



Check against delivery

UN FORUM ON MINORITY ISSUES

12-13 November, 2009
Palais des Nations (Room XX), Geneva

Forum Theme: *Minorities and Effective Political Participation*

Session: *Impact of Electoral Systems and Role of Political Parties*

(Day Two; 11:30am-13:00pm)

*Ms. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi
Director
Democratic Governance Group
Bureau for Development Policy
UNDP New York*

UNDP is very pleased to take part in the second UN Forum on Minority Issues and would like to thank Ms. Gay McDougall, the UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, for the invitation. We also would like to congratulate Rep. Barbara Lee, the eminent Chair of the US Congressional Black Caucus, on her appointment as the Chair of the Forum.

Madam Chair, distinguished delegates and participants,

The thematic focus of the Forum is very crucial for the better achievement of nationally owned development goals and processes. Having been the key development partner of governments for decades, UNDP believes that their efforts to improve sustainable human development and promote inclusion and stability are complemented and strengthened with better attention to the situation of minorities and with the *effective and meaningful participation* of minorities in such efforts.

The marginalization and/or exclusion of minorities have a significant detrimental impact on poverty reduction, democratic governance, environmental sustainability and conflict prevention. Minorities have different perspectives that can enrich the assessment, analysis, planning, implementation, and monitoring of development initiatives of all stakeholders, as well as ensure ownership and help find sustainable and effective solutions to development challenges. Here, we would like to thank Ms. McDougall for leading the development of the **"UNDP Resource Guide and a Toolkit on Minorities in Development"**¹, as well as the OHCHR and the Minority Rights Group International for their continued support in this endeavor. We will launch the document early next year and hope that the implementation of it will, *among other things*, contribute towards the possible establishment of minority specific advisory and/or consultative mechanisms at all levels, as suggested by one of the participants yesterday.

Fair political representation of minorities in parliaments can also stimulate broad-appeal policies that reduce conflict and maximize development potential. This is one of the basic premises of our ongoing joint project with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), referred to by the Secretary-General of the IPU yesterday.

¹ The primary target groups of this product are the UNDP country office practitioners and those with policy advisory responsibilities. However, it can also serve as a reference document for other UN agencies, Government counterparts, and other relevant partners. It is hoped that the final product will enable the target group(s) to understand the conceptual issues and fundamental principles relating to the promotion and protection of minorities, learn how to draw on the available international and regional standards to engage minorities in programming processes, influence policy choices, as well as increase their opportunities for meaningful participation and representation in development processes.

With those general remarks, let me now turn to the topic of this session which has direct relevance to our ongoing work in the areas of electoral systems and processes, parliamentary development, political parties, and increasing women's political participation.

Given the time constraints, I would very briefly describe UNDP's work on elections and share some of our key lessons with this august body:

Supporting elections is an important element of UNDP's work and that the organization has made the shift to providing electoral assistance around the **electoral cycle concept**, which incorporates the election event as one of many elements that go to the quality and magnitude of citizens' participation including in electoral system design, electoral law reform, voter registration methodologies, civic and voter education, building the capacity of electoral management bodies, working with political parties and the media around election-related issues, etc.² This is a trend that manifests examples in all regions.

Some lessons:

1. The type of electoral system (e.g., majority-plurality, proportional representation, mixed, etc.) used in elections has long-term implications for accountability, inclusiveness and representation.
2. While proportional representation systems give a premium to inclusion over exclusion and to broad versus narrow representation (and are known to be more favourable to women's and minority representation), majoritarian systems can encourage national cohesiveness and direct accountability links between representatives and their constituents.
3. Any electoral system proposed should take into account whether the country is deeply divided along political, geographical, religious or ethnic lines. It should also ensure that minorities are fairly represented in the political system.
4. Discussions relating to electoral system reform should involve consultations with all political groups, to the extent feasible, as well as civil society and electoral management body representatives.
5. Ensure that gender equality is considered in debates regarding electoral reform. For example, power, dynamics, class, gender-based discrimination, poverty, ethnicity and the elite's capture of resources, all have gender dimensions that should not be overlooked.
6. In the end, however, there is no single best electoral system to fit all contexts, and the choice of electoral system is never a purely technical one.

² UNDP-produced knowledge products on the subject matter, including on issues such as elections and conflict prevention, working with political parties etc. can be accessed from our website: <http://www.undp.org/governance/>.

On the **role of political parties**, we would like to share the following lessons:

1. Some countries have decided that one way to manage the tendency of party politics to contribute to ethnic enmity is to ban political parties that purport to represent an ethnic, tribal, or racial identity. While this may be effective in some circumstances in reducing ethnic-based conflict and power struggles, in others it may contribute to a sense of alienation among minority groups that can contribute to tensions and violence, or it may be regarded as an unjustified limitation on the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

2. It is important to evaluate how political parties that define themselves as broadly 'nationalist'—or standing for everyone in a united country—define the political community and whether these parties are sufficiently inclusive to draw in members of minority groups and take their interests into account. The concern with identity-based parties is that in the rather fragile environment of newly formed transitional democracies, political parties with very narrow mandates can seize power on divisive ethnic, racial, or religious themes and end democracy, ironically, through the ballot box.

3. Develop political parties' capacity to analyze issues from a gender perspective. This will involve educating them how gender roles shape the ways in which men and women engage in socioeconomic life and participate in politics.

4. Support and promote the use of positive measures such as quotas, as one strategy to address discrimination against women, particularly minority women. The 2002 Human Development Report (HDR) demonstrated that quotas make a difference in women's political participation, largely because they give women a temporary leg up, but that such measures, while valuable, are short-term efforts that must go hand-in-hand with societal mechanisms and capacity/leadership development for women, particularly minority women.

5. We see no examples of majorities of women in party leadership; when we know that it is from the highest ranks of party leadership that the leaders of parliament or government are drawn. Data on party leadership is scarce, but we do see significant numbers of women in the party membership, performing campaigning and fund-raising work, or in parties' 'women's wings'. Even so, in most countries, women are still not able to influence parties to commit to gender equality goals. Considering that in liberal democracies, the political party is central in the competition for political power, if women cannot rise to lead political parties, they will not lead governments!

Thank you very much for your attention!