DEMOCRACY AND THE UNITED NATIONS

Democracy is one of the universal and indivisible core values and principles of the United Nations. It is based on the freely expressed will of people and closely linked to the rule of law and exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Democracy, and democratic governance in particular, means that people’s human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected, promoted and fulfilled, allowing them to live with dignity. People have a say in decisions that affect their lives and can hold decision-makers to account, based on inclusive and fair rules, institutions and practices that govern social interactions. Women are equal partners with men in private and public spheres of life and decision-making, and all people are free from discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, gender or any other attribute. Democratic governance feeds into economic and social policies that are responsive to people’s needs and aspirations, that aim at eradicating poverty and expanding the choices that people have in their lives, and that respect the needs of future generations. In essence, democratic governance is the process of creating and sustaining an environment for inclusive and responsive political processes and settlements.

The United Nations does not advocate for a specific model of government, but promotes democratic governance as a set of values and principles that should be followed for greater participation, equality, security and human development.

Democracy in international law

Although the United Nations Charter does not include the word “democracy”, the opening words of the Charter, “We the Peoples”, reflect the fundamental principle of democracy that the will of the people is the source of legitimacy of sovereign states and therefore of the United Nations as a whole.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly in 1948, projected the concept of democracy by stating “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government.” The Declaration spells out the rights that are essential for effective political participation. Since its adoption, the Declaration has inspired constitution-making around the world and has contributed greatly to the
global acceptance of democracy as a universal value.iii

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) lays the legal basis for the principles of democracy under international law, particularly:

- freedom of expression (Article 19);
- the right of peaceful assembly (Article 21);
- the right to freedom of association with others (Article 22);
- the right and opportunity to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives (Article 25);
- the right 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).

The Covenant is binding on those States that have ratified it. As of July 2012, the number of parties to the Covenant was 167, which constitutes approximately 85 per cent of the United Nations’ membership.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women stipulates that its 187 States parties (as of July 2012) shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right to vote and stand for elections, and participate in public life and decision-making (Article 7).

Supporting democracy around the world

United Nations activities in support of democracy and governance are implemented through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF), the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), among others. Such activities are inseparable from the UN’s work in promoting human rights, development, and peace and security, and include:

- Assisting parliaments and decentralized local governance structures to enhance the checks and balances that allow democracy to thrive;
- Promoting human rights, the rule of law and access to justice by helping to strengthen the impartiality and effectiveness of the national human rights machinery and judicial systems;
- Ensuring freedom of expression and access to information by strengthening legislation and media capacities;
- Electoral assistance and long-term support.

Electoral officers from the United Nations Mission in Nepal prepare ballot boxes and other polling materials for distribution throughout the country. (UN Photo)
for electoral management bodies; and

- Promoting women’s participation in political and public life.

Approximately USD 1.5 billion each year is provided through UNDP to support democratic processes around the world. Since 2011, UNDP has helped strengthen 10,250 institutions (from ministries responsible for policymaking to grass-roots civil society organizations advocating for greater inclusiveness in parliaments, elections, social protection, jobs and livelihoods, and food security mechanisms), making the United Nations one of the largest providers of technical cooperation for democracy and governance globally.

The political work of the United Nations requires that it promote democratic outcomes; the development agencies seek to bolster national institutions like parliaments, electoral commissions and legal systems that form the bedrock of any democracy; and the human rights efforts support freedom of expression and association, participation and the rule of law, all of which are critical components of democracy.

The UN General Assembly and democracy

Since 1988, the General Assembly has adopted at least one resolution annually dealing with some aspect of democracy. Democracy has emerged as a cross-cutting issue in the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits since the 1990s and in the internationally agreed development goals they produced, including the Millennium Development Goals. Member States at the World Summit in September 2005 reaffirmed that “democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives.”

The Summit Outcome Document also stressed that “democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing,” and pointed out that “while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy.” Member States resolved to promote increased representation of women in government decision-making bodies, including ensuring their equal opportunity to participate fully in the political process (para 58g).

World leaders pledged in the Millennium Declaration to spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law, as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They resolved to strive for the full protection and promotion in all countries of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all and to strengthen the capacity of all countries to implement the principles and practices of democracy and respect for human rights.”
International Day of Democracy

On 8 November 2007, the General Assembly proclaimed 15 September as the International Day of Democracy, inviting Member States, the United Nations System and other regional, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to commemorate the Day. The International Day of Democracy provides an opportunity to highlight the centrality of this universal core value and to review the state of democracy in the world. Democracy is as much a process as a goal, and only with the full participation of and support by the international community, national governing bodies, civil society and individuals, can the ideal of democracy become reality, to be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere.

---

1 World Summit Outcome Document, A/RES/60/1, paragraph 119
2 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21
3 In Larger Freedom, A/59/2005, paragraph 148
4 World Summit Outcome Document, paragraph 135
5 General Assembly resolution A/RES/55/2
FOSTERING DEMOCRACY THROUGH ELECTIONS

The spread of democracy around the world has been a significant achievement of our times. Elections sit at the heart of this, making possible the act of self-determination envisaged in the Charter of the United Nations. The Organization’s history is interwoven with elections extending back to shortly after its founding, when, in the late 1940s, it observed elections on the Korean Peninsula. During the subsequent era of trusteeship and decolonization, it supervised and observed plebiscites, referendums and elections worldwide. Today, as the call for democratic change becomes louder in the Middle East and North Africa regions and elsewhere, the United Nations continues to be recognized as a trusted impartial actor. The Organization continues to provide electoral assistance to a broad range of countries, at the request of Member States or based on a Security Council or General Assembly mandate.

The provision of electoral assistance by the United Nations is a team effort involving a number of Funds, Programmes, Agencies and Departments and is closely regulated by the General Assembly. The Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs is designated by the General Assembly as the UN Focal Point for Electoral Assistance Activities. His role is to ensure system-wide coherence and consistency and to help strengthen the institutional memory and the development, dissemination and issuance of United Nations electoral assistance policies.

Electoral assistance is based on the principle established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the will of the people, as expressed through periodic and genuine elections, shall be the basis of government authority. Electoral assistance also recognizes the principles of state sovereignty and national ownership of elections, and that there is no single model of democracy.

The Electoral Assistance Division, within the Department of Political Affairs, supports the United Nations Focal Point in ensuring system-wide coherence and consistency in the provision of United Nations electoral assistance as well as developing electoral policy, and provides technical guidance.
and support in the implementation of around 50 electoral projects at any given time. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the UN system’s main provider of technical electoral assistance, which is delivered as part of its mandate to lead democratic governance assistance at the country level.

The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) also has a major operational role in providing security, technical advice and logistical support to national authorities administering elections in peacekeeping mission settings.

Other UN actors involved in providing electoral assistance include the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations Volunteers, UN Women, the United Nations Office for Project Services, UNESCO and the United Nations Democracy Fund.

Over the last 20 years, the United Nations has provided electoral assistance to more than 110 Member States and territories that have requested support. UNDP, for example, has provided electoral assistance to 59 Member States in the past two years. Areas of support include developing sustainable electoral management capacities, fostering inclusive participation in elections, particularly of women and youth and other underrepresented groups, and coordinating donor support to electoral processes. Similarly, DPKO, when mandated by the Security Council, includes electoral components in its operations which provide similar types of electoral support. Where more than one UN actor is involved in providing electoral assistance (for example, DPKO and UNDP), support is provided in an integrated manner.

The United Nations has also established relations with regional and intergovernmental organizations involved in electoral assistance, including the African Union, the European Union, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the Organization of American States, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Southern African Development Community. Other partners are the many international non-governmental organizations working in the field of electoral assistance. These include institutions such as the Carter Center, the Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. These relationships provide opportunities for collaboration on electoral support activities as well as for sharing lessons and experiences.
UN electoral assistance has been a crucial and successful component in peacekeeping, peacebuilding and in establishing and deepening democratic governance. As democracy has spread, so has the role of elections as the means to establish legitimate government. The United Nations has been engaged in elections in all regions of the world, with assistance provided recently in Afghanistan, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, Zambia, Bangladesh, Iraq, Honduras, Mali and Mexico, to name just a few. In Tunisia, the UN supported civil society in the October 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections and continues to provide technical assistance to the national authorities. In Libya, an integrated UN team supported the Libyan authorities in organizing and conducting the General National Congress elections on 7 July 2012. In 2013, the UN provided technical and logistical support to Malian authorities in the conduct of presidential elections. In addition, the UN, in partnership with regional organizations, facilitated dialogue between the transitional government and political actors in the north of Mali.

Electoral events in each country are unique and reflect an individual country’s political and historical characteristics. While no single electoral system is equally suited to all countries, the electoral process should adhere to obligations and commitments outlined in international human rights instruments. The United Nations therefore carefully addresses each request following a series of steps: official request; assessment; design; implementation; monitoring and evaluation; and lessons learning. Emphasis is often placed on building the capacity of the national electoral management bodies to implement credible elections in line with their respective legal mandates.

Addressing the capacity of an electoral management body in isolation will not necessarily produce credible elections. There also needs to be a focus on the overall political environment in which the elections take place. The United Nations therefore also makes efforts to build capacity beyond electoral authorities. This involves working with voters, the media, political parties and civil society, as well as other actors and institutions of democratic governance such as parliament and the judiciary.

Further recognizing that even a technically good election may still ignite underlying grievances and tensions, the United Nations is placing greater attention on the issue of elections and violence. Some examples include the mediation and dialogue activities of the Special Adviser for Yemen, who works closely with the UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP in moving the political process forward. In Liberia the United Nations Mission (UNMIL), in close consultation with ECOWAS, engaged political actors in an effort to lessen tensions before, during and after the elections. In Guinea, the SRSG for West Africa with close support from DPA facilitated dialogue among political actors thereby helping to ensure a resumption of the stalled electoral process.

The main goal of United Nations electoral assistance is to support Member States in holding
periodic, inclusive and transparent elections that are credible and popularly perceived as such, and establishing nationally sustainable electoral processes.

For more information, please see:
www.un.org/wcm/content/site/undpa
www.undp.org
DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY
The United Nations Democracy Fund

The United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) supports projects that strengthen the voice of civil society, promote human rights, and encourage the participation of all groups in democratic processes. It is the only UN entity that has the word “democracy” in its name; the only UN body with the primary purpose of supporting democracy through empowering civil society; and one of the youngest entities in the UN system.

Since Secretary-General Kofi A. Annan created UNDEF as a UN General Trust Fund in 2005, it has funded close to 500 projects in some 150 countries. In the Seventh Round of Funding, half of the new projects were in the area of rule of law, reflecting this as an increasing UN priority. The large majority of funds go to local civil society groups. In this way, UNDEF plays a new and unique role, complementing the UN's traditional work with Governments to strengthen democratic governance around the world. It targets the demand side of democracy, rather than the supply side.

UNDEF projects exist in developing countries, in societies in transition and in challenging environments. Projects are in six main areas:

- Tools for democratization
- Rule of law and human rights
- Community development
- Youth
- Media
- Women

In 2012, UNDEF received over 3,000 project proposals. Grants average around USD 225,000, and applications are subject to a highly rigorous and competitive selection process. The Fund depends entirely on voluntary contributions from Member States. So far, it has been supported by over 40 Governments, who have contributed a cumulative amount of more than 145 million dollars. The biggest donors are the United States and India.

UNDEF is committed to transparency and knowledge-sharing. External evaluations of completed projects are available on the UNDEF website at: http://www.un.org/democracyfund/evaluations
The following are some examples of UNDEF projects around the world:

**Democracy in Action I: Freedom Messengers take the stage in Jordan**

UNDEF funds a project to empower Jordanian artists and journalists to act as "Freedom Messengers" -- catalysts and networkers for free speech and media. The project, focused on people under 35 and implemented by the Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists in Jordan, held a public event at Amman's Royal Cultural Center in June featuring street theatre, rap music, short films and more, performed by artists in the Freedom Messengers Network.

**Democracy in Action II: Holding Governorate Councils accountable in Iraq**

An UNDEF-funded project in Iraq has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with six Governorate Councils as part of an effort to strengthen civil society participation in democratic processes and advance accountability in Government institutions.

The project, active in the Governorates of Baghdad, Babil, Karkuk, Najaf, Basrah and Karbala, works to make communities more aware of their rights to participation and basic services, as well as evaluate the performance of Governorate Councils to address citizens’ needs. Implemented by the Um-Alyateem Foundation, the project will train Governorate Councils in good governance and transparency, public policy and communication. A network of more than 20 civil society organizations will attend Governorate Council sessions regularly to monitor their performance. The results will be disseminated through a website and public reports.
Democracy in Action III: A Youth Parliament in Tajikistan

An UNDEF-financed project works to build confidence in democracy among Tajik youth near the Afghan border by creating a Youth Parliament. The project produces plans and implements practical activities through a small grants mechanism to meet the needs of disenfranchised youth from ethnic minorities in the Kuhistoni Badakshon province. Youth Parliament members share plans with Government, advocate changes in government policy and monitor implementation. A recent youth parliament meeting in the city of Khorog was dedicated to building photography and video skills as a tool to empower youth, addressing topics such as youth issues, healthy lifestyle and environmental protection. The project is implemented by the Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia.

Democracy in Action IV: Women take a public stand in Paraguay

UNDEF funds a project in Paraguay to strengthen women’s grassroots organizations, train women in leadership and political processes, and enable them to interact with government. Implemented by Sociedad de Estudios Rurales y Cultura Popular, the project also broadcasts radio programmes to give women experience in public speaking; holds forums to bring women together with political candidates and elected officials; engages local governments to hold participatory budget meetings and public hearings about plans and performance; and holds workshops with local officials on gender in local development.
Democracy in Action V: Developing democracy through community radio in Cameroon

An UNDEF-funded project in Cameroon works to promote a culture of democratic practices among young people, and to transform community radio into an effective tool towards this end. It gives rural, marginalized people an opportunity to make their voices heard and to participate in discussions, decisions and actions that affect their collective well-being. Implemented by Change Communications, a local civil society group, the project held training seminars for journalists in July 2013 on how to use radio specifically to advance democratic and civic awareness in rural communities. Establishing consistent programming of this type as a matter of best practice, and ensuring increasingly wide participation, is expected to build a sustainable model for democratic participation.

For more information:
www.un.org/democracyfund
www.facebook.com/UNDEF.undemocracyfund
Contact: savill@un.org
DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The values of freedom, respect for human rights and the principle of holding periodic and genuine elections by universal suffrage are essential elements of democracy. In turn, democracy provides the natural environment for the protection and effective realization of human rights. These values are embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and further developed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which enshrines a host of political rights and civil liberties underpinning meaningful democracies.

The link between democracy and human rights is captured in article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

"[t]he will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures."

The rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and subsequent human rights instruments covering group rights (e.g. indigenous peoples, minorities, people with disabilities) are equally essential for democracy as they ensure inclusivity for all groups, including equality and equity regarding access to civil and political rights.

For several years, the UN General Assembly and the former Commission on Human Rights endeavored to draw on international human rights instruments to promote a common understanding of the principles, norms, standards and values that are the basis of democracy, with a view to guiding Member States in developing domestic democratic traditions and institutions, and in meeting their commitments to human rights, democracy and development.

This led to the articulation of several landmark resolutions of the former Commission on Human Rights.
In 2000, the Commission recommended a series of important legislative, institutional and practical measures to consolidate democracy (resolution 2000/47); and in 2002, the Commission declared the following as essential elements of democracy:

- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- Freedom of association
- Freedom of expression and opinion
- Access to power and its exercise in accordance with the rule of law
- The holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and by secret ballot as the expression of the will of the people
- A pluralistic system of political parties and organizations
- The separation of powers
- The independence of the judiciary
- Transparency and accountability in public administration
- Free, independent and pluralistic media

In 2007, the Secretary-General’s Policy Committee, the highest decision-making body within the UN Secretariat, requested the development of an Organization-wide strategy that further defines the UN’s approach to supporting democracy, anchored in the three pillars of the UN’s work, namely, peace and security, development, and human rights. The Secretary-General tasked the Democracy Working Group of the Executive Committee on Peace and Security — established in May 2007 — to ensure regular follow-up on the issue of democracy and, more specifically, on strategy development.

**Addressing democracy deficits**

Democracy deficits, weak institutions and poor leadership are among the main challenges to the effective realization of human rights. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) seek to address these challenges through their advisory services and technical cooperation programmes, which focus on strengthening the legal framework for human rights promotion and protection (institutional and legal reform); capacity building; empowering vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of society; advocacy, awareness raising and human rights education.

**Promoting democratic governance**

Democratic governance, as supported by the United Nations emphasizes the role of individuals and peoples — all of them, without any exclusion — in shaping their human growth and the human development of societies. But individuals can only make such contributions when their individual potential is unleashed through the enjoyment of human rights.

---

ii Commission on Human Rights resolution 2002/46
In 2011, UNDP helped more than 130 countries and devoted US$1.5 billion\(^{ii}\) in resources to democratic governance, making UNDP the world’s largest provider of democratic governance assistance. UNDP supports one in three parliaments in the developing world and an election every two weeks. UNDP also works to foster partnerships and share ways to promote participation, accountability and effectiveness at all levels, aiming to build effective and capable states that are accountable and transparent, inclusive and responsive — from elections to participation of women and the poor.

OHCHR promotes democratic governance by providing sustained support to democratic institutions, including national actors and institutions involved in the administration of justice; enhancing the capacity of parliamentarians to engage in human rights protection, supporting civil society and facilitating electoral and constitution building processes.

**Supporting transitional democracies**

Recent popular uprisings across the Arab region were led by youth, women, and men from all social strata and are opening greater space for civic engagement in decision making. The calls for transformational change are a popular cry for choice, participation, transparency and respect for people’s legitimate quest for democratic space. These events have reaffirmed the pivotal importance of democratic governance as a system premised on inclusion, participation, non-discrimination and accountability.

In transitional democracies and countries emerging from conflict, OHCHR collaborates with national governments and other actors to confront the past in order to rebuild public confidence and restore peace and the rule of law. With a focus on combating impunity, OHCHR has actively supported transitional justice programmes in more than 20 countries around the world over the past decade. Its support includes ensuring that human rights and transitional justice considerations are reflected in peace agreements; engaging in the design and implementation of inclusive national consultations on transitional justice mechanisms; supporting the establishment of truth-seeking processes, judicial accountability mechanisms, and reparations programmes; and enhancing institutional reform.

---

\(^{ii}\) Total spending tabulated as of June 2012
Guiding national and regional efforts
Two expert seminars organized by OHCHR in 2002 and 2005 shed light on the main challenges to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, including:

- Deepening poverty
- Threats to human security
- The infringements of individual rights and impediments to the enjoyment of fundamental freedoms
- Erosions of the rule of law in contexts such as counter-terrorism
- Illegal occupation involving the use of force
- The escalation of armed conflicts
- Unequal access to justice by disadvantaged groups
- Impunity

The reports of these seminars stand as a guide for developing national and regional frameworks and strategies for the realization of democracy as a holistic concept based on a strict adherence to human rights and the principles of the rule of law.

Moreover, OHCHR has published a compilation of relevant documents and texts, which serves as a reference and analytical tool for constitution-making, the revision/drafting of national legislations and strategies to consolidate human rights and democratic foundations.

More recently, in March 2012, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution titled “Human rights, democracy and the rule of law,” which reaffirmed that democracy, development and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms were interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The Council called upon States to make continuous efforts to strengthen the rule of law and promote democracy through a wide range of measures. It also requested the OHCHR, in consultation with States, national human rights institutions, civil society, relevant intergovernmental bodies and international organizations, to draft a study on challenges, lessons learned and best practices in securing democracy and the rule of law from a human rights perspective.

OHCHR also works to underline the close relationship between human rights and democracy within the United Nations system. In collaboration with the UN Department of Political Affairs and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), OHCHR

---

v The Compilation of documents and texts adopted and used by various intergovernmental, international, regional and sub-regional organizations aimed at promoting and consolidating democracy is available at http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/compilation_democracy/index.htm.
vi A/HRC/RES/19/36, adopted on 23 March 2012
vii The study is to be presented to the Human Rights Council at its twenty-second session.
organized a ‘Round Table on Democracy and Human Rights’ in New York in 2011. The round table discussed democracy movements and their characteristics in a number of States, including those involved in the Arab Spring. It underlined the importance of working with regional and sub-regional organizations when dealing with unconstitutional changes of Government, and when promoting democratic movements and democracies more generally.

OHCHR also seeks to partner with intergovernmental democracy-promoting organizations such as l’Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and regional intergovernmental organizations. In addition, the Office provides dedicated support to the UN Democracy Fund, advising the decision making process on programme funding criteria and on project proposals.

For more information:

OHCHR Geneva, Tel: +41 (0) 22 928 9787 or visit: www.ohchr.org
UNDP New York, Tel: +1 (212) 906 5377 or visit: www.undp.org
WOMEN AND DEMOCRACY

Women have always had a strong stake in democracy. Democracy requires that citizens’ interests be heard, deliberated and legislated on. Women are half of the world’s population, and as such their voice should be heard in the democratic process. Democracy needs women in order to be truly democratic, and women need democracy if they are to change the systems and laws that preclude them, and preclude societies as a whole, from attaining equality.

It is through democratic representation that women’s interests can be represented and their voices heard. Article 7 in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) reiterates the importance of women’s representation in the political life of their countries:

“…ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:
(a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
(b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government”

The role of women in democratic processes is further emphasized in the 2011 General Assembly resolution on Women’s Political Participation (A/RES/66/130), which reaffirms “that the active participation of women, on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision-making is essential to the achievement of equality, sustainable development, peace and democracy”.

Despite these normative advances, and as universal as these goals are, they nevertheless remain elusive for many women. Progress has been too slow in increasing numbers of women in representative office – they still average less than one in five parliamentarians and are also poorly represented in local decision-making bodies, whether as mayors or local council members.
Women are still under-represented in elected positions and most countries are far from reaching the 30 per cent critical mass proposed by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. Political institutions – from political parties to electoral commissions - often lack the capacity to ensure that women’s interests are articulated and addressed in public policy. Accountability institutions are not consistent in ensuring that power-holders answer to women for failures to protect women’s rights or respond to their needs.

In post-conflict settings the lack of access for women to democratic institutions and democratic process is most evident. Security Council resolution 1325 calls on Member States to increase the representation of women at all decision making levels. In response, the United Nations Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support intervene to facilitate women’s participation in political processes and women’s inclusion in governance structures in the countries where peacekeeping operations are deployed.

**Four Key Practices for Women’s Effective Political Participation**

1. **Make both local and national elections free and fair for women.**
   Promote temporary special measures such as quotas, waivers of nomination fees, access to public media, access to public resources, and sanctions on non-complying political parties, to increase women’s participation as both elected and appointed decision-makers in public institutions. Work on voter registration in order to enable women to exercise their democratic right. Take measures to address the factors (violence against women, lack of childcare, gender-biased media reporting, non-transparent political party practices, lack of campaign financing) preventing women from participating in politics by working with Electoral Management Bodies and political parties.

2. **Support women’s civil society organizations to advance women’s interests.**
   Provide assistance to develop collective policy agendas, for instance, through Women’s Charters or by holding National Conventions of Women. Women share priorities that cut across any differences they may have – these shared priorities may be about their right to hold office or their access to improved health care and child care. It is important for women to coordinate, create coalitions, work together and ensure common messages during times of change. Provide capacity building and skills development training to promote advocacy and communication skills, as well as internal organizational capacities of women’s groups and movements.

3. **Build accountability for women’s rights in public institutions.**
   Ensure that constitutional revision processes consider the impact of the design of political, judicial and other public institutions on women’s participation and the exercise of their social, political and economic rights. Constitutional revisions should ensure harmonization with international standards on women’s rights. Work on electoral law reform to ensure that provisions are fair for women. Promote accountability mechanisms and governance reforms that address women’s needs such as
gender responsive service delivery, access to justice, budgeting and access to information. Ensure that accountability processes are in place, through which public authorities answer for their performance on national commitments on gender equality and women’s rights.

4. Support women political leaders to expand their influence.
Support skills and capacity development for both candidates and elected leaders. This support involves both training in terms of skills (parliamentary debate and language, advocacy) as well as content skills on gender mainstreaming, international gender equality commitments and strategies that can be of use. Support also entails advocating for mechanisms such as women’s parliamentary caucuses or women’s networks within civil service institutions, as well as creating governmental mechanisms that have the mandate, capacities and position in government to be an effective policy advocate for women’s interests.

What the UN is Doing – Recent Successes

Morocco: The Movement on Parity, assisted by UN Women, became a powerful voice for women during constitutional reforms. As a result, the new constitution enshrines gender equality, opening the door for a new law doubling the number of parliamentary seats reserved for women. In the most recent national elections, all political party platforms made commitments to gender equality, and the number of women in parliament surged from 10 per cent to 17 per cent.

Colombia: Partnering with women from civil society and government leaders, UN Women helped to successfully advocate for the adoption of a 30 per cent quota for women candidates in national elections. To engage the broader public, an ad campaign drove home the message that “democracy without women is incomplete.”

El Salvador: Through its Fund for Gender Equality, UN Women helped to mobilize women from 22 advocacy groups, parliament and the supreme court around a law making public institutions more gender responsive. It passed, mandating the integration of gender-specific considerations in all public policies, among other measures. The success of the Parliamentary Women’s Group in advocating the bill’s passage led to official recognition, entitling it to representation on all legislative commissions, and making it the first parliamentary group to operate across party lines.

Kenya: After Kenya’s 2010 constitution guaranteed gender equality and the use of affirmative action, UN Women backed a gender audit of a draft Political Parties Bill to see if principles were translating into practice. The Interim Independent Electoral Commission subsequently adopted recommendations to make the bill more gender responsive. When it passed into law, it stipulated that the registration of political parties depends on having no more than two-thirds of any gender in their governing bodies. Another provision requires filling vacant seats in the legislature with people of the same gender.
**Egypt:** At a critical point in Egypt’s political transition, UN Women helped to establish the first Egyptian Feminist Union, comprising 500 women’s groups who advocate with a unified voice, and the Egyptian Coalition for Civic Education and Women’s Participation, which serves as an election watchdog. More than 500,000 people from 27 governorates have signed a national charter highlighting women’s aspirations for the future of their country. In partnership with UN Women, the Government is implementing the ‘Women’s Citizenship’ initiative to issue ID cards to 2 million women who need them to vote and access public services.

**Albania:** UN Women helped to involve more than 2,000 people, 90 per cent of whom were women, in developing community-based scorecards to assess whether or not local services meet women’s needs. Women’s advocates used the findings to lobby political candidates during municipal elections, announcing that women would not vote unless candidates responded to their concerns. Political parties listened, incorporating commitments to gender equality in their platforms. Several newly elected mayors signed pledges to use scorecard findings as a guide for planning public services.

**In United Nations peacekeeping:** There has been significant, and in most cases increased, participation of women as voters and as candidates in elections as a result of the efforts of UN peacekeeping missions to integrate a gender dimension into electoral processes and to ensure the safety of female voters and candidates.

For example, in **Côte d’Ivoire**, with support from the UN peacekeeping mission (ONUCI), 52 per cent of women were enrolled as voters during the 2011 legislative elections, compared with less than 40 per cent in the 2000-2001 legislative process. And, for the first time, there was a higher turnout of women than men voters in an electoral process. However, the female representation in the national assembly, which grew from 8 per cent in 2001 to 10.58 per cent in 2012, still remains relatively low.

In **Haiti**, the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSTAH) organized election-related workshops of which 70 per cent of participants were women. The aim of these workshops was to advance the level of women’s participation in leadership positions and increase awareness of women’s full participation in decision-making at all levels. As a result of the training and support provided by UN peacekeepers, women’s rights organizations who actively engaged in the political process are better equipped to undertake lobbying and advocacy for political equality.
Timor-Leste: in the first round of the presidential elections held in March 2012, 50 per cent of registered voters were women (up from 47 per cent in 2007). The UN peacekeeping mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) worked with female political representatives through a platform established for women in order to support their equal participation in the electoral process. UNMIT also co-chairs the ‘Women’s Political Participation Action Group’ which coordinates the efforts of the political wing of the mission and of other members of the United Nations Country Team.

For more information, please see:
www.unwomen.org