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Guide to best practice in increasing women's, youth and minority participation and representation

During the 2014 ALN General Assembly in Marrakech, 87 delegates from 46 political parties across 23 African countries held panel discussions and breakaway sessions, in which they discussed practical measures and examples from their respective countries, to increase women's, youth and minority participation and representation. This best practice guide was developed through collating the ideas put forward during the ALN GA, as well as further desk research on issues raised by the delegates in Marrakech.

A liberal approach

The key founding ideological principle of liberalism is promoting equality, opportunity, respect and tolerance for all individuals, regardless of race, colour, nationality, ethnic origin, religion, age, gender, sexuality or disability. Therefore a commitment to promoting participation and representation for women, youth and minorities should be a central policy for all liberal political parties.

What is a minority?

There is an ongoing debate around which groups should be referred to as 'minorities', depending on whether it is a reference to a minority in terms of proportion of the population or political representation. People may be defined as a minority in terms of their ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, groups which are often minorities in terms of both population and representation.

Women are sometimes included in the 'minorities' section, despite making up 50% of the population, because female representation in government is typically much lower (18% in the USA, 23% in the UK, 17% in Morocco). However, some claim that it is unhelpful to refer to women as a 'minority group', arguing that it is misleading.

Quotas

Quotas are often presented as the silver bullet which can transform women's, youth and minority representation. However, while there have been some successes, quotas often do

not address the underlying causes of under-representation and low political participation by these groups.

Morocco has a 30% female quota, and Article 19 of the new constitution of 2011 gives men and women equal status before the law. Women in Morocco have succeeded in becoming mayors and ministers, and 17% of MPs are women. However, allowing women to run as candidates is not enough. Political parties don't sufficiently promote or support female candidates, partly because they find it more difficult to secure financial backing.

Women's low participation in politics in Morocco stems from a lack of employment opportunities and money. The first step towards achieving an increase in female representation and participation in politics is improving the education and health systems and creating employment, training and entrepreneurship opportunities for women. Beyond this, the government needs to put sanctions on political parties which do not meet or implement the female quota.

Ultimately, motivating change is more effective than trying to impose change. Quotas may be part of the solution, but it is also important to address the root-causes of low women's, youth and minority representation. On their own, quotas only produce superficial results.

Extending representation helps win seats and elections

The best way of persuading political parties to become more representative, whether through adopting and implementing quotas or a diversity outreach policy, is by showing them that it is in their own interest. Excluding a section of the population holds political parties back in being able to win votes among these groups. Women make up 50% of the population, half the electorate. A key step towards winning votes from women is having female representation within your party.

Promoting women, youth and minority candidates

Women, youth and minority party candidates and officials often have different needs and may require more support from within their party, for example in the area of financial backing. As part of promoting female candidates, it is important to have male champions to stand beside them, as in the UN Women campaign 'He for She'. The major hurdle is to become elected for the first time. Once they are voted in, candidates have the benefit of incumbency.

From local to national level

In many political parties, women's, youth and minority representation is higher at local or municipal level than at national level. While working as a local councillor allows minority candidates to gain experience, it is vital that political parties also support minority candidates at the higher level.

Youth programmes

It has become a cliché to say ‘the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow’. However, reaching out to the youth is essential for political parties to maintain and grow in membership, fundraising and long-term stability. Securing votes from youth depends on having youth representatives in the party. In this sense, it is in the interests of political parties to extend youth participation and representation.

An example of how this can be done is the Young Leaders Programme (YLP) in South Africa. Founded by the Democratic Alliance in 2007, the YLP selects the best candidates from across South Africa has to offer, and trains them in the necessary political and leadership skills to one day lead the party and the country. A youth programme such as this will not deliver an immediate, visible change, but over the years, graduates of the YLP have gone on to work as councillors, party officers and youth representatives. This is a model of youth programme which could be replicated in other countries.

Scholarships

Another way that governments and political parties can assist in extending women’s, youth and minority participation is through funding scholarships. Women, youth and minorities often have a lower income, and fewer contacts in the political field, which holds them back in pursuing a career in politics. Scholarships help to break this vicious circle, and enable candidates to gain first-hand experience.

Context specificity

Programmes to increase women’s, youth and minority representation cannot be rolled out in countries across entire continents in a uniform fashion. The success of the YLP in South Africa has relied on being able to build the programme around the specific context of South Africa. For a project to succeed, it must be adapted to suit the cultural context of the country involved.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR ACTION

In order to increase women’s, youth and minority representation, a political party can take the following practical steps for action:

1. Encourage and enable women, youth and minorities to become involved in your party through creating structures such as a women’s group or youth forum, where they can be politically active. Ensure that groups and forums such as these are well-integrated into the party.
2. Create volunteering opportunities for people from all backgrounds, and make use of volunteer support during election campaigns.

3. Actively identify up and coming women, youth and minority leaders in the party and pair them with an experienced leader in the party who can assist them through monthly mentoring meetings over the course of 1 year.
4. Identify successful women, youth and minority leaders and councillors at local level and provide them with support and training to encourage them to stand at national or parliamentary level.
5. Initiate a debate within the party to discuss possible usage of quotas for female, youth or minority candidates on party shortlists.
6. Ensure that female candidates receive support and endorsement from their male counterparts.
7. Set aside a pool of funds specifically to be used for funding the campaigns of women, youth and minority candidates.
8. Introduce a scholarship scheme for people from under-privileged backgrounds to work for the party and gain experience.
9. Research methods used by other political parties to increase women's, youth and minority representation e.g. Young Leaders Programme in South Africa.
10. Make use of resources available:
 - UN Women He for She action kit:
http://az668017.vo.msecnd.net/sitestorage/dist/content/uploads/2014/08/HeForShe_ActionKit_English.pdf
 - NDI guide to promoting women's political participation:
<http://www.africaliberalnetwork.org/portfolio-posts/734/>