**Executive Summary**

NIMD appointed Global Partners Governance in partnership with Alina Rocha Menocal of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to conduct a Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the Dialogue for Stability (DfS) programme in March 2018. The purpose of the MTR is to assess the extent to which the DfS is contributing towards its stated objective of fostering inclusive and legitimate political processes in fragile settings in five focus countries: Burundi, Colombia, Jordan, Tunisia and Ukraine. Beyond seeking to provide an assessment of progress within the programme so far, the Terms of Reference (ToRs) also sought to draw out lessons that can inform NIMD’s reflections on how it currently works and how it can become more effective. As such, the Review had a particular focus on strategic questions around how NIMD can improve its organisational knowledge, as well as its fundraising and positioning in the democracy/political party strengthening field.

This focus on the strategic lessons has shaped the structure of the report. The Review has 9 sections. The first two sections cover the original terms of reference and describe the methodology. Section 3 examines the broader context for political party assistance and assesses where NIMD sits in that field. Sections 4 and 5 look at the principles underpinning NIMD’s work, and how it is applied in practice, assessing NIMD’s theory of change and its use of political analysis. Section 6 provides a detailed assessment of the key results with respects to relevance, effectiveness and efficiency at mid-term. The last substantive part of the report, sections 7 and 8, examines the knowledge development aspect of DfS and the organisation’s fundraising and positioning work. There is a short concluding section which reflects on what the preceding analysis means for NIMD’s strategic direction.

## Methodology

This assessment of the DfS programme is based on an extensive desk-based review of documents that NIMD shared with the team as part of the MTR process. The team produced an inception report that was presented in NIMD headquarters in The Hague, where the review team also carried out interviews with relevant staff involved with DfS. As part of this work, the reviewers also conducted in-country visits to Burundi and Tunisia[[1]](#footnote-2), and a limited number of remote interviews for Jordan, Ukraine and Colombia. The MTR also benefitted from findings emerging from an Outcome Harvesting exercise that NIMD commissioned separately in Tunisia (where the fieldwork for both the Outcome Harvesting and the MTR coincided) and Colombia.

## Main Findings

The evidence emerging from the research conducted for this MTR suggests that, on the whole, the DfS programme and related interventions in the different countries are working in line with expectations, and likely to achieve most of the anticipated results. Progress has been consistent across the board in terms of reaching out to young political leaders in particular, especially women. The programme is at different stages of implementation in each country, and encountering different sorts of political challenges, but this review reinforces earlier assessments (two of the people involved in the MTR have worked with NIMD in the past and know the organisation well) that NIMD is an organisation that has an instinctively political and adaptive approach to party assistance. Building on the ability of programme teams, and often the skills of individuals within those teams, NIMD tends to work in ways that are more flexible and responsive to country contexts and the needs of interlocutors, and to avoiding many of the pitfalls of traditional democracy assistance.

From the reviewers’ assessment, the principal strategic challenge for DfS, and for NIMD as an organisation, is to find a way of distilling the key elements of that approach and sharing the lessons that emerge, for both internal and external purposes. Through its programme work over the past 20 years, NIMD sits on an impressive amount of information and evidence, but it does not appear to be drawing on or utilising this expertise in a routine way in order to inform its approach, or to distinguish itself from other implementers operating in the same space.

The organisation has three strategic challenges that flow from this:

* The first is to **deepen its knowledge base by drawing out the expertise and experience from programme teams**, particularly in relation to the political management of projects. In other words, the process of building knowledge has to start from the inside out.
* Second, **develop a ‘playbook approach’** towards efforts to distil that knowledge and turn it into publications. Rather than aiming to produce prescriptive toolkits on what to do and how, NIMD should focus on setting out the distinctive characteristics of its approach, built around experiences, examples and anecdotes that allow NIMD staff to interpret and use them as guidance, and not blueprints, to navigate their specific political contexts and identify their own ways forward.
* Third, **build NIMD’s strategy, positioning and messaging on the basis of those internal strengths**, derived from the organisation’s track record and its political experience. This is where we believe NIMD is most able to distinguish its work from others working in the field of political party assistance.

## NIMD’s Theory of Change

While NIMD’s theory of change provides the organisation with a broad strategy for engaging with political change in different environments, our review points to tensions in the way that the ToC is understood and applied. NIMD should be seeking to use its programme experience more systematically as a way of testing, informing, and refining that central theory.

First, NIMD’s central theory is based on a compelling argument about the links between political inclusion and state legitimacy. However, it should be wary of over-claiming causal linkages embedded in the assumptions that anchor the ToC. A theory of change is just that, a *theory*, and as such it needs to be constantly tested and refined. And this process of testing and reflection between the ToC and the programme is not one-way: the ToC should inform the delivery of the programme, but equally, the delivery of the programme should inform the ToC. This iterative process is what enables testing, learning, and adaptation.

Second, staff across the organisation do not have the same understanding of what a Theory of Change is for, or how it should be used. Harnessing a more collective and shared understanding can be instrumental to foster cross-institutional learning and feedback loops. Thus, NIMD should seek the opportunity to reflect on the content, logic and underlying assumptions within country-level ToCs, which may serve as a basis from which KSR staff can engage with other programme managers to explore the ways in which the different ToCs inform and integrate with each other and how they evolve over time. This would not only help to improve the robustness of those ToCs, but also help to:

a) build links between the work of KSR and programme teams;

b) provide useful insights for all NIMD staff as to the operationalisation, testing and refining of the ToCs; and

c) generate an organisation-wide sense of what the ToCs are for, and how they should be used.

Third, flexibility and adaptiveness are critical to NIMD’s success. Clearly, it is important to have a common understanding of what NIMD is/should be doing, and how it operates as an organisation. Yet, it is also essential not to over-specify the contents of the ToC and how the ToC should be used, which is in line with how NIMD and DfS have been operating until now. This is critical to ensure that NIMD keeps to its central purpose, which is to encourage more strategic and thoughtful responses to complex political environments. Over-burdening the ToC may have the unintended effect of turning into a rigid tool or even straight-jacket that makes it more difficult to work in flexible and adaptive ways.

## Political Economy Analysis

The way DfS works across countries clearly shows that NIMD (and its partners) understands and engages with politics. This ability to think in politically informed ways tends to be instinctive and intuitive. This is in many ways a considerable advantage, as those involved in DfS have innate political skills, rather than seeing and treating PEA as one-off, isolated exercises. However, the way PEA is done differs considerably across the organisation. Often, it relies on key individuals within the programmes to provide that political guidance which makes. This combination of an individualised approach that lacks a shared structure across NIMD and its partners makes it difficult to develop a common analytical framework to understand and assess the political context and related challenges as well as to share insights that emerge from that analysis more difficult.

The organisation would thus benefit from looking more closely at the way in which country programmes approach political analysis: what are the different methods being used, why are they used, and what can NIMD and partners learn from this variety of techniques? A few different observations evolve from this:

First, we commend NIMD for its efforts in developing its own PEA approach. Early iterations bear a considerable resemblance to those that have been or are being developed by other organisations, and whilst it is important to draw in work already in the field, NIMD should be aiming to develop a distinctive approach to PEA which draws more directly from its staff’s experience and its programme expertise. It should also make a more purposeful effort to build institutional memory around working in ways that are politically savvy, drawing on the experiences and examples of programmes in the wide variety of countries in which NIMD has worked.

Second, political economy analysis needs to be understood less as an exercise in laying the stones that pave a clear path on the way forward, and more about giving staff the navigation and orienteering skills to find the most suitable route within a constantly shifting environment. The focus for NIMD in building a PEA approach should be drawing on the skills and experiences of programme managers and other relevant stakeholders. Again, using examples and anecdotes from country programmes as part of a political analysis training exercise, possibly led by KSR staff, could be the basis to identify, nurture and encourage such skills as guidance rather than blueprints.

Third, thinking politically and working politically are not the same thing. Although a political analysis provides a useful basis from which to work, translating analytical insights into practical advice and operational implications for programme delivery remains a considerable challenge in international development. A crucial component to working politically is to understand the different incentives and interests at play and facilitate and broker spaces of discussion, dialogue and engagement among relevant actors where those conflicting interests can be aligned towards achieving common strategic goals. This again is an underlying logic of how NIMD seeks to work and engage in-country.

## Results of the DfS Country Programmes

As mentioned above, given the variety of contexts in which the five DfS country programmes operate, and the fact that some programmes (notably Jordan and Ukraine) have only recently started implementation, our review suggests that the programme results to date are in line with expectations, especially for Tunisia and Burundi, which are the two countries where we were able to explore DfS interventions in more detail. The results observed at mid-term are mostly related to the implementation of activities rather than the outcomes of these activities, but this is consistent with the PMEL framework which governs the programme. There are clear logical pathways connecting the programme system, actor and culture level changes to the desired programme objectives but, as we mention in the section on ToC, these will need to be refined and developed in the next year in order to provide a useful basis from which to operationalise the programmes.

In terms of the relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency criteria:

### Relevance

The programmes are grounded in a thorough understanding of the political context, and the preparation that precedes NIMD’s work in such environments means that the organisation has made considerable efforts to foster local buy-in and get traction for such initiatives to deliver outcomes. Working in particular with young political leaders, especially women, NIMD have established a clear niche in strengthening the quality of political parties and their effect on democratic governance in new and developing democracies through a comprehensive approach that seeks to foster inclusive and representative political systems, especially through multiparty dialogue, improve the organisational and programmatic capacity of political parties, and strengthen democratic culture and values. The DfS programme follows NIMD’s approach targeting interventions at system, actor, and political culture levels, but tailors them the challenges specific to FCAS environments. Most of the people we spoke with as part of this review agree that these interventions are highly relevant to the different contexts in which they are implemented and have the potential to contribute to the outcomes outlined in the DfS TOC, as well as to NIMD’s organisational objectives more broadly. Whilst the themes and target audiences of these interventions vary across the five focus countries, NIMD is remarkably consistent in its implementation of these three core activities in ways that are highly attuned and responsive to realities on the ground.

### Effectiveness

Overall, each of the country programmes is making significant progress in achieving different results in contexts that are varied and throw up different challenges. DfS interventions have gotten considerable traction in terms of their focus on young men and especially women. Importantly, some of the programmes, especially in settings that seem to have found a modicum of stability (e.g. Colombia, Tunisia), are further ahead than others being implemented in contexts that remain much more volatile (e.g. Burundi). Some interventions also seem to be more effective than others, and in general our assessment from our research and observations on the ground is that efforts towards i) supporting a more inclusive political party system through dialogue and ii) fostering democratic culture and values are generating greater impact than those intended to iii) support the organisational and programmatic capacity of political parties. In summary:

#### Burundi

NIMD’s overarching accomplishment has been to create and preserve a ‘political space’ for dialogue and engagement across political divides. This platform may be one of the few – if not the only one remaining in Burundi – in which political opinions can (at least to some extent) be exchanged and different parties can interact. This space is clearly highly valued by political party members, including the governing party, and since the breakdown of formal interparty talks sponsored by the international community it represents perhaps the sole route by which conflict resolution can take place. A related achievement to which NIMD contributed substantially is the fact that the recent referendum campaign on constitutional amendments was not boycotted by the opposition parties and passed off peacefully. Both participants and external observers clearly believed that this was a direct consequence of NIMD/BLTP’s work with parties on embedding non-violent communication as a principle and promoting constructive political party engagement rather than boycotts[[2]](#footnote-3).

#### Colombia

NIMD were the only Dutch NGO given a specific role in the Technical Secretariat to help with the implementation of the Peace Agreement that the Government of Colombia signed with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in 2017. This is a remarkable achievement that illustrates the kind of trust and recognition that NIMD has been able to build across the political spectrum, and its work, alongside other organisations, towards creating enabling conditions for peace.

#### Jordan

The major accomplishment of the DfS in Jordan to date has been the establishment of the Jordan School of Politics and the training of 109 political actors on democratic values, knowledge of political systems and political skills. The programme made considerable efforts to recruit participants from a range of backgrounds and as a result, 50% of participants in the first cohort were women and 40% were youth members of political parties. This is the first time a project of this scale with a bespoke curriculum targeted at young political actors has ever been implemented in Jordan. However, since this intervention only began relatively recently, it is too early to assess the impact of the School of Politics.

#### Tunisia

NIMD and DEMO Finland’s partnership on the Tunisia School of Politics and the multi-party dialogue platform has helped to create important and highly valued spaces that bring together actors from across the political spectrum in ways that are much more grounded in mutual respect and growing trust. Many of the young people who have attended the TSoP, especially women, have gone on to work in politics and run for office at different levels. It will be interesting to see whether the different alumni who now occupy political positions are able to continue to bridge divides across parties and work more collaboratively in the remaining implementation – and beyond.

#### Ukraine

The Ukraine programme have held a number of debates, roundtables and developed policy proposals in its first year, though the most significant accomplishment to date has been the establishment of Democracy Schools in Odessa and Lviv, two areas with higher levels of interparty conflict. Since their launch, the schools have offered high quality political education to participants and have become important platforms for fostering tolerance and diversity. The Ukraine programme have also specifically targeted interventions at women aimed at helping female politicians to be more effective campaign fundraisers.

#### Relationship between intermediate results and programme outcomes

The intermediate results are at a level to be expected at the halfway point of implementation. This is not to diminish DfS’ accomplishments, as the fact NIMD have been able to implement interventions in the five countries at all should be regarded as a success. However, the intermediate indicators are overwhelmingly quantitative measures of activities implemented and the number of target groups reached. Whilst these indicators are useful for programme monitoring, they are of limited use in understanding the impacts of interventions or whether they are contributing to the desired outcome level changes that we expect to see by the end of the programme. NIMD are clearly aware of the challenges of evaluating their work and should be commended for their willingness to experiment with innovative methodologies for demonstrating plausible contribution to desired outcomes. However, to date, these have been ‘standalone’ processes not integrated into the wider PMEL work. Integrating qualitative and innovative methodologies for assessing causal claims for complex interventions now will make it much easier for NIMD to build robust case studies demonstrating the contributions interventions have made to observed outcomes at the end of the programme.

### Efficiency

The application of traditional efficiency indicators to the types of interventions implemented under DfS is notoriously difficult due to the challenges associated with identifying tangible outcomes and assessing plausible contribution. These inherent challenges are further exacerbated by the difficulties faced when implementing politically smart and contextually relevant interventions in FCAS settings. As such, it is difficult to make robust claims about the efficiency of DfS at mid-term. However, despite these limitations, based on interviews with key members of the Finance and Support (F&S) team and an analysis of DfS’ financial management documents, the review team are satisfied NIMD are adhering to high standards of financial accountability.

The programme is currently operating at a considerable underspent due to changes in the political contexts which have made it hard to implement interventions as planned in some of the focus countries. NIMD have developed pragmatic approaches to adapt to the contextual changes, though the review team have identified some risks to NIMD and DfS programme outcomes if the underspend continues. The fact that the DfS programme is achieving its intermediate results in such challenging environments despite a considerable underspend suggests the programme is operating in a relatively efficient manner. NIMD have been extraordinarily successful in leveraging the DfS country programmes for additional donor funding. For both these reasons, the DfS programme continues to represent a good ‘investment’ for the MFA.

## Strategic Lessons from DfS Country Programmes

The overview of programme results across the five countries highlights the complexity and variety of settings within which NIMD operate. In such complex political contexts s, generating progress requires time and effort – and it is essential to recognise that progress may be related to *process* as much as, if not more so than, to more tangible *outcomes*, especially within the timeframes involved. While the political environments in which DfS operates are very different, we suggest tentative conclusions about the way in which the programme and NIMD are making a positive contribution, and the factors that are shaping that progress.

In general, DfS efforts intended towards the party system and democratic culture and values, especially through the multi-party dialogue platforms and the Democracy Schools, have achieved considerably more progress than initiatives aimed at the political actor, namely strengthening the organisational structure and strategic planning capacities of political parties. Below we focus on three points to explain why this might be.

First, based on a unique methodology that emphasises not only skills- and capacity-building but much more importantly intensive interactions among young people across political divides to foster connections among them based on mutual respect and trust, the Democracy Schools appear to be tapping and addressing a local need and demand in ways that efforts carried out by other organisations have not managed to. The NIMD programmes have been skilful in connecting that latent interest to the contents and substance of the Democracy Schools, including an explicit focus on gender and the centrality of women’s political empowerment. Although the data reported against the indicators for political culture change is, at best, inconclusive, both the field visits in Burundi and Tunisia and narrative reports demonstrate how valuable the experience of the democracy schools has been in instilling an appreciation for essential democratic values like tolerance, dialogue across differences, and recognition of others as legitimate political actors. This process has enabled increased collaboration between political rivals. Although the number of students who have successfully completed the Democracy Schools training is not necessarily a useful indicator of improved democratic awareness, the way in which participants have valued their experience going through the schools suggests how formative it can be. Many of the young men and women who go through the schools remain engaged with the alumni networks afterwards (the Colombia programme for example reported that 46% of their alumni were actively participating in the network). A significant number of democracy school alumni – and women in particular – have also remained engaged in politics and have even run for office.

Second, the progress that DfS has achieved in pioneering dialogue platforms and fostering interparty dialogue in environments that are complex and sensitive builds in considerable ways on what NIMD and partners have been able to achieve through the Democracy Schools. The experience and track record of the Schools (e.g. in Tunisia, Colombia and Burundi) have helped NIMD and partners to establish themselves as credible and trusted actors across the political spectrum, and that has given them considerable convening power.

Third, DfS initiatives intended to support the “political actor” plank of the ToC seem to be less unique. Among other things, the kind of support provided seems to fall more in line with traditional capacity building efforts, without necessarily seeking to develop a more deeply rooted understanding of why it is that political parties function the way they do, what are the incentives, interests and constraints that drive them, and what this may imply for how the DfS programme might support them more effectively. So, unlike the other areas of DfS/NIMD engagement, which seem to be firmly grounded in a political appreciation of the setting in question, the package of support intended to strengthen political parties as actors is less innovative and politically savvy. As such, it is also less clear to identify NIMD’s distinct contribution, and NIMD’s work in this area appears to local stakeholders to be remarkably similar to support being offered by other international organisations. Perhaps because of this, efforts targeted at the “political actor” component of the ToC also do not seem to connect closely enough with the implementation or logic of the other aspects of NIMD’s work.

## Knowledge and Innovation

The creation of the Knowledge and Strategic Relations team is an important part of NIMD’s development. While its early period has been difficult, its original brief to deepen NIMD’s knowledge base, invest in staff and innovate in the field is still pertinent. However, there remains a degree of uncertainty within NIMD about its role and purpose. We believe that this position can be relatively easily clarified, but that work must start from the inside out.

We believe that in the next phase of its life, KSR should focus on understanding what the country programmes are doing, how they are doing it, and what that says about the distinctiveness of the NIMD model. This initiative cannot be undertaken by KSR alone, and will require the active involvement of programme staff, but will, we believe, strengthen the organisation as a whole around consolidating its distinctive approach. There are four stages to this process.

First, a strategic overview of all of NIMD’s projects which starts by asking programme managers about the most politically sensitive issues with which they have dealt and how they have navigated the politics in such environments.

Second, whereas the first stage would be focused on each country programme in isolation, the second phase would seek to engage all of the country programmes in a discussion as to what these insights tell the organisation about its ways of working, its strengths and its weaknesses, and seeking to create a common internal understanding about the distinctive features of NIMD’s approach.

Third, distilling those insights into products and publications for internal consumption. One option which may be useful to NIMD staff, and used by GPG in some of its projects, is to develop the equivalent of a ‘playbook’, which provides short descriptions of techniques and innovations used in different countries. Over time, the playbook becomes a repository for best practice across the organisation.

Fourth, using that evidence as the basis for external positioning. It is the ability to connect the practical experience of delivering projects, and an analysis of global trends mean for the management of political projects that will set NIMD apart from its competitors.

## Fundraising and positioning

NIMD has invested significant resources internally to improve the way that it approaches its fundraising and positioning. However, most of these analyses focus on the “how?” rather than the “why?” They are undoubtedly useful in improving NIMD’s internal processes, and describe how NIMD can become more effective and efficient in running projects, but NIMD’s long-term future will depend on how well it positions itself within the wider market place.

First, undertake a market analysis and establish a business plan. NIMD’s fundraising and positioning strategy should be based on a detailed understanding of the market, and where they fit within it. It should also seek to get a better understanding of funder expectations, and then seek to match what NIMD does to some of the problems that funders think are the most pressing.

Second, use the market analysis to clarify NIMD’s niche. Clarifying that niche will mean connecting what NIMD does, with a compelling argument as to why donors should fund NIMD to do it.

Third, develop a positioning strategy from that niche. NIMD’s public and promotional events should all be seeking to reinforce certain key messages about what NIMD does, and why it matters.

Fourth, develop an approach built around political acumen. The increased interest amongst donors for more politically forms of programming means that they are searching for programme implementers that understand and engage with the political process. NIMD should be positioning itself as one of the few organisations that has evidence that it can think and work politically.

The increasing international interest in working politically brings opportunities for NIMD, and it could use its experience to bend the market towards the sorts of skills that NIMD has. In other words, it has enough experience and evidence to influence the way that funding agencies are thinking about such issues, provided it can harness that information in the first place.

## Conclusions

It is evident that NIMD has an effective model and is good at managing political programmes in a range of difficult political environments. The Dialogue for Stability programme, for the most part, reinforces that impression, showing evidence of both building on NIMD’s track record and experience, as well as being able to innovate and adapt according to a changing political context.

We pointed out, at various points during the review, that a lot of this success depended on the skills of individual staff, be that in providing political analysis, engaging with the incentives at work, and adapting programme activities in response to their interpretation of events. We recognise that NIMD is eager to develop some central guidelines to ensure consistency and quality across programmes, but this should not be at the expense of that local activity. Any guidelines should not act as a rigid process to be followed, but rather as offering insights, guidance and advice.

The central point we would make is that any attempt to distil NIMD’s method of work should start from the inside. The weakness of NIMD’s reliance on the skills of individual staff and their ability to manage politics is that this knowledge is ephemeral, and exists largely in the heads of those staff. NIMD should be seeking to build up its bank of knowledge and institutional memory in how to manage political programmes, by asking those programme staff about their experiences. It is in the anecdotes and examples they have that resides the institutional memory and a form of practical expertise in how to operationalise political management of programmes.

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1. The DfS programme in Tunisia is jointly funded and managed by NIMD and DEMO Finland. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. While it is always difficult to directly attribute impacts like this, it was the consensus of several different sources that BLTP/NIMD should be credited with this achievement, not least because there have been few, if any other actors in this space in recent years. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)