

Transcript- IOM – Jeffrey Labovitz

Hello! My name is Jeffrey Labovitz. I was in charge of out of country voting, external voting, in Iowa for many, many years, and worked on several of the formative elections which we're now discussing, and I'll give a brief overview of many of them, because there's enough that every single one would take hours and hours.

I got involved in external voting in 1996, for Bosnia. It was the first election for the country and there had been phenomena of ethnic cleansing, so people had moved or forcibly moved. There were terrible atrocities in several locations, and they became part of extensive refugee populations. And so, if you were doing an electoral process and not including them, you would be including only those who had not been pushed out with those who had remained, and often that was from one of the warring factions. So it was very important to look at inclusion of refugee populations, and ensure you had a process which incorporated their voices into the areas where they had come from. Also noting they'd be looking for potential return processes.

It was the first large-scale electoral process to include the external vote ever. I think there were examples where there was some sort of inclusion through embassies of diaspora, but it's the first time it became really : a focus of an election that you needed to include those people. My understanding is that several organizations were approached, and we're not prepared to be working on this, and, truth be told, my organization was willing to do so. One of the stories of external voting is that when you're looking at a post-conflict scenario, there's a lot of different issues and a lot of different concerns. The diaspora is something that, when they thought it was important, we needed to address [it], but it became an aftermath in the planning exercises, and so there was very little time associated with it, and that was the case.

In 1996, I came on board in that one. That was my first time working for my organization and I came on board as the country coordinator for the refugees in Turkey. On this election, Ireland had just gotten the responsibility. They had accepted it, and already the timeline was ticking. I recall being called into Vienna, where we had a coordination center and we had a sample registration form. We had 3 or 4 pages of illustrative but not formalized rules and regulations, and that was it. I recall going to my boss, and I was pretty young and inexperienced to be honest and saying, okay, I understand that we're not observing, we're not putting an observation platform, that we're actually conducting the entire election, and from A to Z out of country voting. It doesn't have the structures you have in your country. We're not utilizing schools. We're dependent on the security of the host country. We have to utilize every mechanism on our own, and we have to find and locate every physical location. It's very, very difficult in terms of logistics. But also you have to apply the rules and regulations and there's differences for external learning. There you have to have different codes for your registration centers. You have to look at separate staffing. You have to have some sort of mechanism where you're identifying where they are voting for, and rules and regulations where you apply to that. That was something which was incorporated in 1996, but it had never been applied before.

So we got on the ground. The advice I got leaving Vienna was, go and speak to different partners, which I did, as well as the Government. Long story short, because there's a lot of different elections and external voting, it was not an ideal process, when I look at it in retrospect. I can't believe we got it done. It was global. There were hundreds of thousands of people who were able to ensure participation in their first election, and it worked somehow. But the planning, the body of knowledge, the frameworks involved : needed to be developed, and within the timeframe I think I started registration within 3 or 4 weeks, with very limited capacity and, in fact, knowledge. And it's something which was a miracle. It happened. It was an imperative because of displacement. and we took on a huge amount of risk of taking on that project. But we implemented it. It was free and fair. There were no large manipulations. It contributed to the overall election, and it was significant.

Then, after that election, there was supposed to be some sort of National Assembly process. I was supposed to go to Macedonia and coordinate both Macedonia and Turkey. That ended up getting postponed, and we came back the following year. In 1997 we did the same. My role that year was I was responsible for the former Yugoslavia. So what is now Kosovo, Montenegro. Serbia was also called Rep. Yugoslavia. It was a big exercise. There were thousands of workers. There was a lot of contention about manipulations. Just like in 199, it was very complex, with municipalities. You would split municipalities, with municipalities where there were a lot of refugees based on ethnic basis, and there were efforts to try to manipulate that. It was another exercise which was really important, so that people would have voices into the areas where they had come from that there was potential for return, that you were not solidifying through votes, that people outside would be marginalized, and those people who occupied their houses would be getting the votes and being able to take over the political processes without without social inclusion. Again it worked. It was complex. It was the biggest exercise I had worked on. There were several 1,000 workers. We again were very dependent on the government for security. There were levels of intimidation, and it came outside of the structures and frameworks which you have internal elections. So when they are using school buildings for registration centers and polling centers, we do not have any of that. So you have to negotiate each and every one individually. You've got to map out the country. You got to know where displaced populations are. You've got to place them responsibly.

It was with the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) (for) the Bosnia elections, that they would send longer-term core teams. They would have a short-term, who would come out for elections logistically, really, really complicated and politically, very, very complicated. Again, while we reached broadly around the world, I think there was over, there were people in over 60 countries who participated in both of those elections. The significance there is the inclusion of diaspora voting, of external voting, in areas where there is profound displacement. What you find in external voting is that the estimates for populations are often much higher than the actual number of people. When the time comes there's a lot of pressure to keep having centers everywhere in the world and the expectations are very high, and those people who are organizing elections feel those pressures in Turkey, for example, in 1996, I think they had 25 to 40,000 refugees at one time. By the time the election took place, many of those

had returned. There were less than a couple 1,000; so the expectations of big numbers are there, and sometimes they're not, and that turns out to be a trend for external voting as a whole.

At this stage, external voting is also something which the organization was never able to make a permanent presence with because it's intermittent. It doesn't happen all the time, and yet we kept being called into it. So when you had the popular consultation in 1999 in East Timor, we were also requested to participate on that. I was the only person from 1996 to 1997 who had worked on the elections, who was with the organization still. Then I was called to lead the entire process. Following the tripartite agreement which was signed between the parties in 1999, we went and started working on the popular consultation for East Timor, and that involved Macau Mozambique, the US. Portugal, Australia and of course, Indonesia, outside of East Timor.

Again, you're very much reliant on security structures, and you're having to contract everything yourself, so in some ways it's much more complicated. We had pressure. We had security pressure, but we put the structures in place. The number of people who voted was not significant, because most of the diaspora had returned, and there were not many people in those locations, but they were people who were in exile. Ramos Horta voted, of course, Guzmel voted out of prison in Jakarta, which is part of OCV operation, and extending the vote was significant in that there was inclusion for people who were displaced, but also inclusion for people who were no longer allowed to be part of the country. The popular consultation was relatively small, but again politically dynamic.

There was always a fear for me when I was doing external voting, that there can be reasons in external voting why there would be a need to rerun the entire election. And so, in that sense there was a risk. I remember, during counting in one of the locations in Indonesia, we were under extreme pressure. We were surrounded by groups of people who were intimidating us. At a certain point we thought that ballots could be confiscated and taken away with us. In the end we were able to complete the process. We met all standards of transparency. It had no effect on any outcome of the vote, but it was free and fair, and it included these types of voices. Then again, we had a little bit more time to organize the popular consultation, so it meant structures were able to be developed in terms of preparation. The standard and professionalism that we were conducting, now, was much higher than my 1996 experience. We had professionals working on our own OCD. Training manuals, we were able to give input on legal frameworks, we were able to get input on overall procedures into the election. We reviewed all procedures for the entire election and were able to insert elements for out of country voting. It was a great collaboration. It was working again for me with Jeff Fisher. There were people like Michael Maley working on procedures who we worked closely with, and the operation itself technically, was much stronger. But also my organization was building its own ability to call in a group of people who now had experience. We worked on out of country voting before, we could count on for the highest level of professionalism in our practices, and it became a team which we would continue to utilize in other locations.

In the year 2000, largely, that team we brought to Kosovo for their first election, that included again a broad diaspora, included populations in the former Yugoslavia. It was not easy again at

all, but the structures again were in place. The teams were much easier to recruit because there was a continuity from previous elections technically, and was very, very solid.

Structurally, it's a huge challenge. Again, relying on yourself for every single agreement location process in every country you're going to. You have to have some sort of agreement for each country which gives you a basis to operate. In some countries they don't have a legal basis for foreign elections to take place in their territory outside of embassies. So you had to work with every single one of those countries. There's an agreement in all those countries that processes will take place. There's lag times for delivering election material. There's special procedures which you have to do for sensitive material. I remember one of the challenges is the silver nitrate which people dip their finger into to show they voted, which was part of the process, is considered hazardous material in some places, and so we had to work through getting that to every part of the diaspora country. It was a broad diaspora. It was working in a lot of countries. There were structural challenges. But again, we were able to perform that in a long way. One of the challenges was eligibility criteria for Kosovo, which was unique. There were many people who had emanated and come from Kosovo, who were working in Europe, many in Germany, for example, a large diaspora. Kosovo is not a huge country, the diaspora was pretty big, and so that would substantially affect results of elections. So you had to very much go into eligibility. Criteria have proof of documentation. Look at eligibility, and go through a transparent process which, I think, we achieved.

In the second election, Assembly election in 2001, we continued with our teams largely in place, and worked on those, and then the next one was 2004, which was in Afghanistan. I went to go, set that one up. Still, we brought in a team which is headed by Peter Urban, who, you may hear from, who worked on a lot of the OSCE elections, and we were given the project by the United Nations. He ended up sitting in that team running the process. It may have been one of the largest ones ever. I think we had 25,000 workers, many in Iran and Pakistan, for a large diaspora in very remote areas, many of those with huge security concerns. The logistical element for just running a payroll for temporary workers when there's 25,000 is amazing.

The average amount of time we had in external voting was maybe 60 days from start to finish, so you can imagine what it's like to identify teams, contract teams, have locations, have insurance, being able to ensure that you have all the structures in place, and you're building into a structure where you are adapting the entire electoral process yourself, outreach voter education, manuals training, the whole entire registration process appeals process voting process. Again, it was a massive exercise. It was important. This is probably one of the examples where the diaspora contributed significantly to the absolute numbers in the votes and in very close elections, they were a very significant part of the final result.

That team from Afghanistan, very soon, just migrated over and did the next out of country voting in Iraq. The first election post war in Iraq, again, a huge logistical exercise with very, very broad, significant populations, and something which met all levels of excellence. By this time I believe that our procedures and processes for the last several years are strong. They are thought out. They're well developed, professionalized, and they're brought. They are global. They're around

the world in a very, very short period of time. The Iraq elections were the culmination of a lot of what we are talking about in this exercise, these formative years. In the eighties, nineties, and early two thousands, IOM became the organization for external voting. I became the point person for almost all of them, and which would ensue over the next decade we ended up doing the popular referendum independence referendum for South Sudan, again fraught with logistical and security issues.

I remember, so closely, that I thought this would be the one where they would challenge results, because we almost had to close processes. We had a number of deaths. We have lynching and election intimidation of our people. I can't tell you how many death threats they had. I recall having to coordinate on security issues over and over again, and work with communities and leaders to try to get some semblance of security so the election can take place. It did. The referendum went through. It was with a sigh of relief, given the considerable concern, the security parts of it, that we were able to go through the entire exercise. Then we went on and did a whole bunch of elections in Libya, their first ones as well. I did election evaluations in Mali, Chad and Lebanon, Syria [too, I] did for years, and we continue to look and evaluate out of country voting and different aspects over the years.

The challenges of external voting, I think, have been recognized more and more in the very beginnings. We were a small group, making it work under extreme circumstances. Understaffed. Not really funded. Well, if you look at cost per vote, you can't really compare, because you're setting up structures around the world, and external voting is expensive. But when you need to include displaced populations and marginalized populations, and when you're considering issues such as ethnic cleansing and how people can participate in democratic processes where the whole objective was to exclude them. Then there needs to be a consideration in how you include these people, but the exercise is complex. The logistics are unbelievably difficult. The security aspects are, at times, unprecedented, at times, not even comparable to the end processes. Again, you're looking at locations and situations of displaced people sometimes in countries and hosted in areas where security is not optimal. There needs to be a real consideration on how it's done. It's expensive. As I said, it's a risk. If you can't make the external voting work, you don't want to sacrifice an overall process. There needs to be an evaluation of when it's done, when it's not done, when it makes a difference and how you employ it.

Increasingly, we move towards options which don't only include in person or mail-in voting, but we started to look at online registrations. Libya would have been one of those. There's also questions about manipulation, perceptions, manipulation and online processes, and sometimes that risk outweighs the ability to do it when, in fact, that's probably the easiest one.

Going back to this phase of time. It was dynamic for me. Personally, I learned a lot. I ran the biggest operations and was involved in the biggest operations my organization has ever done. There was a level of working alone to make it work within a structure and function of working with UN structures and bodies, which was challenging and rewarding at the same time. Thank you.

