

CAMBRIDGE CONFERENCE

ON

ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

Working With International Organisations

Take time to understand the international organisation that may be a potential provider of support or funds

The work of international organisations in the elections field can and does provide significant benefits, including good people, offering good advice, in good faith. Different organisations have different characteristics – International IDEA's strength, for example, lies in its analytical approach while IFES tends to be quite practical; and some organisations (for example, OSCE and the Carter Center) focus more on assessment than assistance. The positive contribution of international organisations stems from their sense of sharing the key values of Electoral Commissions, such as a commitment to independence, serving the voters, and so on.

Much good comes from the work of international organisations, especially where they focus on capacity-building and training. Most Electoral Commissions can benefit from this support, particularly from the work of International IDEA, IFES and the ACE Network in bringing together online information and analysis about a wide range of issues which can help to explore options in relation to the challenges of the role of Electoral Commissioner. International organisations provide useful support when an Electoral Commission needs to identify a suitable expert to offer consultancy advice in specialist areas.

However, international organisations do not necessarily share the same goals as Electoral Commissions. Whereas international organisations are often focused on international standards, sometimes expressed in relatively idealistic terms, electoral management bodies are constrained by the actual provisions of their national legislation, which might or might not conform to international standards. Electoral Commissioners always have to work with the legislation as enacted, rather than an ideal model.

In this regard it is often useful to distinguish two different kinds of international support. Experience suggests that organisations such as the UNDP, the European Union and USAid make an effort to support the Electoral Commission, and are in fact actively concerned not to compromise the Commission's independence. On the other hand, some international organisations act in a more partisan manner, including through their support to certain civil society organisations that themselves take an overtly partisan stance. Some international organisations come across as more focused on their own priorities and interests, and are determined to demonstrate their own relevance rather than taking the time to understand the local situation, including the provisions of national legislation.

Perceptions of problems and needs can be driven the media rather than discussion with the electoral commission and requirements of the relevant legislation.

More problematically, sometimes the interests of international organisations are clearly at odds with those of Electoral Commissions. This issue arises particularly in relation to resources. First, whereas Electoral Commissions' costs are generally met from state resources made available either by Parliament or by Government, international organisations' funding comes from a wide range of sources. Those governments and organisations that provide resources for international organisations might set priorities that reflect their own priorities (including, in the case of governments, their foreign policy or trade interests), not just priorities that the beneficiary Electoral Commission might share. Second, it is generally the case that in order to fund their ongoing headquarters, etc, costs, international organisations include in the cost of their work on particular elections an element of "overhead" which might typically be in the region of 30%-50% of the base costs, but might sometimes reach as much as 100% of base costs. One consequence of this model is that international organisations' decisions on which elections to support might be skewed by considerations about the level of overhead contribution that the work would generate. Another consequence is that, although Electoral Commissions are rarely charged for the work of international organisations, it can be difficult to determine the true cost of administering an election (which was, of course, a key piece of information for any Electoral Commission).

The reality is that the organisational structure of international organisations is funded from the same source of funds as that which is used to provide support for an Electoral Commission. International organisations have a permanent staffing complement, are a multi-billion dollar businesses, with funding generally coming from major donor countries, the main one of which is the US. Both the US and the UK's DfID have been major contributors of funds and are very much based on the aid budget of a country. With aid budgets coming under pressure in the wake of the global financial crisis, international organisations must go searching for additional sources of funds. Some of those funds are genuine aid, but some of it also driven by foreign policy or vendor interests. The geopolitical interest of the donors must be understood if problematic outcomes were to be avoided.

Electoral Commissioners must not be naïve – they must be ready to examine carefully the interests and motivations of those offering money, technology and other forms of support. If an election does not go well, Electoral Commissioners cannot expect to count on the international organisations that had provided so much support, for help at that stage.

Ensure that the goals and objectives of the Electoral Commission are clear and relevant to the context of the country and its electoral circumstances

It is vitally important for an Electoral Commission to be very clear about its own goals and priorities before working with international organisations, in order to reduce the scope for downstream problems. **A strategic plan** - an intentional path - is important to clearly establish what an EMB really needs. An Electoral Commission should be prepared not to work (or to work only in certain areas) with an international organisation if it was clear that

the Commission's own goals or interests could be compromised. There are opportunities to "shop around" for an international organisation that is more aligned to the goals of the EMB.

Clarity about a Commission's goals is an important defence against the risk that international organisations would effectively "do your thinking for you". A particular risk is that international organisations might offer inappropriate, non-sustainable solutions – it was important for an Electoral Commission to recognise (and reject) these.

Whereas Electoral Commissions sometimes suffered from relatively rapid turnover, especially among Commissioners themselves, international organisations (and their main funders) might have well-developed goals and interests which could give them an advantage in setting the parameters for their work with Electoral Commissions. However, Electoral Commissions probably have more power and influence in these relationships than may be realised, and should insist on sticking to their goals and interests, not those of an international organisation.

International organisations are not the only resource for support

The support from other Electoral Commissioners offered by the Cambridge Conference is a very useful potential resource that Electoral Commissioners could turn to when assessing the benefits and risks of working with international organisations. In the context of the Cambridge Conference on Electoral Democracy and the informal get-togethers of Electoral Commissioners from SAARC countries, there is significant value from more effective "South – South" co-operation, quite possibly facilitated through the Cambridge Association, to help to evaluate the benefits and risks of working with international organisations.

The responsibility for election management rests always with the EMB and cannot be delegated or shared with an international organisation

It is important that Electoral Commissions take responsibility and ownership for the electoral process – and enlist the support of their governments and citizens. An Electoral Commission should always plan on the basis that it should be able to administer elections without aid from international organisations or donors; should such additional support be offered, and provided it is compatible with the Electoral Commission's plans, then it could be regarded as a bonus. International support should be seen as a marginal rather than a central plank of an EMB's electoral capacity. It is important for an Election Commission to take ownership of the process, and understand who are going to be its long term supporters.

An important ingredient to taking responsibility is to ensure a full understanding of the cost of administering successful elections, and securing, from the Government and/or Parliament, an adequate budget with which to do so. Securing adequate funding is a vital step in ensuring the Elections Commission's independence and maintaining focus on the agreed goals and priorities. It is important to avoid an expectation of continuing, even permanent, international support for certain key aspects of the electoral process. Some

Electoral Commissions deliberately limit the involvement of international organisations to capacity-building work.

The Accra Declaration on Aid Effectiveness lays down some guidance for Electoral Commissions. According to the Accra Declaration, Electoral Commissions should aim to rely on international organisations and other donors for no more than a maximum of 10% of the total costs of administering an election. More importantly, international funding should never pay for critical elements of the election operation, and should instead fund “softer”, less fundamental aspects. Greater reliance on international funding can see the election being deferred if that funding does not materialise. Moreover, it is difficult to see how an Electoral Commission could claim to have its own set of goals and priorities if it is in fact financially dependent on international organisations or other donors.

Where a number of international organisations are supporting an Election Commission, one approach is to establish a “basket fund” administered by the international organisation that collects contributions from a range of international donors upon which the Electoral Commission could then draw. This has the advantage of saving the Electoral Commission from dealing separately with multiple donors. However, care should be taken to ensure that the international organisation does not keep an overly generous percentage of the fund to cover its own “overheads” – in effect, a commission, which is understood to be a standard UN approach. An alternative is to replace the “basket fund” with a system known as the “Direct Implementation Method”, which removed the brokering role of the international organisation.

Establish good relations and dialogue with the international organisation, especially with its local representative

There is no right or universal answer to what is the appropriate balance of international support and autonomy for an Election Commission. An Election Commission must operate in the real world and in context. Only the Electoral Commissioners themselves, using their experience and wisdom, are in a position to distinguish between a genuine offer of support, and one that comes with unacceptable conditions attached. The way to do this was not to look at the headquarters of the international organisation, often described as a “black box”, but to listen intently and with an open mind to what the local representative is saying.

The head office of most international organisations is generally located in a capital in the US or Europe. International organisations therefore generally rely on in-country managers. Building a positive relationship with the local representative will assist in understanding the objectives and interests of the international organisation.

Generally speaking, maintaining good relationships (both personal and institutional) with international organisations is important. One benefit of this is to assure international organisations of the integrity of the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Commissioners. This, in turn means that when Electoral Commissioners are faced with criticism and attacks, they are sometimes able to look to international experts for support through what may be described as “soft diplomacy”, for example, by explaining that despite any problems that had emerged, it is clear that these problems were not particularly unusual in the wider international context.

Understand the potential role and influence of vendors

It is important for Electoral Commission to be clear in advance on the problem it sought to address; being specific with vendors about this; and contracting only with vendors who could demonstrate that their solution would in fact solve the Commission’s problem. Experience suggests that some funding is often sourced from a vendor seeking to implement a proprietary solution. Effective due diligence is needed to ensure that the solution is in fact able to meet the needs of the Election Commission. One particular aspect of electoral operations that is actively pursued by vendors is in relation to voter registration systems, especially biometric registration. In many countries, it is entirely possible – given adequate resources, training and time – to conduct electoral registration manually. But many vendors (sometimes strongly supported by international organisations and other donors) push electronic systems as a better solution – despite the fact that such systems were not necessarily economic in either the short- or the long-run.

Support from international organisations may not always be appropriate to the circumstances of the country or the Election Commission

Electoral process are always very sensitive. It is a matter of fine judgement and recognising the constraints under which Election Commissions have to work, but involving international organisations in the conduct of elections might add risk to the overall

situation. Indeed, some Election Commissions never work with or become members of international organisations. However, discussions with other Electoral Commissions about good practice, the role of technology in elections, and so on is generally seen as positive.