**ADOPTING TECHNOLOGY FOR INCLUSIVE ELECTIONS: A SOLUTION OR A PROBLEM?**

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Thank you Chair,

Honourable commissioner Pandey,

Anthony Banbury, of President and CEO of IFES, fellow panellists and all distinguished participants.

It is an absolute pleasure and privilege for myself, and for International IDEA, to be presenting and participating this second Democracy Cohort meeting on Integrity of Elections, as part of Summit for Democracy – Year of Action. Thank you very much for the invitation.

Our Secretary General, Dr Kevin Casas Zamora was representing IDEA in the first Cohort meeting in November and conveyed our steadfast support to the work of this Cohort, led by India, together with Maurice and Greece, and IFES. You can count on our support with the work of cohort. He also made a call for strengthening and sharpening the election related national commitments made in the first summit, and for intensified international coordination and sharing of electoral experiences, something we continue to do here and now.

Our panel is discussing the Technology solutions from the point of inclusion and inclusive election. I think we have already established that Technology can enable solutions to many challenges, and hence enhance integrity of elections, but has also potential for undermine the same, and create new problems. We probably need to recognise from the outset that **failure is inherent in all technology** - with the invention train, we invented train accident, and we need to be prepared to these failures, accommodate them, and have fall back solutions.

On what it comes to Inclusion in particular, -what I am going to do is to present, on the basis of International IDEA research and publications, some of the broader considerations, and questions that we need to ask, when exploring and adopting, hopefully democracy affirming technology. I wish to thank my colleague **Antonio Spinelli** for his contributions with this presentation.

**It is hard to imagine inclusive democracy without inclusive elections.**

**They** serve as the conduit through which all members of a society are able to participate in their country’s political process and express a say in shaping key decisions affecting their lives. The more inclusive an election is, the greater the likelihood that all voices and perspectives will be heard and represented in the final outcome.

**To be inclusive, an election must meet specific requirements whose fulfilment, however, is constantly being challenged: and it is in reference to these requirements Election Integrity commitments may be formulated.**

| **REQUIREMENTS** | | **BARRIERS** |
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| Equal and universal suffrage | All eligible citizens must have the right to vote and participate in the election without discrimination or barriers, without fear of repression or intimidation | Restrictive voting eligibility qualifications are routinely used to exclude certain groups from the suffrage and to be fairly represented in the election process by limiting their access to voter registration, polling stations, and other aspects of the electoral process |
| Professional, fair and impartial electoral administration | The legal framework governing the electoral process must protect the rights of all citizens; ensure neutral and unbiased administration that is committed to ensuring the integrity of the process; and ensure that all political parties and candidates have equal opportunities to compete | Poorly managed, biased and fraudulent electoral administration undermines the integrity and credibility of the electoral process, ultimately discouraging citizens from participating |
| Transparency and accountability | The electoral process must be transparent and open to public scrutiny, with mechanisms in place to investigate and address any complaints or allegations of misconduct | Lack of transparency and accountability undermines stakeholder trust in the way EMB has managed the electoral process and in the legitimacy of its outcome |
| Physical accessibility to voting | Elections must be accessible to all citizens, including those with disabilities or special needs, or minority populations | Legal, procedural or physical barriers limit access to polling stations, preventing certain groups, traditionally marginalised, from participating in elections |
| Access to information | Citizens, political actors, civil society organisations and the media must enjoy access to accurate and unbiased information about the candidates and the electoral process | Barriers preventing or limiting access to accurate and unbiased information prevent informed decision making and meaningful electoral participation |

The exclusion of certain individuals or groups from full participation in the political process, from representation in government and key decision-making processes has dire consequences, having the potential to trigger an escalation:

**So one of the questions to be asked is Who is not included**? Who is not registered, or not able to vote?

In many countries and contexts the answer would be :1. People out of their constituencies, students, migrant workers – internal or out of country migrants, often they form a significant group and which actually is the reason for lower voter turnouts. 2. senior citizens, disabled, 3. Women – on what it comes voter turnouts. Or 4. Youth, 5. Indigenous peoples, - for example in Australia, with compulsory voting and very high level of voter registration (record one in 2022 elections) the first Australians are not equally well registered, for number of reasons, 6. In many western countries it is less educated young men – who are not voting.

* *When the voices of certain individuals or groups are silenced, their political discrimination and marginalization is perpetuated and exacerbated*
* *Their protracted exclusion, in turn, may lead to a polarized political and social climate, where only certain perspectives and interests are voiced, represented and acted upon, with the resulting policies and decisions disproportionately benefiting represented individuals or groups openly neglecting those excluded*
* *Feeling disenfranchised and excluded, these individuals or groups, to make their silenced voices heard, may be led to resort to civil disobedience, social unrest, and even to violence*

Operating in such context, electoral management bodies (EMBs) are constantly looking at technological solutions that could help them enhance the inclusiveness, efficiency, and integrity of their elections, and address new and evolving threats always coming their way.

The use of technology can majorly contribute to support the EMB in virtually any electoral operation, including:

* **Voter registration ​ - introducing biometric registration both In Bangladesh and in Fiji resulted into significant increase in voter registration. In both countries the process was accompanied by massive awareness campaigns. Possible challenges of biometric registration are sustainability, license costs, and lack of appropriate legal framework, or data security**
* Voter identification ​
* Results tabulation & transmission​
* **Electronic voting (e-voting) and counting​ – introduced and applied in number of countries, online voting much less than, India, Brazil**
* EMB internal communication and data management ​
* **EMB external communication (website, social media)​**
* Party and candidate registration​
* Observer registration and accreditation​
* ​E-learning for election officials​
* **Boundary delimitation (GIS)​ - and use of open data – IDEA – together with our Indonesian partner piloting a tool called ERA, electoral redistribution application, where anyone interested can create boundaries, compare with the official ones. With low cost**
* Publishing election data & Open Data​-
* Voter information/education ​
* **Political party finance reporting- digital disclosure and reporting increases transparency, digital campaigning allow crowd funding, where small donation make difference, but research is showing that digital campaigning is also increasing overall spending. IDEA publication where we looked at**

**On voting and results – we know that fastest developing electoral technology is in supporting technology – after voting - in result transmission counting and result publication – slowest development has been in online voting. –** technology does not necessarily equal with high tech - using telephone for voting is technology too – both Australia and new Zealand expanded telephone voting to covid patients/ or those in quarantine**.** Earlier this facility was provided visually impaired voters. Telephone voting obviously assumes or requires high level of trust on electoral management bodies -election officials – trust on elections would be a topic of another whole session – trust by voters is the most resource and capital that any EMB has and something that it needs constant cultivation.

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If effectively designed, adopted, and maintained, technology can strengthen the management of elections in numerous ways. Technology can:

* Improve the efficiency, speed, accuracy, transparency, and reliability of key electoral operations
* Address procedural shortcomings and, by reducing reliance on human intervention, also limit the occurrence of human error
* Enhance election integrity by reducing or preventing opportunities for manipulation, irregularities, and fraud
* Foster electoral inclusion by facilitating voting access and convenience to segments of the electorate traditionally marginalised or excluded from the franchise
* Limit voting accessibility, exacerbate political exclusion and discourage participation.

Examples – Estonia, small population, with online – savy citizenry – cyber security in place.

Canada

India –

Bad examples

**If instead poorly designed, adopted, and maintained, technology can:**

* Challenge consolidated democratic principles
* Undermine how elections work and both their actual and perceived integrity
* Create vulnerabilities and new domains and for manipulation, fraud, fuelling mistrust
* Make the electoral process slow and inefficient, prone to errors, delaying or undermining key electoral operations

**Many considerations must therefore be factored into both the design, adoption, and maintenance of technology in support of a more inclusive election.** The numerous unforeseen risks which its introduction inherently involves, particularly those relating to its inappropriate or untimely introduction, must be carefully weighed in.

So, when seeking to introduce technological solutions to maximise inclusion in their elections, how may EMB effectively consider and assess such risks?

**To this effect, International IDEA had developed a set of questions that may assist EMBs in this task, by asking themselves**: I will not go through them by one by one but many of the questions relate to whether the technology actually increase inclusion of all eligible voter, whether there is broad acceptance by the electoral stakeholders, and voters in particular, whether timing is realistic and costs sustainable – whether appropriate legal frameworks are there in place, and if the technology is fit for the purpose? **Do we need Ferrari when Toyota will do?**

* Does the adopted technological solution contribute to enhance the inclusion of all eligible voters’ and their equal access to, and participation in, the franchise?
* Does it enjoy broad political consensus obtained through the meaningful engagement of all key electoral stakeholders in its introduction?
* Is it fit for the purpose that it is supposed to achieve and the service that it intends to provide to the electorate, especially to those individuals and groups traditionally marginalised or excluded from the franchise?
* Was the adopted solution developed locally, independently, to ensure that it is best tailored to the specific needs, cultural context, and existing capacities and infrastructure in which it must be deployed, maintained and sustained over multiple election cycles?
* Is the timing of its deployment opportune and realistic?
* Is it efficient, affordable, upgradable, cost effective, seeking to achieve the maximum results at the lowest cost?
* Is the adopted solution flexible enough to be adapted to existing legal framework or can it be realistically introduced through new election regulations?
* Is it user-friendly, simple, and understandable for those having to use it, on both the operator and user’s ends?
* Does the adopted solution offer appropriate safeguards to guarantee its ethical, transparent, professional and unbiassed use by those having to operate it?
* Is it reliable and secure, having been developed through extensive testing, auditing, verification, and certification?
* Has its introduction been based on a realistic assessment, sufficient comparative research and analysis of similar systems, practices, and experiences in other jurisdictions, and learning from their successes and failures?
* Does it ensure transparency while simultaneously maintaining secrecy and privacy – especially where sensitive data is processed?
* Has maximum usability of the technological solution been ensured, by training those having to operate the new system and by informing and educating the electorate on its use?

In conclusion, while appreciating the manyfold and obvious benefits involved in an inevitable increase in the use of technology to support electoral inclusion, EMBs should continue to carefully consider the tensions that often arise in the management of elections.

Key among them is their ability to navigate between:

* On the one side, the participation dividend – efforts for greater inclusion, accessibility and voting convenience urging them not only to bring voters to the ballot box, but also – through the use of technology –that of bringing the ballot box to voters; and
* On the other, the EMB’s constant need to strengthen and protect electoral integrity both from the genuine risks that increase the further voting moves away from the controlled environment of the polling station and from new threats constantly emerging and attempting to erode public trust in electoral processes and their outcomes.

There is a tension between increased convenience, and opportunity to expand inclusion –

And spoilers trying to undermine credibility of elections – while EMB must protect electiosn and provide service for the voters.

The pandemic years saw decline of the voter turnouts - which are yet to recover, but

Pandemic was **an accelerator** of what we call special voting arrangements – many such arrangements have and will outlive the pandemic.

**So to answer the first question if the technology is A SOLUTION OR A PROBLEM for inclusion? Answer is that technology can be a solution, but has also failure as its inherent character, and hence EMBs must have fallback plans, plan B.**

Barcode to all International IDEA databases, and tools – many are about technology and elections. Very happy to share

THANK YOU

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