

# The House Democracy Partnership at Ten Years: Findings and Considerations

## Summary

### Overview

The House Democracy Partnership (HDP) brings together the U.S. House of Representatives with parliaments in emerging democracies to help strengthen legislatures using a peer-to-peer model. Established on March 14, 2005, the partnership is a bipartisan, twenty-member commission of the U.S. House of Representatives that works directly with legislatures and parliaments in 17 partner countries around the world to support the development of effective, independent, and responsive legislative institutions. HDP is the indirect successor to the Frost-Solomon Task Force, which assisted the parliaments of 10 new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe from 1990 to 1996. HDP uses peer-to-peer exchange programs, training seminars for members and staff, and targeted material assistance to build capacity in key areas such as legislative oversight, budget analysis, committee operations, constituent relations, and library and research services. Activities include Washington-based visitor programs for Members of Parliament (MP), training for legislative staff, regional or in-country workshops, technical consultancies, and material assistance.

Since its creation over a decade ago, the House Democracy Partnership (HDP) has contributed to the institutional development of legislatures in 17 partner countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Georgia, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Lebanon, Macedonia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Peru, Timor-Leste and Ukraine. Over this period, HDP has conducted 35 inbound programs, bringing more than 800 members of parliament (MPs) and legislative staff to the United States. Through funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), these inbound programs have been primarily implemented by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic

### General Findings

- HDP and legislative strengthening, is an important component in building and ensuring democratic stability.
- HDP assistance is greatly valued by partner countries.
- HDP provides an important complement to on-the-ground legislative strengthening efforts.
- Greater flexibility and continued evolution of the HDP model will further strengthen impact.

Institute (NDI). Inbound HDP programs were complemented by approximately 25 outbound HDP Congressional delegations (CODELs) to HDP partner countries over the same period, in addition to a number of technical assistance consultancies, which have been conducted in the partner legislatures to provide additional in-depth, tailored assistance.

## Considerations

- Approach HDP membership with greater flexibility.
- Explore additional types of partnership with HDP countries.
- Develop long-term solution for HDP staffing.
- Expand range of HDP activities.
- Embrace new technologies in increase engagement.
- Improve opportunities for skills transfer with peers.

To mark HDP’s 10th anniversary year, a series of retrospective assessment missions were conducted to capture the impact of HDP to date, chart its evolution, and inform future programming. Each assessment team included U.S. Congressional staff members (and in two cases, a former congressman and a former Congressional staff member), as well as staff from NDI and IRI. Over a two- to three-day period in each country, assessment teams met with partner parliamentarians and staff and alumni, as well as stakeholders including representatives of the international community, media, civil society, and historically marginalized groups. In total, assessment teams visited 13 partner countries and two “observer” or potential partner countries—Nepal and Tunisia. A list of current and former Congressional representatives and staff that joined technical staff on the assessment missions is attached as Appendix A.

In addition to gathering information about the impact of the HDP program, the retrospective assessments provided an opportunity for additional engagement between HDP partner and observer countries during the year. The findings from this assessment underscored the continued importance of HDP, documented its evolution and impact over the past decade, and suggested a number of opportunities for future programming.

## General Findings

### **Legislative strengthening is an important component in building and ensuring democratic stability.**

HDP operates in a world that is undergoing profound and rapid change. The pace of this change poses challenges even in the most established democracies, but particularly so in new, restored, or consolidating democracies. Citizens in many parts of the world expect their elected representatives to be increasingly responsive and transparent, and to deliver outcomes at a rapid pace. The assessment teams heard from members and staff in partner legislatures about the challenges of building and maintaining public confidence in the legislative institution, as well as the challenges presented by the

rise of social media, social protest movements, and fractious political environments. In a number of HDP partner countries, political corruption presents a significant challenge to continued democratic development as well as public trust. Common issues raised by interviewees during the assessment missions included low levels of citizen trust in parliament, frustration with what is viewed as endemic corruption and institutions that are insufficiently responsive to citizen concerns, and the perception of weak legislative autonomy vis-à-vis the executive.

### **HDP assistance is valued by partner countries and provides an important complement to on-the-ground legislative strengthening efforts.**

The relationship with HDP is valued by all partner countries visited as part of the assessment missions—so much so that several legislatures (including, for example, Colombia, Kenya, and Kosovo) have expressed willingness to contribute their own resources to send additional members and staff to participate in HDP programs. HDP has played an important role with respect to both legislative development and inter-parliamentary diplomacy. Although HDP membership is welcomed in all partner countries, the level of engagement varies based on several factors, including the political situation or democratic political will of partner countries. The assessment teams did not visit Lebanon (currently inactive due to challenges of the in-country political environment), Afghanistan or Iraq (where security concerns and issues in securing visas made coordinating an assessment mission in these countries administratively impossible), or Haiti (where this year saw the dissolution of parliament and highly contested elections). The peer-to-peer aspect of HDP is particularly valued by past HDP participants, along with its bipartisan nature. The extremely high level of bipartisanship within HDP was particularly striking to many participants, against more widespread perceptions of political polarization in the U.S. Congress. As one past HDP participant noted, “[since participating in the exchange], we’ve looked for more ways to engage politicians from across the divide in areas where our interests can converge.”

The United States has traditionally been among the largest providers of assistance for legislative strengthening globally. Congressional engagement by members and staff complements this assistance and adds substantially to the effectiveness of legislative strengthening programs. Direct coordination between HDP and in-country legislative strengthening programs—where in-country programs exist—has been helpful to HDP in identifying the strongest program partners, in targeting windows of opportunity for legislative reform, and most importantly, in ensuring maximum sustainability of the lessons learned during HDP interventions through ongoing direct support to partners. Direct coordination has also been helpful to on-the-ground assistance programs by reinforcing messages about specific legislative reform goals with legislative leadership, helping to empower reform-minded actors in these institutions, and providing direct Congressional peer-to-peer support on those issues.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Congress has recognized the importance of parliamentary strengthening and the importance of coordination between HDP and USAID legislative strengthening programming in language included in the annual state and foreign operations appropriations bill. The FY2016 State and Foreign Operations Report notes “concerns about USAID decreasing legislative strengthening programs in emerging and transitioning democracies. The Committee directs the USAID Administrator to support legislative strengthening programs in those countries where the House Democracy Partnership is engaged in an active program.”

**Greater flexibility and continued evolution of the “traditional HDP model” will further strengthen the impact of HDP assistance.**

HDP has evolved greatly over the course of the past 10 years—a fact appreciated by many of the individuals with whom the assessment teams met. HDP started its life as the House Democracy Assistance Commission—which put partner legislatures in the posture of being recipients of assistance, rather than of joint partners working together with the U.S. Congress to strengthen democracy. Partners appreciated the change of name to the House Democracy Partnership and the relationship it signified; several suggested that they would welcome continued evolution from assistance to partnership. For example, a regional HDP training event was convened in partnership with the Estonian Riigikogu in August 2016—a parliament that benefited from HDP’s predecessor, the Frost-Solomon Task Force, which provided Congressional support to new parliaments in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union from 1990 to 1996. HDP plans on jointly hosting a regional program in Jakarta, in partnership with the Indonesian House of Representatives, in early 2017.

Over its first decade, HDP exposed large numbers of members and staff from a very diverse set of partner country legislatures to the U.S. Congressional model. Looking forward, this report highlights a number of ways in which HDP may wish to tailor the program model to meet the identified needs of its partner countries and to better accommodate the diversity of its partner countries. The report also suggests reviewing membership criteria, which may lead to a more flexible method of engaging with partner countries. For example, HDP has begun to explore the use of “observer status” as a way of preliminarily engaging with some legislatures before inviting them to be formal partners. While it may not make sense to dissolve partnerships with current members, HDP has informally placed countries on “inactive status” and it is suggested that this practice continue.

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