilized to preserve the incumbent from being dislodged from power. The use of violence and intimidation has also become a common feature in African elections and this is used by both opposition and ruling party leaders and supporters to advance their chances to win elections. Ethnic and religious cleavages have also been mobilized as a basis for electioneering and these have had catastrophic consequences in several countries, e.g. Kenya and Nigeria.

The UN history in Electoral Support – in brief

Promoting democracy and elections lies at the heart of the mandate and role of the United Nations in general and the UNDP in particular. It is important to note that while the UN Charter does not directly accord the UN with a mandate to promote democracy – in fact democracy is not a pre-condition for UN membership – the link between democracy, on the one hand, and other stated purposes of the UN such as promoting peace, human rights, and development, made it imperative for the UN to mainstream democracy promotion in its work. For example, Newman and Rich (2004) argues that democracy is a critical precondion for ending “scourge of wars”; democracy including the right to self-determination and choosing own socio-cultural and political institutions including the government is a fundamental human right; the quality of development on the other hand depends on the quality of democracy. Put differently, there is interdependence between peace, development, human rights and democracy. Beside the UN Charter being silent on democracy promotion, a host of subsequent UN decisions and resolutions over the years have given the UN systems
a clear mandate to support democracy in general and elections in particular. These include the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights$^2$ and the 1966 International Convention for Civil and Political Rights$^3$, both of which provide for the right of citizens to establish democratic systems and institutions through genuine elections.

Rich and Newman argue that the UN General Assembly has over the years advocated that the authority to govern should stem from the will of the people and that will required “an electoral process that provides all citizens with equal opportunity to vote and be voted for and to freely express their political views”. In 1991, the General Assembly passed the Resolution 46/137 which gave further clarity to the UN’s role in promoting democracy and elections. This resolution set up processes and institutions to undertake international electoral assistance on behalf of the UN. These included the Secretary-General’s designation of the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs as the focal point on electoral matters, the establishment of the United Nations Electoral Assistance Unit in 1992 to support the focal point’s efforts. In 1994, the unit became a part of the UN’s Department of Political Affairs and was renamed Electoral Assistance Division (EAD).

Furthermore, the UNEAD and the UNDP recently adopted Note of Guidance on UN Electoral Assistance which is a normative and operational framework for UN support towards the efforts of member states to promote democratic electoral processes and build sustainable capacity to manage electoral systems and processes. In this context, the UN regularly renders technical advice and assistance on the legal, institutional, technical and administrative aspects of organizing and conducting elections. It also supports the international or domestic observation of electoral processes in member states.

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2 “The will of the people, as expressed through genuine and period elections (inserted), shall be basis of the authority of the government – Article 21(3)”

3 “To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors” – Article 25(b)
The UN history in supporting democratic transition including the promotion of credible elections is chequered and varies in terms of the degree of involvement and level of success. One of the first UN engagements in supporting transition – mainly in the context of the decolonization of Africa - was Congo in 1960. The UN deployed military forces to restore order in the country and suppress the rebellion which threatened the wellbeing of the newly-independent state. According to Dobbins et al (2005) democracy did figure heavily in the various UN resolutions on Congo\(^4\); in fact, there was no agreement during the Cold War on the definition of democracy. This meant that most UN interventions in promoting peaceful and stable states around the world did not include the objective of promoting democracy and good governance as it is the case today following the collapse of the Cold War. Post-Cold War UN-led operations in countries such as Namibia, Cambodia, and Mozambique followed a different trajectory, i.e. brokering a peace according; disarmament; demobilization; reintegration; encouraging political reconciliation; holding democratic elections; and overseeing the inauguration of a new national government. Although aspects of political negotiations for peace making and peace building are necessary preconditions for the UN role in supporting democratic elections, this presentation will give more attention to the latter than the former due to time constraints.

UN Role in Supporting Democratic Elections around the world

The UN’s involvement in electoral support began in the 1960s and 1970s, when through the Trusteeship Council the UN assisted with the observation or supervision of some elections and referenda in various regions of the world. By the late 1980s, UNDP had financed several small-sized projects that provided some form of assistance on specific technical aspects of electoral processes and on the establishment of the related infrastructure necessary to conduct elections. Also at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the UN had begun to engage in major electoral missions of three kinds – the organisation and conduct of elections (such as through the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia through

\(^4\) http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG304/
UNTAC in 1993); the supervision and control of elections (such as in Namibia through UNTAG in 1989); and the verification of electoral processes (such as in El Salvador through ONUSAL in 1994).

The UN role in supporting democratic elections became more pronounced and well-defined in the 1990s. The General Assembly Resolution 46/137 provided for the appointment of the UN electoral focal point and the establishment of a specialized unit on electoral assistance, i.e. UNEAD. Activities which form part of the EAD role include evaluating government requests for electoral assistance; conducting needs assessment missions; collaborating in the design of electoral assistance project activities with other UN system agencies and in developing the electoral components of peace-keeping operations. In addition, EAD provides logistical and advisory support to international observer groups, maintains a roster of electoral experts, organizes conferences and training courses; assists in the administration of UN electoral trust funds; and serves as the organization's institutional memory in the electoral assistance field. The same Resolution also mandated the UNDP to collaborate with EAD in rendering electoral support to UN member states, given the UNDP broad-based physical presence around the globe, i.e. 166 country offices around the world. UNDP's permanent field presence supported by robust logistical infrastructure, solid country knowledge and tested neutrality to work with government, bilateral donors, non-governmental organizations and political parties, has proved a sine qua non for UN electoral assistance.5

The UNDP mandate in general provides for strengthening democracy through targeted support to electoral institutions, laws and processes with a view to fostering credible elections and inclusive politics. In this context, the UNDP assumes principal responsibilities in providing assistance to member states in the following areas:

• Support to EAD in undertaking assessments prior to or after elections (Lesotho in 2010)

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5 UNDP and Electoral Assistance: 10 Years of Experience
• Collaboration with UNEAD in supporting and coordinating international observers (Malawi, 1993 and 1994)

• Assistance to civil society-based election monitors or domestic observers (Mexico, 1994 and 1997)

• Coordination and mobilization of international donor aid (basket fund management) based on the UNDP’s convening power and status as a trusted neutral actor (Kenya 2007)

• Technical assistance and advisory service on electoral processes – this area constitutes the bulk of the UNDP’s past and ongoing electoral assistance activities and programmes (DRC, Mozambique, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, etc.)

UNDP Technical assistance to member states includes short term to long term support. Short term support can be a consultancy to review the country’s electoral laws, or to plan and implement voter registration or staff training, while long term support entails institutional strengthening (EMB organisational development), civic education, stakeholder engagement, and legislative reform.

Although Dobbins et al (2005) commends the UN for a successful role in supporting democratic transition around the world since the 1960, they identified areas of weakness in the way the UN conducts of democracy and electoral support:

• slow mobilization and deployment of assistance including peacekeeping forces and civil administrators;

• uneven quality of military components and police and civil administrators;

• mismatch between ambitious mandates and modest means;
• premature withdrawal of missions especially after the successful completion of first democratic elections;

Another weakness which until over many years has dogged the effectiveness of international support for free and fair elections, including the work of the UND, is the lack of policy coherence and synergy among donors who support elections: for example, donors tend to support elections in line with their foreign policy preferences or only sponsor electoral activities which guarantee them publicity. This meant that donor support to elections has been sporadic, “ad hocric” and without a concerted effort to strengthen the entire electoral system and process or to achieve the broader governance and developmental goals of the recipient country. Other shortcomings in donor support to elections include lack understanding of the local (national) environment (Afghanistan, East Timor, Iraq, etc), lack of commitment to democratic change especially among local actors (Cambodia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, etc.), and conflicting priorities as set by donor agencies, for example, whether to exit a country on the basis of unrealistic timelines set during political negotiations or to exist on the basis of attainable objectives – Kofi Anan refers to this as “exiting without a strategy” as opposed to “an exit strategy”.

Recalibrated Efforts by the UNDP to support Credible Elections

In order to enhance aid effectiveness including electoral support, the UNDP joined forces with donors to come up with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action in 2005 and 2008 respectively. These instruments provide for enhanced coordination and harmonization of aid policies and actions, mainstreaming local ownership and mutual accountability, and fostering flexibility in aid management but based on measurable development results.

In order to foster better synergy and coordination in aid policy and action the UNDP has since 2007 collaborated with the European Commission and International IDEA to promote Effective Electoral Assistance through advocacy and training especially for UNDP, EC, and other donor personnel. The UNDP and the EU also set up the Joint Task Force and signed a memorandum of understanding in 2004 which paved the way for collaboration between the two institutions in the areas of policy dialogue and cooperation in governance (including electoral and parliamentary support) and conflict management.

In 2009 the UNDP and the Spanish government and also in cooperation with the Canadian government entered into a strategic cooperation agreement entitled the Global Programme for the Electoral Cycle Support (GPECS). The latter sought to mainstream the use of the electoral cycle as the framework for supporting, managing and evaluating elections around the world. The Electoral Cycle Approach (ECA) – see example below - sought to take stock of all the steps of the electoral cycle, i.e. the pre-voting, during and post-voting phases of elections, and looking at elections as process rather than event. According to this approach, elections are composed of a number of integrated building blocks, with different stakeholders interacting and influencing each other. Electoral components and stakeholders do not stand alone and it is therefore important that when supporting elections, all these factors are taken into consideration in order to foster a holistic approach that supports all key components of elections, including stakeholders such as political parties, parliaments, media, civil society, and observers.

The ECA seeks to promote long-term capacity and institutional strengthening objectives as opposed to short-term objectives. Electoral assistance is more effective when focused on long-term capacity development including strengthening the country’s institutional foundations and wider processes of democratic transition and governance. This includes support to promote civic and voter education, strengthening the EMB capacity to deliver credible elections through long-term staff

7 http://www.ec-undp-electoralassistance.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16&Itemid=31
development and financial investment. Towards this end, the UNDP has provided for a lead time of at least one year to enable institutional reform to take root.

The ECA also seeks to strengthen mechanisms for inclusive, representative and transformative participation. As democracy is about popular participation in public decision making processes including elections, it is important that electoral support mainstream inclusive politics, i.e. inclusive access to rights, representative institutions, and transformative civic participation. This calls for efforts to promoting access to decision making structures and political resources for the historically marginalized groups, such as women, people living with disabilities, and minority groups. Strengthening women participation in elections as voters and candidates

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8 UNDP Electoral Assistance: Essentials no. 14 December 2003
especially through civic and voter education is an important element of this approach to electoral assistance. The same approach also applies to effort to levelling the playing field for all electoral contestants, including minority parties which often fall prey to the incumbency privileges enjoyed by the ruling parties through unfettered access to state resources including the media. The UNDP has also been actively involved in promoting out-of-country voting to ensure fairness to citizens who live outside their country for various reasons, including political displacement.

A further nuanced approach to the UNDP electoral assistance over the last few years has been the need to support all elections beyond the first national elections. This means supporting second-generation elections and also lower-level elections such as regional and local elections which are the embodiment of decentralization.

Conclusion

While this presentation dealt much with the role of the international community in general and the UN in particular, a lot has been done by Africa’s own institutions of governance especially at the regional level, for example the African Union and also at the sub regional levels via the Regional Economic Communities. These institutions have over the last few decades developed instruments and protocols in support of free and fair elections and even set up programmes to further electoral assistance including election observation and monitoring at country level. This notwithstanding there is need for closer collaboration with and support to these institutions in order to given capacity to make their interventions more robust and sustainable. Similarly, the international community, working with Africa’s own institutions, must recalibrate its efforts to punish offenders and isolate those who steal elections. Similarly, they must reward those who do well by using elections to strengthen democratic governance in their countries.
Similarly, there is also a challenge for African leaders to walk the talk when it comes to the host of instruments and protocols they have drafted and discussed but never put into practice due to lack of ratification. This includes the much acclaimed African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance which was adopted by the African Union in 2007 but still requires 15 ratification – only seven countries\(^9\) have ratified it over the last three years. More work lies ahead for Africans to show leadership in the exercise of accountability in the same way they expect the international community to act when it comes to supporting democracy and elections on the continent.

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\(^9\) The seven countries are Burkina Faso, Ghana, Lesotho, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia and Mauritania