

## INTRODUCTION

The environment in which elections are held and electoral assistance takes place is in dramatic flux, exacerbating existing challenges to holding credible elections and introducing new, dynamic risks to electoral integrity. This technical note, provides evidence-based guidance to Sida to assess and implement electoral assistance. It introduces the Electoral Cycle Approach and the concepts of electoral assistance. It discusses electoral assistance in practice, with focus on three main areas of support: election management bodies; media and the information environment; and civil society and election observation. It also discusses lessons learned, the changing contexts and risks and provides opportunities for Sida's engagement. In an annex it provides examples of Sida's experiences and key actors and resources for electoral assistance.<sup>1</sup>

## WHY ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE?

To support the conduct of free and fair elections is to support the human right of every citizen to take part in the conduct of public affairs as voters or as candidates for elections. This is stipulated in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In conformity with ICCPR, elections must be conducted fairly and freely on a periodic basis within a framework of laws guaranteeing the effective exercise of voting rights.<sup>2</sup> Complementing this human rights based motivation for electoral assistance is a more development-based reason. A report of the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) on the effectiveness of electoral assistance makes the following points:

*“electoral assistance is meant to support democratic development by strengthening key institutions, supporting a viable environment for participation and ensuring the legitimacy of an incoming government. Ideally, this facilitates other development objectives such as health and economic progress, meets the democratic aspirations of citizens, and enables national and regional stability. For these reasons, electoral assistance has been an integral part of international development and foreign policy”<sup>3</sup>*

The report points out that there are limits to what electoral assistance can achieve: it “cannot heal deep societal rifts, change the status of women in society,

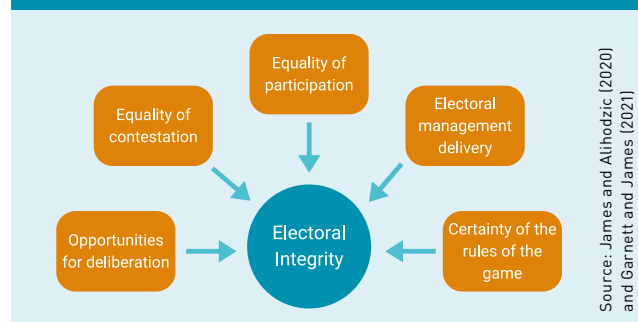
or bring democracy where it is absent”.<sup>4</sup> Electoral assistance can, however, enable, inspire, inform, or support ecosystems and infrastructures to protect credible and inclusive democratic processes. Changes in the geopolitical landscape and the increase in authoritarian governments and groups, increased risks for crises and conflicts as well as the opportunities and challenges of digitalisation calls for an up-date of norms and principles for electoral assistance to take into account the need to protect the electoral process.

The capacity, confidence and commitment of domestic actors and institutions to ensure well-run elections is key to ensuring a democratic transition or maintaining democratic governance over time. As the EBA report says, ‘while elections as events may be, and often are, imperfect processes – the more widespread an understanding and acceptance of what a fair and well-run election looks and feels like – the more difficult to avoid a demand and expectation’ of fair and well-run elections.

## ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

Critical to the role of electoral assistance is supporting electoral integrity, which can be understood as *“the realization of principles in the conduct of elections that are necessary to support the broader realization of democratic ideals”*.<sup>5</sup> Or as V-Dem Institute phrases it *“electoral integrity refers to the fairness of the entire voting process and how well the process protects against election subversion, voter suppression, and other threats to free and fair elections”*.<sup>6</sup> Electoral integrity is not just about elections in and of themselves, it's about how well elections contribute to broader democratic goals; a well-run election only advances democracy if it is widely perceived to be well-run: by experts, by politicians, and most importantly by citizens.

### Box 1: Key principles of electoral integrity



#### Examples of principles and guidelines for electoral assistance published in 2024:

Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity (GNSEI) Principles for Electoral Reform Processes (October 2024)

USAID Guiding Principles for Electoral Reform Processes (USAID November 2024)

Model Commitments for Advancing Credible Elections (The Carter Center, International IDEA, IFES, NDI, Kofi Annan Foundation September 2024)

Defending Information Integrity: Actions for Election Stakeholders; Action Coalition for Information Integrity in Election (UNDP March 2024)

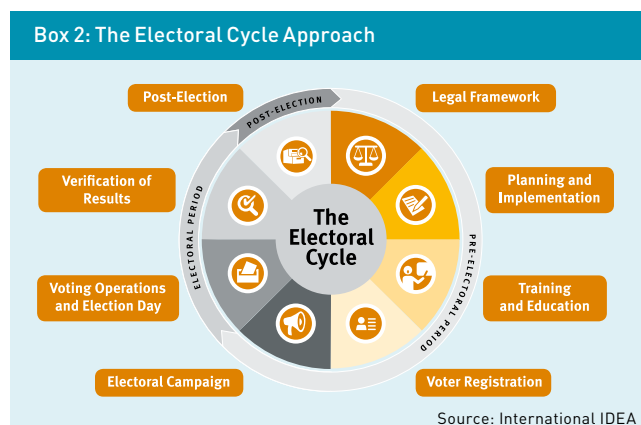
Development Co-operation Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment (OECD March 2024)

Recent examples of global events or shifts with profound impact on electoral conduct are shifts in election technologies, extreme weather, war and risk of political violence, large-scale movements of people, epidemics, destabilizing narratives in the online environment and the deliberate undermining of electoral institutions. Women and men have different opportunities to contribute to electoral processes, where women often face structural barriers to political participation, for example in running for office.

## THE ELECTORAL CYCLE APPROACH

The electoral cycle approach serves as a global touchstone for election, election observation and electoral assistance programming. It serves as a practical policy influencing tool designed to move away from the short-term event focus that dominated early interventions. The electoral cycle approach (see box 2) expanded the electoral assistance remit to include a wide range of systems, processes and behaviours such as the capacity of electoral management bodies, legal framework design, and inclusive participation. It is now a common practice that assessments must consider the entire election cycle in determining what constitutes a credible election.

A wide range of tools and resources accompany the electoral cycle approach and inform programming.



The Curriculum on Strengthening Electoral Assistance developed by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) uses the electoral cycle as the anchor for participants to explore options and programming ideas. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) implementation guides emphasise the importance of lessons learned and evaluations in the post-election period of the electoral cycle. The BRIDGE curriculum and course package has taught the electoral cycle approach to thousands of election officials and stakeholders of 200 nationalities. The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network has long served as the premier unifying source of information and knowledge resources for all parts of the electoral cycle.

## ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE IN PRACTICE: SUPPORT TO ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES

Electoral management bodies are typically responsible for registering those eligible to vote in an election, processing nominations of candidates, conducting polling and counting and tabulating votes. Several of these tasks are logistically challenging and complex, not least in less developed countries, many of which are Sida's partner countries. To reach all adult citizens, including women, men and non-binary, however remote, demands recruitment of thousands of temporary workers.

Electoral management bodies may also regulate and monitor campaign financing. All of the tasks potentially have political implications (for example efforts to register particular demographics, or decisions not to accept a candidate). This combination of challenging logistics and political consequences has always meant that electoral management bodies are under particular scrutiny. The advance of social media has amplified that scrutiny in ways that threaten electoral trust. Electoral management bodies capacity to handle digital threats, cybersecurity risks, the spread of mis- and disinformation and the need for digital literacy form part of the new electoral assistance landscape.

Electoral violence is a challenge across the world. It can take many forms, from intimidation to physical violence including all forms of gender-based violence, often aimed to influence the behavior of voters, candidates and election officials.<sup>7</sup>

Increasingly, support for electoral management bodies is about raising their legitimacy, autonomy and confidence to withstand political pressure and efforts to undermine their functioning or credibility, whether deliberate or not. Challenges to the autonomy of electoral management bodies and public trust in institutions can manifest in many ways. For instance, candidates can allege that an electoral management body is biased against them, an incumbent government can exert undue pressure by withholding

funding, or elections workers can be subjected to harassment and threats. When electoral management bodies demonstrate visible competence and independence, public trust is boosted and the risk of a disputed result is lessened.<sup>8</sup>

Electoral assistance funding is typically readily available during an election year and through ‘emergency’ requests for short-term assistance. Well-designed electoral management bodies-focussed electoral assistance projects are ideally long-term rather than event-oriented. They include investment in the capacity and conduct of electoral management bodies to deliver trusted elections over time, and in the face of difficult and ever-changing contexts. This people-anchored approach can include professional development schemes with the upgrading of skillsets and recruitment practices, entrenching of risk management habits, and facilitating inter-agency cooperation.

#### Box 3: Examples of methods to support independence of electoral management bodies

1. Publicly and privately reinforce and support electoral management bodies acting independently and in good faith in the face of significant political pressure.
2. Provide support for local partners as they advocate for legal and institutional reforms that strengthen electoral management bodies’ independence and protect electoral integrity.
3. Facilitate knowledge exchange and learning among electoral management bodies facing similar challenges to their independence and/or electoral management bodies that have successfully guarded their independence against similar threats in the past, including by supporting international, regional, and national associations of election officials.
4. Conduct rigorous needs assessments to understand electoral management bodies challenges and threats to independence, including those posed by malign transnational actors, the political economy of an election context, and any potential harms posed by international support and engagement to inform technical assistance objectives, investments, and program design.
5. Provide direct technical assistance to electoral management bodies to build capacity to administer credible election processes and withstand threats to their independence, convene and engage in deliberative, constructive, and meaningful multi-stakeholder processes, and improve strategic communication with election stakeholders.
6. Highlight threats to electoral management bodies’ independence, including threats due to the involvement of other public institutions in different parts of the electoral process, in election observation mission methodologies, reports, and public statements.
7. Support academic and other institutions that provide degree and certification programs in election administration to foster professional independence.

Source: The Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity – Guidelines for Safeguarding Electoral Management Body Independence

### WHAT CAN SIDA DO?

#### Support to electoral management bodies and other institutions

- Long-term and flexible support to global development actors promoting and supporting free and fair elections.
- Support to the strengthening the integrity of electoral management bodies and protection against malign information influence and disinformation.
- Support to strengthen digital and physical security for all individuals, organisations and institutions working with elections, with consideration to challenges for women and groups in vulnerable situations
- Support to regional organisations and networks working to strengthen institutions working for and with free and fair elections
- Coordinate efforts with the Swedish resource base

### ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE IN PRACTICE: SUPPORT TO THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Pressing issues in the information environment include declining trust and increasing frustration about electoral processes. This is fuelled and exacerbated by narratives spread through digital platforms. If coordinated and/or algorithmically amplified, narratives of ‘fraud’ can disrupt the orderly transfer of power and incite violence.

Because of potential threats to societal stability and regional security, and the imperative to mitigate the harms of abuse of these platforms puts regulating the online environment at the top of the policy agenda. Election management bodies worldwide are noting an unprecedented level of public scrutiny pushing previously ‘under-the-radar’ election operations to centre stage. A viral picture of someone carrying a ballot box can fuel a narrative disproportional to or disconnected from reality.

#### Information integrity

Information integrity refers to the accuracy, consistency and reliability of information. It is under threat from disinformation, misinformation, hate speech and more.

United Nation Global Principles for Information Integrity (June 2024)

The necessary implication for electoral assistance is to shift focus from processes that ensure the accuracy of the results towards initiatives that focus on trusting the electoral process and accepting the result. This can mean, for example, performative or ‘radical’ transparency whereby every step of a process is shown and tracked. Supporting this transformation means supporting public consultations and information sessions, multi-stakeholder working groups, while attending to and rapidly responding to online narratives. Examples of preventative measures against attacks on electoral processes include

pre-emptive correct information ('pre-bunking'), fact-checking services, situation awareness (evidence-gathering) activities and civic education initiatives to promote media literacy and critical thinking skills.<sup>9</sup> Media platforms play a role in mitigating the risks to election information integrity, in cooperation with election management bodies, information integrity institutions and civil society.

### WHAT CAN SIDA DO?

#### **Strengthening and protection of information integrity, including increased resilience against foreign malign information influence and other mis- and disinformation**

- Support to organisations working for innovative solutions, methods and technical standards for a free, open and secure internet as well as to prevent and mitigate internet shut downs.
- Support efforts to thwart threats and violence online and offline, with particular attention to all forms of Gender Based Violence and violence against groups in vulnerable situations.
- Support to methods and technical solutions that support information integrity, such as content verification, fact checking and constructive use of machine learning and AI.
- Support to training and education initiatives in media- and information literacy.
- Support to platforms for networking and multistakeholder dialogue.

Traditional media support remains relevant. Media safeguard democratic principles and practices by holding relevant authorities accountable and informing public discourse. This role presupposes a news media that adheres to established journalistic ethics and is committed to a high standard of truthful and factual reporting. Electoral systems and processes are not always intuitively easy to understand; superficial journalism that amplifies and gives weight to misleading narratives about an election underway can cause profound damage by undermining trust. Conversely, an informed, experienced and articulate journalist can help guide citizens to a more nuanced understanding of the issues at play. Independent journalists can scrutinise efforts to unduly influence the electoral process; this is work that is not always safe.

### WHAT CAN SIDA DO?

#### **Promoting free and independent media**

- To promote the notion that objective and relevant information, journalism and debate is accessible at national and local levels throughout the election cycle.
- Emphasise and enhance support to media as a component in electoral assistance, including support for safety and security of journalists, with particular attention to challenges faced by women.
- Support investigative journalism for increased transparency and accountability as well as corruption reporting in relation to elections.

This role of a 'trusted third party' can be particularly important in ensuring a peaceful outcome if, for example, an election result is likely to be close (between two leading candidates), delayed or contested. A healthy working relationship between election authorities and leading journalists, built over time by transparent and consistent information sharing and careful explanations of decisions, helps to ensure that when a 'scandal' does arise, the coverage is proportionate and correct, thus hopefully mitigating the risks of escalation, confusion or violence. This speaks to electoral support that

- encourages early trust-building between media, watchdog civil society organisations and authorities towards a shared understanding of the processes,
- promotes the availability of factual and relevant information, journalism and debate at national and local levels throughout the election cycle through a diversity of media, where independent media are also able to operate freely,
- pays particular attention to support for, and the safety of, journalists in conflict and post-conflict environments.<sup>10</sup>

The area of regulating disinformation is an area where the risks are extremely high. Well-intended regulation against disinformation can, in the hands of an over-enthusiastic election authority or government, be weaponized against anyone who says anything about electoral processes. For these reasons, statutes against disinformation must be context-specific and align with human rights standards and principles. In some circumstances, draconian content moderation laws provide an avenue for current leaders to imprison opposing candidates and suppress digital rights; alternatively, regulations that are too narrow quickly lose relevance as practices and behaviours change. Disinformation and false narratives transcend borders, necessitating greater sharing of information and cooperation. Multi-stakeholder and informed discussions are imperative before implementing new reforms, in order to create a sense of shared purpose and willingness to cooperate. Similarly, codes of conduct can build shared understanding between political parties around norms for election campaigns, such as acceptable uses of artificial intelligence. All this can preferably be promoted and supported in electoral assistance programmes that include action against disinformation: greater sharing of information, multi-stakeholder discussions and codes of conduct.

### **ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE IN PRACTICE: SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND OBSERVATION**

There is a heightened recognition of the importance of independent civil society engagement, whether it is fact-checking and debunking disinformation,

conducting get-out-the-vote campaigns, or advocating for electoral reform on behalf of women or groups in vulnerable situations. A broader electoral assistance support for civil society engagement across the electoral cycle recognizes the role civil society organisations can play in promoting social cohesion, and building trust between parties or with the electoral management body.

Engaged civil society organisations can promote and evaluate the availability of information on various aspects, for example where and how to register to vote, the roles of institutions, and principles such as the secrecy of the ballot. Accurate and non-partisan voter education provided by civil society organisations can help to counter disinformation and strengthen public trust in the integrity of elections. Election observation, both international and domestic, provides an opportunity to scrutinise an electoral process with the outcome of offering advice for electoral reform while building trust among voters and candidates. These community-level functions take on particular importance in conflict and post-conflict environments where trust-building is paramount.

Guidelines and a corresponding code of conduct outlining what constitutes good practice for domestic election observation organisations were developed and endorsed in 2010 by nine principal local election observation organisations<sup>11</sup> through the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations. These global principles followed the endorsement by similar Guidelines and code of conduct for international election observation organisations in 2005, through the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation. Several international election observation organisations, for example the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA), have been instrumental in supporting the establishment and capacity enhancement of local election observers. The Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM) facilitates and improves the critical work of citizen election monitors throughout the world. Domestic observers provide unrivalled knowledge of local conditions, long-term engagement and cost-effectiveness.

### WHAT CAN SIDA DO?

#### Strengthening local election observation

- Support capacity building, especially outside the larger cities, of local actors, often civil society organisations, that engage in local election monitoring.
- To more systematically make use of the observations and recommendations of election monitoring in analyses and assessments of electoral assistance as well as in the political dialogue on country level.

Effective support to domestic civil society organisations for conducting voter education campaigns, advocacy or election observation relies on an enabling environment for civil society to operate. Electoral assistance in this area can include support to election observation methodology development, election observation tools development and related capacity development. Examples of this include parallel vote tabulation processes and efforts, data analysis and reporting, media monitoring mechanisms and training, and technical expertise on specialized topics such as political finance and electoral management. Recognising the rise and risks of unexpected events and disinformation, electoral assistance can build connectivity between electoral management bodies and civil society to amplify and convey correct and trustworthy information to voters.

An international election observation mission is initiated when a country is planning to hold elections and invites international governmental or non-governmental organisations to observe the voting process (for example AU, OAS, ASEAN, EU, OSCE, EISA, the Carter Center). If an international governmental organization accepts the invitation, the contributing states of the organization will be requested to deploy personnel to the election observation mission to be held. The Swedish mandate to support international observations is managed by Folke Bernadotte Akademin (FBA). They train Swedish personnel, and second and deploy them to international election observation missions.

### LESSONS LEARNED

A review of over 80 policy and practice documents revealed a consolidated set of broadly agreed electoral assistance principles as listed in box 4. Their implementation in practice has proven difficult for all involved actors. Key obstacles identified included: competing motives and objectives for electoral assistance stakeholders, inadequate implementation methods, funding lines not fit for purpose and an un conducive environment due to lack of genuine political will for necessary reforms.

Examples and reasons for poorly executed electoral assistance include untimely disbursement of funds, procurement or recruitment delays that impact delivery and adherence to the electoral calendar, and the abandonment of projects post-election that stymies the continuity necessary for institution-building over time. Electoral assistance straddles multiple communities including development, diplomatic, security, and technical cohorts. Interaction and communication between these actors is hampered at times, due to for example competing geo-political interests. This in turn hinders important knowledge sharing and efficient implementation of various interventions.

#### Box 4: Electoral Assistance (EA) Principles (EBA Report)

##### Project Related

Local ownership and Empowerment  
Electoral Cycle Approach  
Participation of women  
Inclusion of marginalized groups  
Risk management  
Multi-level action  
Linkages with election observation  
Monitoring and evaluation

##### Context Related

Context-awareness  
Coordination with diplomatic efforts  
Harmonization and alignment  
Addressing democratic weaknesses  
Role of regional organizations  
Responding to flawed elections  
Timing and sequencing of EA

Communication channels and adaptive modalities continue to be increasingly important, because of the rapid changes in global and national environments in which elections are managed and supported. The reality of democratic backsliding and the different conditions for democracy mean that a standardized approach to electoral assistance is unhelpful and potentially risky. Electoral assistance programming in local contexts requires flexible and responsive approaches. To respond effectively to rapid changes in local contexts, adaptive frameworks and functional relationships must be in place. Since these are built over time, it speaks to the importance of long-term electoral cycle programming.

Regional-level support, meanwhile, allows for context and language sensitivity and can be a wise alternative for long-term capacity-building investments, while avoiding the risks of engagement where there is democratic backsliding (see box 5).

#### Box 5: The 2021 EBA Report on Electoral Assistance

The Report on the Principles and Practice of Electoral Assistance by the Expert Group on Aid Studies (EBA, see [www.eba.se](http://www.eba.se)) maps norms and insights from the development community and electoral assistance practitioners over the decades, and consolidates community of practice views how best to respond to new challenge such as the effects of new technologies, the role of money in politics, attacks on the credibility of elections, and trends towards autocratization.

##### The report recommends:

- Revising election assistance guidelines and practice in favour of responsive, context-sensitive and long-term oriented electoral assistance
- Investing in regional initiatives that foster professional cohorts and institutional resilience to withstand domestic political pressures
- Revitalizing arenas for international cooperation and global norms building to address contemporary challenges and democratic backsliding.

Framing programming at the supra-national level as long-term oriented and based on professional development at the outset improves the accuracy and efficiency of information and communication and professionalism of various cohorts, while also

providing networking opportunities and support systems for individuals that in turn can help with morale and personal security during difficult times.

#### CHANGING CONTEXT AND NEW RISKS FOR ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

As the challenges to holding credible elections are evolving, so must the ways that elections are supported. The emerging electoral management challenges are about how to resist political pressure, adapt to rapid onset crises, and transform to meet new realities of digitalization and demography. Well-designed electoral assistance programs need to meet these challenges in the short, medium and long term. Projects must be risk-aware (political, technical, security, financial, reputational) without being risk-averse.

Storms, bushfires, flash floods, and disease outbreaks are unpredictable, create impossible working conditions for frontline temporary election workers. They can cause legal and political quandaries regarding postponement, and alongside the increasing likelihood of extreme heat on election day, have a disproportionate impact on political rights of women and groups in vulnerable situations. The dramatic increase in flash flooding is more likely to disenfranchise a rural mother than an urban office worker. Similarly, a rise in online and public election-related frustration tends to target female candidates and officials more personally and aggressively than men. It may also risk making the polling centre feel unsafe for visible minorities and traditionally marginalised groups.

Special voter arrangements such as provisions for voting by mail or by proxy can help ensure that the voting rights of groups in vulnerable situations are protected. Such arrangements can also help extend voting rights to other groups such as refugees, internally displaced people and the incarcerated. However, any voting which takes place outside of the controlled environment of a conventional polling station comes with risks to electoral integrity, making elections more complex and expensive to deliver and secure, and more vulnerable to conspiracy theories and accusations of fraud.

Donors need to navigate competing narratives about the credibility of elections. Elections need 'legitimacy' to achieve the desired outcome of a political transition. Mistakes will happen in an election, decisions may be misunderstood, and 'losers' may likely be unhappy with some aspect of election rules or conduct. These incidents or narratives – amplified in social media, and potentially weaponized for political gain – make the ability to sensibly differentiate between an isolated incident and systemic fraud more important than ever. Quiet diplomacy tasks for the international community can include advocating for calm and encouraging candidates to accept an electoral loss peacefully and gracefully.

To create order in competing narratives, some key organisations have compiled a set of 'model commitments' to set benchmarks on the types of behaviours and structures that are expected in a credible election. Summarised in Box 6, the full document can be a useful tool to refer to and cite when commenting on electoral processes. These commitments contain commentary for each thematic area that is supported by references to numerous international normative sources, including treaties, political commitments, state practices, and interpretive sources as outlined in the Election Obligations and Standards Handbook<sup>12</sup>.

#### Box 6: Model Commitments for Advancing Genuine and Credible Elections:

- 1. Genuine Elections:** The legal framework, institutions and processes for elections guarantee that there shall be periodic, openly competitive elections that reflect the people's will through universal suffrage. Such elections ensure citizens can freely express themselves and guarantees the peaceful transition of power
- 2. Legal Framework:** Legal structures must protect voters' election-related rights and protect them from discrimination, as well as provide effective remedies for violations affecting voters, candidates, political parties, authorities, campaigners, journalists, and observers.
- 3. Election Administration:** Electoral Management Bodies must be politically neutral, administratively independent, professionally effective, and transparently appointed
- 4. Electoral Accountability:** Legal provisions should ensure public availability and documentation of decisions made by electoral management bodies, courts law enforcement and other government agencies, providing timely resolutions and the possibility of appeals
- 5. Information Integrity:** Laws and regulations should protect the freedom to seek and share credible election-related information, address disinformation, and ensure access to accurate information, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated content
- 6. International Engagement:** Government agencies should engage in international and regional efforts to promote democratic norms and credible elections, facilitating learning and experience-sharing to tackle issues related to cybersecurity, foreign threats to information integrity, and illicit financial flows.

There are examples of electoral assistance causing more harm than good, such as through unsustainable design choices, insufficient funding, inappropriate technology or delayed procurement that jeopardises electoral conduct.<sup>13</sup> Supporting electoral processes in countries where authoritarian tendencies are prevalent can have unintended consequences such as entrenching incumbent advantage or putting democracy practitioners in danger. Submerged, deep-rooted grievances and societal rifts easily 'emerge' at election time – which can explain why an error or last-minute change can trigger outrage, anger or violence disproportionate to the issue at hand. A mismanaged vote count almost brought Kenya to civil war in 2008 as it sparked a tinderbox of past injustice and land disputes. The risk of agitation or violence increases with high stakes and close election results, unexpected election results, or delayed election results.

For the development community, economic, health and social outcomes hinge on the political stability and policy direction that accepted election results can bring. Meanwhile, the high stakes, volatility and sensitivities explain why the conduct of elections – and by extension electoral assistance – is equally relevant to diplomatic and security communities. Election-related decisions and actions have political consequences. This multiplicity of interests can lead to unhelpful and competing agendas between concerned parties, where, for example, shorter-term geo-stability goals can take precedence over longer-term institution-building programmes. This environment can be challenging for desk officers tasked with an electoral assistance portfolio. 'Normal' development cooperation processes can be tested by the reality of rigid election calendars, court decisions and rapid shifts in socio-political dynamics, where complex decisions on electoral assistance need to be taken within hours rather than weeks or months.

Engaging in electoral assistance thus requires great care in recruitment, choice of partners, mechanisms for quick response cooperation, attentiveness to a country's evolving political, social and institutional context, the level of women's political participation and the ability to recalibrate quickly when needed. It requires informed cooperation, joint analysis mechanisms and higher-level engagement across pillars and between donors. These cooperative habits are increasingly important in light of rapidly changing conditions for the conduct of the elections.

#### WHAT CAN SIDA DO?

##### Strengthening competence and learning in electoral assistance

Strengthen the coordination and cooperation across the political section and the development section at the Embassy level.

Increase exchange and learning across the organisation also in relation to the Swedish resource base.

Increase the presence and engagement in international fora on electoral reform and electoral assistance.

## Endnotes

- 1 This technical note has been produced with the support of Sida's Helpdesk for Democracy and Human Rights, and more precisely with the support of International IDEA, which is part of the helpdesk during 2023-2025.
- 2 General Comment Adopted by the Human Rights Committee under Article 40, Paragraph 4, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 27 August 1966 (from website of the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, ohchr.org)
- 3 Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Report 2021:05, Laanela Pearce, Therese et. al; Supporting Elections Effectively: Principles and Practice of Electoral Assistance, 2021 p. 18.
- 4 Ibid. p. 30
- 5 Election Law Journal, 19(3), James, T. S., & Alihodzic, S., When is it democratic to postpone an election? Elections during natural disasters, COVID-19 and emergency situations, 2020, p. 344-362.
- 6 V-Dem Institute, Göteborg University, Nord, Marina, Juraj Medzihorsky and Staffan I. Lindberg, V-Dem Thematic Report, Democracy's Core Institution – Clean Elections Across the World, 2024.
- 7 V-Dem Institute, Göteborg University, Randahl, David et al., Forecasting Electoral Violence, Working Paper SERIES 2024:150, 2024 p. 3-4.
- 8 International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy 20230, The New Checks and Balances, 2023, p.12-16.
- 9 Lessons learned from the German FFO and International IDEA project on the Protection of the Information Environment in Elections.
- 10 On effective support to media including in electoral processes see [Development Co-operation Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment | OECD](#)
- 11 ANFREL, E-HORN, ENAR, ENEMO, EPDE, GNDEM, RedOIE, SADC ESN, WAEON (see Annex 2)
- 12 The Carter Center, Election Obligations and Standards, A Carter Center Assessment Manual, Second Edition.
- 13 Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Report 2021:05, Laanela Pearce, Therese et. al; Supporting Elections Effectively: Principles and Practice of Electoral Assistance, 2021 p. 54.
- 14 Sida's annual report to the Government 2023 (Sidas årsredovisning), p. 126
- 15 Sida Contribution 13251 Support to National Elections 2021-2024
- 16 Sida Contribution 14828 Carter Center support to LEON 2021-2024
- 17 Sida Contribution 16118, EISA 2023-2025 (ADS V)
- 18 Sida Contribution 14402 IFES 2021-2024
- 19 Sida's annual report to the Government 2023 (Sidas årsredovisning 2023), p. 81.

## ANNEX 1: EXAMPLES OF SIDA'S ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

Sida's work in electoral assistance is broad and long-term with a focus on strengthening the conditions for free and fair elections. Support to safeguard election integrity is crucial, as well as long-term support that develops capacity and that covers the full election cycle.<sup>14</sup>

Sida has through support to the UNDP in recent years contributed to elections in Mali, Liberia, Zambia, Bolivia and in the MENA-region. In Liberia during the 2023 elections, Swedish support enabled UNDP to promote inclusion, with a specific focus on women's political participation in collaboration with UN Women, civic and voter education, capacity development of electoral and democratic institutions, as well as the prevention of electoral violence.<sup>15</sup> The planning began in 2020 and agreements were signed in 2021. As a complement to the cooperation with UNDP, Sida through the Carter Center provided long-term support to the Liberia Elections Observation Network, a civil society organisation that advocated for electoral and constitutional reform and observed and monitored the national elections and by-elections.<sup>16</sup> One component was also support to the media. In addition to partners receiving bilateral support, organisations such as West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) could use core and programme support from the regional Africa strategy to monitor and support the Liberian process, by themselves and through their partners AU and ECOWAS.

In Zimbabwe Sida provides long-term support to the civil society organisation Zimbabwe Election Support Network as well as to the Afrobarometer, a network of researchers, for their analysis of elections. In Mozambique Sida supports an institute for election monitoring and in Somalia Sida supported a private company for administrating local elections.

Sida's previous and current collaboration with EISA enhanced the capabilities of election management bodies across the continent, particularly in post-apartheid and post-conflict countries like South Africa, Mozambique, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The engagement of EISA within the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) led to the drafting of the "Principles for Democratic Elections in ECCAS" with input from civil society, election bodies and regional stakeholders, as well as contributed to ECCAS' ability to conduct election observation through capacity-development workshops for election observers and technical support to pre-election and election missions.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to support on country and regional levels Sida supports international organisations on the global level, such as IFES. In Ukraine, a partner of Sida, IFES<sup>18</sup>, has continued to operate following the full-scale Russian invasion, adapting existing programming to war-time conditions and introducing new initiatives to help Ukraine's Electoral management bodies and civil society to serve internally displaced persons. This includes supporting civil society organizations specializing in working with refugees, and persons with disabilities and providing advice on emergency response and crisis management to election officials and educators.

Moreover, Sida has provided support to free and independent media, census surveys, to political participation of women especially with Sida's support to political parties. Sida has during recent years increased support to organisations that address and work to counter dis- and misinformation and that enhance the use of digital tools to support information integrity and access to information in relation to elections. One example is Sida's support to the organisation Meedan and their fact-checking tool Check Global is used by new rooms, fact-checkers, researchers and civil society organisations across the world.<sup>19</sup>

## ANNEX 2: KEY ACTORS

[ANFREL \(Asian Network for Free Elections\)](#) – The leading organisation in Asia working for the promotion of democratic elections, including election observation.

[The Carter Center](#) – A leader in election observation, The Carter Center has been pivotal in compiling, advocating and upgrading international standards and obligations around electoral processes. The Carter Center is committed to political participation for historically marginalized groups.

[EISA](#) (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa) – aims to support the development of sustainable democracy in Africa by conducting electoral monitoring and observation and providing support to intergovernmental bodies, civil society and electoral management bodies.

[E-HORN](#) (The East and Horn of Africa Election Observers Network)

[Electoral Integrity Project](#) – a network of academics whose aim is to understand how and when elections fail, articulate the problems that result from failed elections (security, accessibility issues and lack of trust in electoral institutions) and brainstorm ways to mitigate such problems using scholarly evidence.

[ENEMO](#) (The European Network of Election Monitoring Organisations)

EPDE (The European Platform for Democratic Elections)

[EU/EEAS](#) – EU Election Observation Missions for missions in countries around the world, with the exception of the regions covered by OSCE. Hosted by the European External Action Service (EEAS).

[Folke Bernadotte Academy](#) – a Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. A focal agency for Swedish applied expertise on security and democracy, and keepers of the Swedish election observation roster, training and engagement with the election observation community.

[GNDEM](#) (Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors) focus on citizen election monitoring.

[International IDEA](#) (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) – provides knowledge, policy recommendations and programming support on sustainable and inclusive electoral processes. Hosts the Global State of Democracy Initiative including the annual report The Global State of Democracy.

[IFES](#) (International Foundation for Electoral Systems) – supports institutions that respond directly to the grievances/requests of their citizens, advocates for all persons have equal access to voting opportunities and helps countries develop sustainable technologies to aid the efficiency of elections.

[IRI](#) (International Republican Institute) – IRI aims to strengthen democracies worldwide through election observations, technical assistance and capacity building for political parties. In Europe in particular the organization has eight field offices to provide local political, governmental and non-governmental support in response to challenges to democracy.

[Kofi Annan Foundation](#) – Geneva-based foundation that maintains capacity for mediation and responsive action where elections are endangered.

[NDI](#) (National Democratic Institute) – active in observing elections for more than 25 years and pivotal in developing the methodology and networks of international and domestic observations. It also emphasizes the role of elections in mobilizing citizen participation and limiting political violence.

[OSCE/ODIHR](#) (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) – collaborations in “conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation”; monitors elections in OSCE member states and provides technical assistance to countries.

[Red OIE](#) (Red de Observación e Integridad Electoral) – The Electoral Integrity Observation Network. A regional network that conducts election observation in Latin America and the Caribbean.

[UNDP / UN – Electoral Assistance Division](#) – with partnerships with over 170 countries and the access that the UN provides, UNDP conducts holistic electoral cycle programming responsive to quickly evolving contexts and vastly different circumstances.

[SADC ESN-SA](#) (The Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa) – a regional organisation working in the area of elections in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

[WAEON](#) (West Africa Election Observers Network) – a regional organisation that aims at strengthening and supporting citizens’ election observation groups in the sub-region.

[WFD](#) (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) – is a public body of the United Kingdom which works with political parties, parliaments and electoral management bodies to build capacity in emerging democracies.

## ANNEX 3: ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE RESOURCES AND INITIATIVES

### *ACE Electoral Knowledge Network*

[The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network](#), a partnership between International IDEA, Elections Canada, INE-Mexico, IFES, UNDP, UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), The Carter Center and EISA offers users access to an impartial encyclopaedia of elections with trustworthy information.

### *BRIDGE Project*

[The BRIDGE Project](#) (Building Resources in Democracy Governance and Elections) is a project to design curriculum and workshops for electoral administrators and practitioners that focus on practical issues rather than the abstract as seen in more traditional lecture formats. As a training tool, BRIDGE focuses on the daily relationships between different tasks for administrators. In collaboration with the Australian Election Commission (AEC), IFES, UNDP, United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and International IDEA, BRIDGE equips electoral administrators with the knowledge necessary to run smooth elections. The Institutional Excellence module is the most recent addition to the BRIDGE Curriculum – uniquely aimed at higher level officials to lead institutional resilience-building.

### *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation (DoP)*

The DoP binds the leading, credible international observation organisations through information-sharing, methodology development, and commitment to upholding stringent standards, as outlined in the DoP founding document. Representatives from the Organisation of American States (OAS), OSCE/ODIHR, the African Union (AU), the European Union External Action Service (EEAS), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Carter Center and others meet annually to share ideas and observations current challenges to elections, norms and methodologies that work best for elections.

### *Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity (GNSEI)*

Convenes leading international electoral support actors to inform and develop action to advance electoral integrity in the face of critical threats to democracy. A broad-based platform to develop, advance, and promote adherence to norms, guiding principles, and codes of conduct. Coordinated by USAID, with a steering board from International IDEA, IFES, REDOIE (LAC) and the Asian observation network ANFREL.

### *iExcel (IFES Executive Curriculum for Electoral Leadership)*

A modular leadership training curriculum targeting executive and senior management to respond to contemporary challenges such as independence, crisis management and ethical dilemmas.

### *Master in Electoral Policy and Administration, developed by International IDEA*

Master in Electoral Policy & Administration | Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna ([www.santannapisa.it](http://www.santannapisa.it))

### *Strengthening Electoral Assistance Curriculum (SEAC)*

A training course for donors and development practitioners in aid agencies to improve the effectiveness of electoral assistance, developed by IFES.

### *UNDP Arab Women's Leadership Academies\**

A program to cultivate and catalyze women leadership, while driving inclusive development and shifting the regional perception of women's roles.

### *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)*

Hosted at the University of Gothenburg's Department of Political Science, a social science data set and comprehensive analytical tools on the dynamics of democratic government. V-Dem annually publishes its findings and puts particular focus on elucidating the relationship between development and democracy.

## ANNEX 4: RESOURCES

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