

# Information and Electoral Integrity: What Role for EMBS in the Era of Social Media?

The 2024 ECONEC Symposium and 10th General Assembly

Policy Paper No. 36



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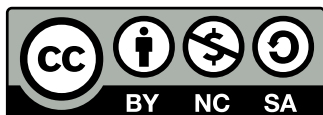
Policy Paper No. 36



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# Abbreviations

|               |                                                   |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>AI</b>     | Artificial intelligence                           |
| <b>CSOs</b>   | Civil society organizations                       |
| <b>ECOWAS</b> | Economic Community of West African States         |
| <b>ECONEC</b> | ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions           |
| <b>EC</b>     | Electoral Commission                              |
| <b>EMBs</b>   | Electoral management bodies                       |
| <b>FIMI</b>   | Foreign information manipulation and interference |
| <b>FOI</b>    | Freedom of information                            |
| <b>IPAC</b>   | Inter-Party Advisory Committee                    |
| <b>PVR</b>    | Provisional voters register                       |
| <b>UCG</b>    | Unconstitutional changes of government            |

# Executive Summary

For elections to be free, fair and credible, the electorate must have access to accurate and timely information throughout each stage of the electoral process. Electoral management bodies (EMBs) must ensure both electoral and information integrity. EMBs often inadvertently find themselves at the centre of this interplay. On the one hand, the credibility of the elections they oversee depends on how well-informed citizens are; on the other hand, EMBs operate amid a complex and often hostile information environment—one marked by disinformation, deepfakes, AI-generated propaganda and other manipulative techniques and actors.

Given these circumstances, the Economic Community of West African States Network of Electoral Commissions (ECONEC) held its 2024 annual symposium and 10th general assembly from 11–12 November 2024 in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on the theme ‘Information Integrity and Electoral Integrity: What Role for EMBs in the Era of Social Media?’. The symposium brought together various stakeholders, including member states’ EMBs, civil society organizations (CSOs), communication experts and development partners. It comprised six panel discussions: (a) review of recent elections in the region; (b) normative frameworks on access to information and electoral processes; (c) providing access to information on elections; (d) opportunities and challenges of access to information in the digital era; (e) EMB strategies for promoting access to information during elections; and (f) leveraging social media to uphold freedom of access to information. The discussions underlined the need to ensure access to information and transparency, understand and leverage both traditional and social media channels, implement effective voter education and establish democratic regulation of digital and social media platforms to protect information and electoral integrity.

What is more, the symposium was held at a time when increasing voter apathy towards elections, combined with the widespread use of social media to spread disinformation, have led to a growing acceptance of unconstitutional changes of government (UCG) and the rise of autocratic military regimes in

**There has been a surge in disinformation campaigns, often on social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, etc.), that influence voter perceptions and undermine electoral integrity in the region.**

West Africa. There has been a surge in disinformation campaigns, often on social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, etc.), that influence voter perceptions and undermine electoral integrity in the region.

Key policy recommendations emerging from the symposium:

1. *Enhance access to information and promote proactive disclosure to combat misinformation and disinformation.* This will involve maintaining a live, user-friendly official platform (web and mobile) that provides real time electoral updates, organizing public awareness campaigns and establishing a dedicated information integrity unit.
2. *Utilize traditional and social media platforms and develop a rapid response communication strategy.* This will involve establishing specialized communication teams, publishing frequent updates, maintaining open channels for voter inquiries, creating interactive content that clearly explains the electoral process and implementing a rapid response protocol to quickly correct false narratives through official platforms such as websites, SMS messages, radio and social media.
3. *Launch media and information literacy campaigns.* This will involve implementing both nationwide and community-based media initiatives to strengthen voter resilience against misinformation and disinformation, establishing codes of conduct and developing capacity-building programmes for political actors on ethical campaigning, information sharing and leveraging social media and AI platforms to provide ongoing electoral education.
4. *Advocate for effective democratic regulation of digital and social media platforms.* This involves working with national cybersecurity agencies and legislators to enact laws that criminalize coordinated election disinformation campaigns while protecting freedom of speech, developing systems for identifying emerging narratives and misinformation trends and responding swiftly with accurate information.
5. *Collaborate with fact-checking organizations.* This involves partnering with independent fact-checking bodies and CSOs to verify and debunk false information, especially during voter registration and elections.

# Introduction

For elections to be free, fair and credible, the electorate must have access to accurate and timely information throughout each stage of the electoral process. Electoral management bodies (EMBs) must ensure both electoral and information integrity. EMBs often inadvertently find themselves at the centre of this interplay. On the one hand, the credibility of the elections they oversee depends on how well-informed citizens are; on the other hand, EMBs operate amid a complex and often hostile information environment—one marked by disinformation, deepfakes, AI-generated propaganda and other manipulative techniques and actors.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental principles supporting electoral integrity include ethical conduct, fairness and impartiality, transparency and accountability. These principles are essential to the legitimacy of democratic governance. They involve adherence to internationally recognized standards throughout the electoral process, ensuring elections are free, fair and credible, and thereby accurately reflect the will of the people. Its core principles include transparency, inclusiveness and accountability, which rely on access to information (Norris 2014).

Information integrity refers to the accuracy, consistency and reliability of the information content, processes and systems that support a healthy information ecosystem. Information integrity can only be ensured with access to information (Hanafin 2022). It is critical to ensuring electoral integrity, especially in today's digital and AI-driven communication environment (UNDP 2023).

The main barriers to electoral and information integrity are disinformation and misinformation on social media, which can distort voters' understanding and lead to mistrust (Hassan 2022). Wardle (2020) describes the current media

**For elections to be free, fair and credible, the electorate must have access to accurate and timely information throughout each stage of the electoral process.**

<sup>1</sup> Opening statement at the symposium by Mohamed Kenewui Konneh, Chief Electoral Commissioner and Chair (ECSL) and President (ECONEC).

environment and its contamination as information disorder, which occurs when truth and facts coexist with misinformation and disinformation, such as conspiracy theories, lies, propaganda and half-truths (Wardle 2019; USAID 2021; Helm and Nasu 2021).

Misinformation is false or misleading information that is not intended to cause harm. The individuals sharing it may even believe they are helping (Ireton and Posetti 2018; Lazer et al. 2018; Wardle 2019; and Helm and Nasu 2021). Disinformation, however, is false information that is deliberately and knowingly created and spread to deceive and harm others (Lazer et al. 2018; Wardle 2019; and Helm and Nasu 2021). Information disorder threatens the social fabric of multi-ethnic societies across the West African region. Although this issue is not new, the current phase is more challenging due to widespread manipulation, the ease of sharing information, diverse techniques and the rising number of actors, including individuals, state entities, foreign governments and specialized firms (Hassan 2022). As a result, 'there is a disinformation pandemic across the globe, making it difficult for individuals to access trustworthy information' (Munene and Oloo 2024).

**West African information ecosystems, which combine social media, traditional media and 'pavement radio' with content that often spreads from online platforms to offline word-of-mouth, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation, especially during elections.**

West African information ecosystems, which combine social media, traditional media and 'pavement radio' with content that often spreads from online platforms to offline word-of-mouth, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation, especially during elections. Visual and audio content (videos, images and chatbots) serve as main vectors in an ecosystem susceptible to misinformation and ethnic or religious manipulation (Hassan 2022). Misinformation and disinformation campaigns, hate speech and Internet shutdowns now directly undermine public trust in electoral processes (UNDP 2024). Both state and non-state actors have exploited misinformation to influence election results, escalate tensions or weaken democratic institutions. Emerging trends show how AI-generated content (e.g. deepfakes), fake articles, manipulated videos, bots spreading political propaganda and advanced micro-targeting via social media have been used to disrupt election campaigns in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Sierra Leone and other countries (CivicHive 2024; Itodo 2024; Okolo 2024). This inevitably heightens the vulnerability of West African information ecosystems during elections. These emerging challenges underscore the urgent need to safeguard the integrity of the information environment, especially in the digital sphere, during electoral processes.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Concept Note, 2024 ECONEC Symposium & General Assembly

## Chapter 1

# Political and Socio-Economic Context

Many West African states transitioned from military or authoritarian rule to multiparty democracy in the 1990s or early 2000s. The region's political scene remains dynamic although recently there has been a resurgence of military coups in West Africa and several transitional governments are currently in place (Hassan 2024). Military coups occurred in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger between 2020 and 2023, resulting in non-electoral shifts in power. Moreover, these countries either dissolved their EMBs totally or weakened them through systematic dismantling of these independent electoral institutions, signalling a troubling erosion of democratic norms. These developments also had serious regional ramifications as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso formally left the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), one of the strongest blocs in Africa. The countries formed a new arrangement called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), causing regional disintegration.

Despite this troubling trend, several West African countries continue to exemplify stable and commendable democracies. In Ghana, the electoral commission (EC) received widespread accolades for orchestrating what have been deemed transparent and credible elections by international and regional observers (Africa Report 2024). In Senegal, despite some initial hiccups, the elections brought the youngest president on the continent to power (Melly 2024). Again, despite the political turbulence, the election was taken as an important symbol that reinforced Senegal's democratic resilience (Idrac 2024). Elsewhere, Nigeria also made important democratic strides when President Muhammadu Buhari peacefully handed over power in 2023 to his successor, Bola Tinubu, following his own history as the first opposition candidate to defeat an incumbent via a democratic election (The Commonwealth 2023).

Democracy and electoral processes remain crucial in regional governance (Hassan 2024). However, EMBs operate within fragile political systems, which can result in institutional manipulation and electoral violence (Security Council Report 2011). Kofi Annan (2014) highlights declining trust in electoral

**Democracy and electoral processes remain crucial in regional governance. However, EMBs operate within fragile political systems, which can result in institutional manipulation and electoral violence.**



Photo credit: ECONEC.

commissions due to executive influence undermining EMB independence. Democratic consolidation remains inconsistent, with frequent allegations of electoral fraud, vote-rigging, incumbent manipulation and post-election violence. Examples include Guinea (2020 election violence), Nigeria (ongoing trust issues with Independent National Electoral Commission processes) and Sierra Leone (contested 2023 elections and complaints about the results).

There are also legal and institutional weaknesses within the EMBs themselves, such as voter registration flaws, inadequate logistics and planning and a lack of transparency in the management of results (Nata 2024).

Many EMBs rely heavily on international donor funding for logistics, capacity building, voter education and electoral technology support (e.g., biometric registration, election observation). This creates both opportunities for capacity building and risks of external interference or dependency (International IDEA and OSIWA 2016).

Poor socio-economic conditions—manifesting as poverty, persistent and widening inequalities and rising unemployment—pose a serious external risk

to peaceful elections. Numerous studies (including Krug et al. 2002) show a clear link between poverty, inequality and political unrest, especially violence associated with elections. High poverty levels leave voters vulnerable to vote-buying, clientelism and political inducements such as gifts, money or food in exchange for votes. The impact of poverty becomes even more pronounced when elections are highly competitive (Jensen and Justesen 2014).

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## Chapter 2

# Data on Misinformation/ Disinformation in West Africa

**West Africa accounted for nearly 40 per cent of documented disinformation campaigns across the continent, with approximately 72 campaigns spread across 13 countries.**

There is a shortage of data on misinformation and disinformation campaigns during elections in West Africa. However, a 2022 report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies identifies 23 disinformation campaigns that targeted African countries, dating back to 2014 (Atlantic Council 2022). Since then, there has been an increase in disinformation campaigns, often on social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, etc.), that have influenced voter perceptions and weakened electoral integrity in West Africa. Improved sophistication and organization in the spread of disinformation have been observed. Efforts are generally aimed at either glorifying or delegitimizing political aspirants and undermining the credibility of institutions (CDD 2022).

West Africa accounted for nearly 40 per cent of documented disinformation campaigns across the continent, with approximately 72 campaigns spread across 13 countries. Approximately half of these campaigns were linked to Russian networks, with a notable focus on the Sahel region—19 campaigns since 2018 have targeted Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

In Nigeria, the Centre for Democracy and Development (2022) highlighted over 60 online disinformation incidents, fact-checking efforts and platform vulnerabilities ahead of the 2023 elections. The role of social media in shaping Nigerian politics has evolved significantly in the last decade and a half.

In Ghana, a study by the International Republican Institute (2024) found that WhatsApp, which is used by approximately 10.1 million Ghanaians or roughly half of all Internet users, was the primary channel for the dissemination of disinformation. Facebook's 7.4 million users' public pages and adverts amplified false claims and were used to spread disinformation. X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram also acted as platforms for viral disinformation.

In Senegal, a study by AfricTivistes & Democracy Reporting International evaluated the reliability of Wolof and French language AI chatbots ahead of



Photo credit: ECONEC.

the country's 17 November 2024 legislative elections. The study revealed that AI-generated responses frequently contained inaccurate or unverified claims, underscoring the risk of misinformation posed by generative AI.

The EU Elections Observation Mission report on Sierra Leone's 24 June 2023 elections (EU 2024) identified divisive content on 409 Facebook posts and in comments on 550 tweets; 49 posts and 10 tweets contained tribalistic messages. Disinformation was primarily disseminated through WhatsApp groups, aiming to confuse voters and influence their electoral decisions.

## Chapter 3

# Legal and Normative Frameworks on Misinformation and Disinformation in West Africa

Between 2016 and 2021, Africa Check examined 11 African countries. It found that they had almost doubled the number of laws and regulations on misinformation, increasing from approximately 17 to 31, covering areas such as cybercrime, press regulation and public order, including West African countries like Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Niger and Senegal (Africa Check 2021).



Photo credit: ECONEC.

Sierra Leone's Cyber Security and Crimes Act 2021 criminalizes the sending of false messages or other matters with the intention to cause danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or

unnecessary anxiety to others. Ghana's Cybersecurity Act 2020 (Act 1038) establishes offences for cyberbullying, fake websites, impersonation and online fraud, some of which may overlap with disinformation. The Electronic Communications Act, 2008 (Act 775), also criminalizes the transmission of 'false or misleading statements' via electronic communications if it is likely to endanger safety or security, or cause public panic. Niger's Cybercrime Law (2020) criminalizes the creation and dissemination of false or defamatory information. Mali's Law on the Press Regime and Press Offences (2000) and Cybercrime Law (Law No. 2019-056) criminalize false information and impose fines and prison sentences. Burkina Faso's Penal Code and Digital Laws (2019/2020) criminalize the publication of false news related to security issues and Internet throttling during elections. Côte d'Ivoire's Press Law (2017) criminalizes fake news and Senegal's Press Code (2017) criminalizes publishing false news that damages morale or public institutions. Guinea's Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection (Law No. L/2016/037/AN) criminalizes online criticism or 'false data messages', including social media posts. Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act (2015) criminalizes the dissemination of false information that causes offence or influences elections. Penalties include imprisonment and fines.

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## Chapter 4

# Current Practices on Addressing Misinformation and Disinformation

The Annual ECONEC Symposium and the 10th General Assembly held in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, discussed the role of EMBs in ensuring information and electoral integrity in the era of social media. All six panel discussions focused on strategies to address misinformation and disinformation, thereby safeguarding information and electoral integrity in the region. They covered: (a) a Review of Recent Elections in the Region; (b) Normative Frameworks on Access to Information and Electoral Processes; (c) Providing Access to Information on Elections; (d) Opportunities and Challenges of Access to Information in the Digital Era; (e) EMB Strategies for Promoting Access to Information During Elections; and (f) Leveraging Social Media to Uphold Freedom of Access to Information.

**The session on 'Normative Frameworks on Access to Information and Electoral Processes' highlighted access to information as a crucial method to combat misinformation and disinformation.**

The first approach discussed at the symposium to combating misinformation and disinformation was ensuring access to information and proactive disclosure. This approach was examined across the various panels. The discussions during the panel on 'Recent Elections in West Africa' highlighted how EMBs in Liberia and Senegal expanded access to information by effectively utilizing both new and traditional media and strengthening communication platforms. Liberia established a Communication Section and Strategic Response Committee, which responded to false information within an hour and provided timely updates on the electoral process. Senegal supplied real-time information as the electoral authority actively disseminated details. The EMBs recognized the importance of engaging with multiple stakeholders in the electoral process and employed various communication channels and platforms.<sup>3</sup>

The session on 'Normative Frameworks on Access to Information and Electoral Processes' highlighted providing access to information as a crucial method of combating misinformation and disinformation. According to the presentations

<sup>3</sup> Serigne Mamadou Ka, Permanent Secretary, ECONEC, moderated the session with two panellists: Alvin T. Jalloh from NEC Liberia and Papa Birame Sene from DGE Senegal. The two elections in 2023 and 2024 were held after the last ECONEC symposium.



Photo credit: ECONEC.

and subsequent discussions, existing global principles affirm that access to information is a fundamental right for everyone. Freedom of information (FOI) is a fundamental human right and a core element of all freedoms upheld by the United Nations. FOI functions as both a standalone and a leveraged right, since it can be used to realize other rights, including the right to democratic participation as outlined in Article 13 of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. The normative frameworks emphasize that access to information is a right for all, and that all information held by government bodies, including EMBs, is, in principle, public.

One of the presentations on 'Providing Access to Information on Elections' emphasized the need to disclose information proactively through effective communication. Ghana's Electoral Commission's handling of the Provisional Voters Register (PVR) helped address misinformation and disinformation, ensuring electoral and information integrity. The EC released the Provisional Voter Register (PVR), which immediately sparked concerns from the National Democratic Congress (NDC), Ghana's largest opposition party. The NDC argued that the register contained irregularities and demanded an independent forensic audit, which it deemed crucial to maintaining election integrity. In response, the EC defended the established legal mechanisms for voter verification and committed to a re-examination exercise to rectify any inaccuracies. This led to a nationwide demonstration organized by the NDC to press home its demands. The EC organized a live-broadcast meeting under the

**The second approach discussed during the symposium to combat misinformation and disinformation was understanding the flow of information and improving communication by effectively using both traditional and social media platforms during the electoral process.**

Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) framework for all stakeholders to bring evidence of irregularities for verification, thus agreeing to media coverage of the IPAC meeting for the first time. The proceedings were made available to the public through live broadcast and initiated an online verification option for voters to check their registration status. The EC demonstrated a commitment to accessible, efficient communication. Through these efforts, the EC addressed stakeholders' concerns about the register.<sup>4</sup>

The second approach discussed during the symposium to combat misinformation and disinformation was **understanding the flow of information and improving communication by effectively using both traditional and social media platforms during the electoral process**. The panel on 'Access to Information in the Digital Era: Opportunities and Challenges' emphasized that, regarding information flow, the focus has been on the 'source' through fact-checking and on the 'receiver' through media and information literacy. The 'channel' provides the 'platform', which promotes transparency but has received less attention. The main point is that in communication, the source, channel and receiver are all vital and play a key role in ensuring the integrity of the information.<sup>5</sup>

The panel on 'EMB Strategies for Promoting Access to Information During Elections' also discussed ways to **enhance communication within the electoral process**, including identifying the types of information citizens are entitled to know. EMBs should fulfil their responsibilities as institutions that facilitate citizens' access to information by first clarifying the information citizens require during elections. An explicit agreement on this will help the EMBs to better understand the trends and evolving landscape surrounding elections, enabling them to meet information demands more effectively.<sup>6</sup>

The discussions on 'Recent Elections in West Africa' demonstrated how EMBs in Liberia and Senegal improved access to information through effective use of both new and traditional media, thereby strengthening communication channels. There are already communication strategies and departments within EMBs. A key opportunity discussed is that the Internet, especially social media, has democratized communication and created more opportunities for inclusion for underrepresented groups in political processes. Social media has empowered marginalized groups to promote counter-narratives, pre-empt political spin and build diverse networks of dissent (Jackson, Bailey and Welles 2020).

The panel on 'Leveraging Social Media to Uphold Freedom of Access to Information' offered suggestions and pointers on how EMBs could use social media to fulfil their obligation to provide citizens with access to information

<sup>4</sup> From the submission 'An Overview of Good Practices in Voter Information and Communication: A Case Study of Ghana' by Emmanuel O. Akwetey, Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG).

<sup>5</sup> From the submission 'Access to Information in the Digital Era: Opportunities and Challenges' by George Sarpong, Executive Secretary, National Media Commission, Ghana.

<sup>6</sup> From the submission 'How EMBs Could Promote Access to Information' by Olufunto Akinduro, senior programme officer, International IDEA at the Annual ECONEC Convening in Sierra Leone, 11–12 November 2024.

on the electoral process. The key highlights were that in the digital age, with the advent of the Internet and social media platforms, everyone is a source; social media has both negative and positive impacts; and information disorder is a soft power tactic. There is a business model behind these innovations—Facebook, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, TikTok and AI—which EMBs should understand.<sup>7</sup>

The third approach discussed during the symposium to addressing misinformation and disinformation is the **use of effective voter information and education strategies in the electoral process**. The panel on ‘EMB Strategies for Promoting Access to Information During Elections’ outlined the voter information strategies Sierra Leone utilized in the 2023 elections. It was described as a ‘tree structure design’ comprising the roots, trunk, branches and fruit.<sup>8</sup>

The ‘roots’ represent core principles of transparency, accountability and public trust. To earn the public’s trust, the EC consistently engaged with the public, guided by its communication policy. The ‘trunk’ is the strategies the EC employed to inform and educate the public, including awareness campaigns through roadshows and voter information services, such as creating simple, multilingual jingles in all 16 local languages. Given the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation during the election, messages in local languages played a crucial role. The EC also provided toll-free lines and an app to answer questions and verify voters’ details. It collaborated with and supported CSOs and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists to facilitate voter education in remote areas. To promote inclusivity, messages were tailored for people with disabilities and women. The EC partnered with radio and television stations, print media and online platforms to disseminate information on the electoral process. It engaged with political parties through the Political Parties Liaison Committee and established a civil society platform. The ‘branches’ represent the specific tools and initiatives, such as utilizing digital and social media platforms (including websites, Facebook pages, Twitter [now X] posts and Instagram messages) to reach the public. WhatsApp and audio messages were also developed, reflecting common communication channels. Community engagement was fostered through community-level electoral education meetings with key stakeholders. The ‘Fruits’ represent the outcome and the benefits, such as informed decision-making by voters, reduced void votes below 1 per cent and the conduct of peaceful elections. Misinformation was reduced to a large extent.

The key challenges in the EMB’s work were constant misinformation and disinformation from politicians, as well as inadequate resources and technological tools. Misinformation fuelled distrust in the 2023 elections and set the tone for the outright rejection of the results, especially by the main

**The key highlights were that in the digital age, with the advent of the Internet and social media platforms, everyone is a source; social media has both negative and positive impacts; and information disorder is a soft power tactic.**

<sup>7</sup> A submission on ‘Leveraging Social Media to Uphold Freedom of Access to Information’ by Kojo Impraim (PhD), Director, Media for Peace and Sustainable Development, Media Foundation for West Africa at the Annual ECONEC Convening in Sierra Leone, 11–12 November 2024.

<sup>8</sup> A submission on ‘EMB’s Strategies for Promoting Access to Information During Elections’ – The Experience of Sierra Leone, by Zainab Umu Moseray, Commissioner, Western Region, Electoral Commissioner of Sierra Leone at the Annual ECONEC Convening in Sierra Leone, 11–12 November 2024.

Attention should be paid to how citizens' attitudes can be changed, as they have become more discerning in identifying right and wrong information and verifying it through cross-checking.

opposition party. The ECSL had a straightforward approach to voter education to ensure electoral integrity. It used various strategies to promote access to information. However, the ECSL was constrained by the lack of adequate resources. The issue of how EMBS can promote access to information was also discussed at the panel on 'EMB Strategies for Promoting Access to Information During Elections'. EMBS should develop voter information, voter education plans and communication strategies. Attention should be paid to how citizens' attitudes can be changed, as they have become more discerning in identifying right and wrong information and verifying it through cross-checking.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth approach discussed during the symposium to tackling misinformation and disinformation is **the need for effective regulation of digital and social media platforms through democratic means**. The panel on 'Access to Information in the Digital Era: Opportunities and Challenges' examined how social media use has created both opportunities and risks related to access to information during electoral processes and the promotion of information disorder. Alongside politicians who criticize EMBS, some more influential or malicious actors amplify their narratives. There is also the more insidious issue of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), a largely legal activity that threatens or can negatively influence values, procedures and political processes. FIMI targets EMBS, with politicians sometimes acting as malicious actors.<sup>10</sup> Despite the existence of legal and normative instruments, global technology platforms have limited regulatory presence in West Africa, and mainly focus on politically influential countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. Even in these key markets, platforms fail to effectively moderate content or uphold their own standards (Hassan 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Akinduro, How EMBS Could Promote Access to Information.

<sup>10</sup> From the submission 'Access to Information in the Digital Era: Opportunities and Challenges' by George Sarpong, Executive Secretary, National Media Commission, Ghana.

## Chapter 5

# Advantages and Disadvantages of the Approaches: Cost, Impact and Scalability

In terms of cost-effectiveness, there are already established **access to information and proactive disclosure laws and frameworks**. These include the Model Law on Access to Information for Africa (2013), Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa and national legislation on freedom of information. There is no requirement to develop new laws and frameworks. The EMBs simply need to be deliberate about providing access to information to prevent a vacuum where misinformation and disinformation can flourish. However, the abundance of information and a failure to restrict exempt or classified information can undermine the work of EMBs.

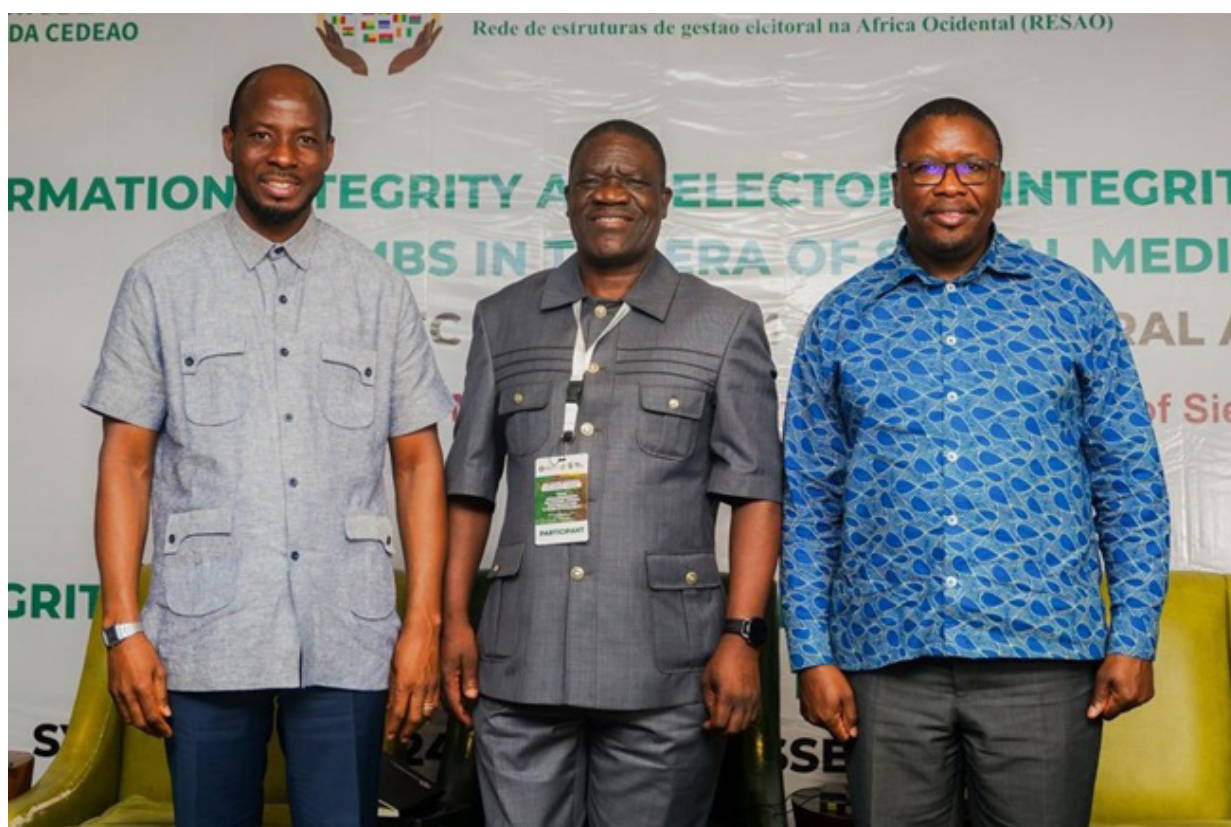


Photo credit: ECONEC.

**With effective access to information, EMBs can stay ahead in combating misinformation and disinformation by proactively offering timely and accurate data.**

With effective access to information, EMBs can stay ahead in combating misinformation and disinformation by proactively offering timely and accurate data. The Ghanaian EC's example demonstrates that EMBs can make a significant impact by achieving transparency through public engagement, developing responsive and inclusive communication channels and fostering stakeholder collaboration. However, in some cases, 'EMB's are reticent', thereby failing to ensure access to information and allowing misinformation and disinformation to flourish.

Access to information can be expanded through the EMBs' willingness to disclose information proactively and by effective use of radio and traditional communication methods, which are accessible across all the countries of the region.

Most EMBs already have a communication and outreach department, voter education and civic education departments, as well as existing communication programmes and activities. However, effective communication requires financial, technical and human resources to carry out media and communication tasks. Additionally, providing information does not always have the desired impact. Some people hold on to their pre-existing beliefs and perceptions.

For effective use of social media platforms, the Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa already exist. The EMBs can utilize these to improve their capacities and, together with other relevant electoral stakeholders, harness the advantages of social media and mitigate the adverse effects of new and emerging digital technologies. However, the Guidelines are non-binding on member states. They may choose to utilize and follow them at their own discretion.

**In terms of impact, social media has given EMBs an unprecedented ability to engage citizens directly. Some social media platforms are free, and where charges for boosting are necessary, they are relatively affordable.**

In terms of impact, social media has given EMBs an unprecedented ability to engage citizens directly. Some social media platforms are free, and where charges for boosting are necessary, they are relatively affordable. However, EMBs often lack the expertise, high-tech knowledge and infrastructure needed to use social media platforms and tools effectively.

In terms of scaling EMBs' approaches to social media, they should first seek to understand the business models that underpin these innovations—Facebook, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, TikTok and AI. EMBs can collaborate with social media platforms and major tech firms to enhance their content curation, moderation standards and reporting mechanisms for potentially harmful electoral-related content.

Regarding voter information and education strategies during elections, EMBs can implement cost-effective public awareness campaigns such as roadshows and voter information services, including simple, multilingual jingles. They can provide toll-free lines and mobile apps for responding to questions and voter verification. Additionally, they can leverage existing relationships with CSOs, traditional media outlets and online platforms. They can also utilize

current meetings and engagements with political parties to establish civil society platforms. Communication can be improved through WhatsApp and audio messages. Community-level electoral education activities can also be organized. However, while EMBs may plan voter education strategies and programmes, some politicians deliberately initiate and carry out disinformation campaigns. The role politicians play in spreading misinformation undermines EMB efforts and creates perceptions that can overshadow the truth. As a result, despite the messages disseminated by EMBs, stakeholders and voters may still refuse to accept the facts.

Effective voter information and education strategies will enhance informed decision-making by voters, reduce void votes and ensure peaceful elections. This can lead to the acceptance of election results with little or no contention, a non-violent handover and growth in the region's democratic credentials.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding **effective democratic regulation of digital and social media platforms**, any framework should be supported by the Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa, which outline what the states and EMBs should do to tackle the spread of misinformation and disinformation and to foster an environment that protects rights both online and offline. However, regulations can become counterproductive if they do not adhere to democratic standards and are exploited to silence dissenting views. This could prove costly by reversing the progress made in strengthening democracy in the region.

Social media operators should be transparent and accountable about their policies concerning elections, content curation, moderation measures and support for local languages. They should work with the media, CSOs, EMBs and other key stakeholders to publicize their content curation, moderation standards and reporting mechanisms of potentially harmful electoral-related content. Furthermore, social media operators should set up effective systems for controlled access to data for research purposes relevant to electoral integrity (AAEA n.d.).

In terms of impact, effective democratic regulation of digital and social media platforms will maintain probity in the information ecosystem. However, while EMBs plan voter education strategies and programmes, FIMI and some politicians deliberately design, initiate and implement disinformation campaigns. Therefore, regardless of the messages disseminated by EMBs, stakeholders and electorates will sometimes dismiss them.

**Social media operators should be transparent and accountable about their policies concerning elections, content curation, moderation measures and support for local languages.**

<sup>11</sup> Akinduro, 'How EMBs Could Promote Access to information'.

Table 5.1. Comparative matrix of the approaches

| Criterion               | Proactive disclosure and access to information                                                                          | Enhanced communication and media use                                                                                      | Voter information and education                                                                                                  | Democratic regulation of platforms                                                                                            |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Core principle</b>   | Transparency preempts falsehoods. Providing official information fills vacuums where misinformation thrives             | A holistic strategy must address the source, channel and receiver of information                                          | An informed and educated electorate is the best defence against false narratives                                                 | The digital information ecosystem requires rules and oversight to function safely and fairly                                  |
| <b>Primary actor(s)</b> | EMBs, government bodies                                                                                                 | EMBs (communication depts), media partners                                                                                | EMBs, CSOs, media, community leaders                                                                                             | Government, legislators, technology platforms                                                                                 |
| <b>Key activities</b>   | Rapid response committees, real-time data dissemination, live-broadcast stakeholder meetings, online verification tools | Effective use of both traditional and social media; understanding platform business models and algorithms                 | Multi-faceted campaigns (e.g. 'tree structure'), multilingual jingles, toll-free phone lines, community engagement, partnerships | Developing legal frameworks to govern platforms and counter malicious foreign interference                                    |
| <b>Key challenge</b>    | Ensuring EMBs consistently and quickly release information to the public without delay                                  | The dual nature of social media (positive/negative impacts) and its use as a 'soft power' tactic for information disorder | The need to adapt strategies as citizens become more discerning and require more than just information dissemination             | Foreign information manipulation and the failure of global technology platforms to effectively moderate content in the region |

## Chapter 6

# Lessons Learned for EMBS in West Africa

The following approaches emerged from the symposium discussions.

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### 6.1. INNOVATION

1. The live broadcast by Ghana's EC of a meeting under the **Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) framework**, which allowed all stakeholders to present evidence of irregularities for verification of the PVR showcased an innovative approach to ensuring access to information and proactive disclosure. It was the first time the EC agreed to media coverage of the IPAC meeting proceedings, making them accessible to the public via a live broadcast. Ghana's approach provides an example that other EMBs could adopt when engaging with political parties and stakeholders, utilizing their existing platforms.
2. Another is **contextualizing, adopting and utilizing the 2017 Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa to combat misinformation and disinformation**. If embraced by EMBs, these principles will help address the twin issues of information integrity and electoral integrity. EMBs therefore should use these Guidelines as checklists and develop a comprehensive internal policy on proactive information disclosure.
3. Another innovative approach that emerged from the forum to address misinformation and disinformation is **the strengthening of digital accessibility and the encouragement of stakeholder collaboration** through the establishment of a permanent multi-stakeholder advisory group. This would enhance continuous communication between EMBs and their stakeholders beyond the election period (AAEA n.d.).

Another innovative approach that emerged from the forum to address misinformation and disinformation is the strengthening of digital accessibility and the encouragement of stakeholder collaboration through the establishment of a permanent multi-stakeholder advisory group.



Photo credit: ECONEC.

## 6.2. COLLABORATION

1. A key emerging approach is for **EMBs in Africa to adopt a unified strategy and form a coalition to engage with major technology companies**, with South Africa, which has the necessary experience and capacity, taking the lead. EMBs should collaborate with social media operators to ensure transparency and accountability regarding their corporate policies on elections, content curation, moderating measures and the ability to operate in local languages. The major tech firms need to do more to moderate and prevent harmful and false content on their platforms.
2. **Integrating voter information and media literacy strategies** was also emphasized. Currently, EMBs are increasingly adopting an approach to voter education that includes media literacy. The issue of having dedicated teams remains since most EMBs still have separate communication and outreach departments and voter education and civic education departments. However, the work of these departments is gradually becoming interconnected. There is a serious need to start considering how teams are organized. This will ensure multitasking and help eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy.

- 3. Inter-agency approach.** Beyond the structure of EMBS, there is the issue of collaboration between agencies. In some countries, other agencies bear a broader responsibility for civic education, while EMBS have a more limited focus on voter education. The focus should be on how EMBS can work with other institutions. Such an inter-agency approach would reduce the burden on EMBS, promote coordination and enhance citizens' understanding of civic and voter education.

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### 6.3. REGULATION

- 1. The use of more data-driven approaches and artificial intelligence** was also highlighted. New technologies capable of rapidly producing and spreading information pollution are becoming more accessible and affordable for any actor willing to use them. In this digital era, EMBS must be fully aware of and leverage more data-driven methods and artificial intelligence to combat the problem of information disorder.
- 2. Adequate resources, deliberate information and communication strategies and approaches.** EMBS can only function effectively with adequate human, financial and technical resources. They must focus on ensuring effective communication and employ appropriate methods and techniques.

**In this digital era, EMBS must be fully aware of and leverage more data-driven methods and artificial intelligence to combat the problem of information disorder.**

## Chapter 7

# Conclusions

Electoral integrity is fundamental for peaceful transitions and accountable leadership in West Africa. However, it cannot be achieved without ensuring information integrity. Achieving information integrity requires addressing and responding to all forms of misinformation and disinformation.



Photo credit: ECONEC.

Elections can only be free, fair and credible if the electorate has access to information at all stages of the process. EMBs should ensure information integrity by providing access to information and supporting electoral integrity. However, because they are responsible for organizing elections, EMBs inadvertently find themselves at the centre of a dilemma. On the one hand,

the credibility of the elections they conduct depends on how well-informed citizens are; on the other hand, the environment in which they operate is filled with deliberate disinformation and abuse of artificial intelligence by bad-faith actors. The symposium provided a clearer understanding of the theoretical foundations of access to information as a citizen's right, the types of information citizens need to fully participate in the electoral process, the opportunities and pitfalls of using social media during elections and how EMBs can effectively tackle misinformation and disinformation.

EMBs can successfully address misinformation and disinformation with proactive rather than reactive communication from strong communication teams that provide timely information and use social media and new media platforms effectively.

**The symposium provided a clearer understanding of the theoretical foundations of access to information as a citizen's right, the types of information citizens need to fully participate in the electoral process, opportunities and pitfalls of using social media during elections and how EMBs can effectively tackle misinformation and disinformation.**

## Chapter 8

# Policy Recommendations

The recommendations are structured under the following broad key themes.

1. *EMBs and media regulators should enhance access to information and promote proactive disclosure to combat misinformation and disinformation.* This would involve maintaining a live, user-friendly official platform (web and mobile) that provides real-time electoral updates; organizing public awareness campaigns; establishing a dedicated information integrity unit and creating a specialized unit within the EMB focused on detecting, monitoring, analysing and countering misinformation and disinformation during the electoral cycle. The key success factors would include clear links to verified electoral facts, real-time updates during critical periods, easy navigation and mobile optimization, skilled digital analysts and fact-checkers and monitoring tools such as social listening software. The necessary resources would include communication and media staff trained in information disorder and open source intelligence, web developers and content managers, hosting services with high uptime, digital promotion and awareness initiatives, technical tools and partnerships with dedicated office infrastructure. Potential challenges might include a lack of user engagement, technical outages during peak periods, cybersecurity threats, budget limitations, limited in-house digital literacy and resistance from tech companies over supporting and providing access to information.
2. *EMBs should utilize traditional and social media platforms and develop a rapid response communication strategy.* This would involve establishing specialized communication teams, publishing frequent updates, maintaining open channels for voter inquiries, creating interactive content that clearly explains the electoral process and implementing a rapid response protocol to quickly correct false narratives through official platforms such as websites, SMS messages, radio and social media. The key success factors would be developed and approved messages, strong media partnerships and the inclusion of local languages and trusted voices. Necessary resources include a communication strategy,

communication policy crisis communication plan, a dedicated team of communication professionals, real-time Internet access, communication tools, and partnerships with local and national media outlets. Likely obstacles include EMB commitment and buy-in from various heads, bureaucratic delays in message approval, a lack of trust in EMB communication, Internet connectivity issues and strained relationships with local and national media houses.

3. *EMBs and media regulators should launch media and information literacy campaigns.* This would involve running both national and community-based media initiatives to strengthen voter resilience to misinformation and disinformation, creating codes of conduct and developing capacity-building programmes for political actors on ethical campaigning, information sharing and utilizing social media and AI platforms to provide ongoing electoral education. Critical success factors include engaging influencers, community leaders and religious figures; producing and sharing simplified content such as videos, memes and quizzes; providing messages in different local languages; promoting inclusive party participation; and implementing enforcement mechanisms like warnings, fines and suspensions. Essential resources to be budgeted for include content production and media placement, dedicated teams for digital engagement and misinformation management, monitoring systems, media monitoring tools, digital communication channels, rapid-response strategies, partnerships with government agencies and NGOs and an independent complaints mechanism.

The main obstacles include low digital literacy, media saturation or apathy, limited campaign durations during the electoral cycle and insufficient investment in dedicated teams focused on digital engagement. Additionally, there is a lack of software solutions capable of identifying trends and providing data to counter disinformation effectively, along with a deficiency in political will and allegations of selective enforcement.

1. *CSOs, media organizations and other stakeholders should advocate for effective democratic regulation of digital and social media platforms.* This would involve collaborating with national cybersecurity agencies and legislators to pass laws that criminalize coordinated election disinformation campaigns while safeguarding freedom of speech as well as developing systems to detect emerging narratives, identify misinformation trends and respond swiftly with accurate information. It would also include engaging in social media and big tech companies to understand their plans for moderating and removing harmful content. The key factors for success would include inclusive stakeholder consultations, legal reviews to prevent misuse and mechanisms for enforcement and appeal. The necessary resources would include legal drafters, technical advisors, campaign materials for advocacy and logistics for consultations and public hearings. Probable obstacles include the risk of suppressing

**EMBs and relevant regulatory institutions should collaborate with fact-checking organizations. This would involve partnering with independent fact-checking bodies and CSOs to verify and debunk false information, especially during voter registration and elections.**

legitimate expression politicization of the process, and enforcement challenges in rural or online spaces.

2. *EMBs and relevant regulatory institutions should collaborate with fact-checking organizations.* This would involve partnering with independent fact-checking bodies and CSOs to verify and debunk false information, especially during voter registration and elections. The key success factors would be: a clear memorandum of understanding outlining roles and responsibilities, joint public education campaigns and the sharing of real-time data and incidents. The resources needed would include a budget for partnership support, technical integration tools and regular coordination meetings. Potential obstacles might include political perceptions of bias, capacity limitations of partner organisations and legal or regulatory barriers.

## 8.1. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS AND TIMELINES IN THE ELECTORAL CYCLE

**Table 8.1. Timeframe: Short term (Immediate to election cycle)**

|                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key recommendation</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• enhance access to information and proactive disclosure of information across the electoral cycle.</li> <li>• use traditional and social media platforms.</li> <li>• collaborate with fact-checking organizations.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Actions and responsible parties</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EMBs and media regulators should develop a live, user-friendly official platform (web and mobile) providing real-time electoral updates.</li> <li>• EMBs should establish specialized communication teams, publish frequent updates, maintain open channels for voter inquiries, create interactive content explaining the electoral process and implement a rapid response protocol to quickly correct false narratives.</li> <li>• EMBs and relevant regulatory institutions should partner with independent fact-checking bodies and CSOs to verify and debunk false information, especially during voter registration and elections.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Key success factors</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• clear links to verified electoral facts.</li> <li>• real-time updates during critical periods.</li> <li>• easy navigation, mobile optimization, skilled digital analysts and monitoring tools.</li> <li>• development of approved messages and strong media partnerships and the use of local languages and trusted voices.</li> <li>• clear memorandum of understanding outlining roles and responsibilities, joint public education campaigns and the sharing of real-time data and incidents.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Resources required</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• communication and media staff trained in information disorder and open-source intelligence, web developers, hosting services, digital promotion initiatives, technical tools and partnerships.</li> <li>• communication strategy, communication policy, crisis communication plan, dedicated team of communication professionals, real-time Internet access, communication tools, and partnerships with local and national media outlets.</li> <li>• Budget for partnership support, technical integration tools and regular coordination meetings.</li> </ul>                                                                                      |
| <b>Potential challenges</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of user engagement, technical outages during peak periods, cybersecurity threats, budget limitations, limited in-house digital literacy and resistance from tech companies over supporting and providing access to information.</li> <li>• EMB commitment and buy-in from various heads, bureaucratic delays in message approval, a lack of trust in EMB communication, Internet connectivity issues and strained relationships with local and national media houses.</li> <li>• political perceptions of bias, capacity limitations of partner organizations and legal or regulatory barriers.</li> </ul>                                     |

**Table 8.2. Timeframe: Medium-term actions (Pre-election cycle to recurring)**

**Key recommendation** • Launch media and information literacy campaigns.

|                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Actions and responsible parties</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EMBs and media regulators should run national media and community-based initiatives to strengthen voter resilience to misinformation and disinformation.</li> <li>• They should also create codes of conduct and develop capacity-building programmes for political actors on ethical campaigning, information sharing and utilizing social media and AI platforms.</li> </ul>                                              |
| <b>Key success factors</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• engaging influencers, community leaders and religious figures; producing and sharing simplified content such as videos, memes and quizzes; providing messages in different local languages.</li> <li>• Promoting inclusive party participation, and implementing enforcement mechanisms like warnings, fines and suspensions.</li> </ul>                                                                                    |
| <b>Resources required</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• budgets for content production and media placement.</li> <li>• dedicated teams for digital engagement and misinformation management, monitoring systems, media monitoring tools, digital communication channels, rapid-response strategies, partnerships with government agencies and NGOs and an independent complaints mechanism.</li> </ul>                                                                              |
| <b>Potential challenges</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low digital literacy, media saturation or apathy, limited campaign durations during the electoral cycle and insufficient investment in dedicated teams focused on digital engagement.</li> <li>• there is a lack of software solutions capable of identifying trends and providing data to counter disinformation effectively.</li> <li>• Deficiency in political will and allegations of selective enforcement.</li> </ul> |

**Table 8.3. Timeframe: Long-term actions (Structural and institutional)**

**Key recommendation** advocate for effective democratic regulation of digital and social media platforms.  
establish a dedicated information integrity unit within the EMB.

|                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Actions and responsible parties</b> | <p>CSOs, media organizations and other stakeholders should collaborate with national cybersecurity agencies and legislators to pass laws that criminalize coordinated election disinformation campaigns while safeguarding freedom of speech, develop systems to detect emerging narratives, identify misinformation trends and respond swiftly with accurate information, and engage social media and big tech companies to understand their plans for moderating and removing harmful content.</p> <p>EMBs should create a specialized unit within the EMB focused on detecting, monitoring, analysing and countering misinformation and disinformation during the electoral cycle.</p> |
| <b>Key success factors</b>             | <p>inclusive stakeholder consultations, legal reviews to prevent misuse and mechanisms for enforcement and appeal.</p> <p>proactive disclosure, transparency and clear links to verified electoral facts.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Resources required</b>              | <p>legal drafters, technical advisors, campaign materials for advocacy and logistics for consultations and public hearings.</p> <p>skilled digital analysts and fact-checkers, technical tools and dedicated office infrastructure.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Potential challenges</b>            | <p>risk of suppressing legitimate expression, politicization of the process and enforcement challenges in rural or online spaces.</p> <p>limited digital literacy, budget constraints and resistance from political entities.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

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# Annex A: Concept note

## Background and Rationale

Following almost two decades of steady, incremental advances in democratic governance across the West Africa region, characterized by both the regularity of elections and the quasi-predictability of electoral legal frameworks, the overwhelming consensus today is that the region is facing a crisis of democracy. Indeed, prior to the August 2020 coup d'état in Mali, commonly viewed as the trigger event for the democratic reversal the region is currently experiencing, voter turnout, which is a key indicator for assessing the vibrancy of democratic governance, had been steadily declining across the region (Nwokolo 2022).

Data compiled by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES 2024) reveals, for instance, that over the four electoral cycles from 2001 to 2016, voter turnout during presidential elections in the Republic of Benin steadily dropped from 87.74 per cent (2001) to 74.86 per cent (2006) and then to 64.03 per cent (in 2016). In Nigeria, the figures went from 69.08 per cent (2003) to 57.49 per cent (2007) and then to 34.75 per cent (2019). Similarly, in Ghana, voter turnout figures went from 85.59 per cent (2004) to 69.52 per cent (2008) and then to 68.62 per cent (2016).

Although largely ignored at the time, this trend signalled citizens' growing dissatisfaction with electoral democracy as a system of governance able to deliver on their developmental aspirations. This latent feeling was thrust into the limelight when the successive coups d'état across the region that followed the August 2020 coup in Mali were greeted with popular support and excitement.

Widely acclaimed as the best system of governance, one which permits citizens to have a say in managing their affairs through elected representatives, the disaffection towards electoral democracy in West Africa appears unusual and worrisome. Considering that competitive and participatory elections are a central institution of contemporary liberal democracy, any attempt to understand citizens' dissatisfaction with democracy starts by interrogating the quality of elections. Hence, although elections have become a regular feature on the political calendar in most African countries, concerns that they are often lacking in transparency and thus prone to fraud have been identified as a major cause of rising voter apathy.

Beyond this flaw, which unsuccessful parties often cite to justify their contestation of election results, Nwokolo (2022) argues that some of the other reasons that explain voter apathy on the continent include: a lack of knowledge about the voting process, a lack of knowledge about the candidates or issues, and a lack of understanding about how voting affects them personally. This points to the importance of information integrity within the context of an electoral process. A careful look at all these factors seems to lead one towards the realization that transparency and the right to access credible information have not been given the requisite priority in managing electoral processes on the African continent at large and in the West Africa region in particular.

While it is widely accepted that genuine democratic elections should reflect the free expression of the will of the people (or citizens), a pertinent question is: how free is the choice of an uninformed electorate? By recognizing every individual's right to hold opinions without interference, Article 19 of the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) consecrates citizens' right to seek and receive all the information they need to form an opinion. In the context of democratic elections, voters should be given access to all the information they need to understand why they should participate, how they can participate, the issues at stake, the different candidates and their plans, etc.

Unfortunately, in practice, this is not always the case as research shows that there is a disinformation pandemic across the globe, making it difficult for individuals to access trustworthy information (Munene and Oloo 2024). Munene and Oloo (2024) note that fake news is widespread in African elections, especially in presidential elections. The situation is made worse by the ease with which disinformation can be spread, the multitude of techniques employed to do so, and the variety of actors (individuals, state actors, foreign governments, and specialist firms) involved (Hassan 2022). These emerging challenges point to the need to safeguard the integrity of the information space, and especially the digital information space during elections. Compromised information integrity could also compromise the overall integrity of elections, especially when it comes to acceptance of results (International IDEA et al. 2024).

Saddled with the responsibility of organizing elections, electoral management bodies (EMBs) inadvertently find themselves at the centre of the interplay between electoral integrity and information integrity. On the one hand, the credibility of the elections they conduct depends on how well-informed citizens are; on the other hand, the environment in which they operate is rife with deliberate disinformation and abuse of artificial intelligence (AI) by bad faith actors. Therefore, to ensure the sustainability of elections and, more broadly, democratic governance in the West Africa region, EMBs need to reflect on the role they must play to uphold citizens' rights to access credible information on electoral processes.

Created in 2008 as the umbrella body of EMBs in West Africa, ECONEC has as its core mandate to promote the conduct of peaceful, fair and credible elections whose outcomes are accepted by all stakeholders. Its means of action include the conduct of symposia on relevant thematic issues of interest to election administrators, capacity-building programmes, peer-learning events, research and advocacy. Hence, in pursuit of its mandate and in keeping with its tradition of organizing annual symposia, ECONEC plans to organize a conference on the topic *Information Integrity and Electoral Integrity: What Role for EMBs in the Era of Social Media?* This topic is particularly pertinent at a time when rising voter apathy towards elections, coupled with widespread usage of social media to spread disinformation, is leading to popular acceptance of unconstitutional changes of government and the emergence of autocratic military regimes in the West Africa region.

### Objectives

The main objective of the symposium is to critically assess the role of EMBs in promoting information integrity as a critical aspect of protecting electoral integrity.

More specifically, the symposium will attempt to:

- review conceptual issues around the obligation to guarantee citizens access to information on electoral processes;

- examine the role of EMBs in guaranteeing a clean information environment during the electoral process;
- explore how EMBs answer the three pertinent questions: *What? How? When?*, in framing their voter information and communication strategies;
- assess the impact of the digital media space on the integrity of electoral process; and
- proffer policy recommendations on how EMBs can leverage the digital media space to fulfil their obligations to guarantee the integrity of the information space and provide citizens access to information on the electoral process.

### Methodology

The symposium will be organized around several panel discussions on specific themes. A moderator will facilitate each panel, which will comprise discussants, who will make presentations that set the stage for general discussions around the issues raised.

A rapporteur will be entrusted with responsibility for producing a comprehensive report on the symposium deliberations. This report will serve as the basis for preparing a policy brief on access to information and elections in Africa.

### Expected Outcome(s)

It is expected that at the end of the symposium, participants will have a clearer understanding of:

- the theoretical underpinnings of access to information as a citizen's right;
- the type of information citizens need to fully participate in the electoral process;
- the opportunities and pitfalls of social media usage in the electoral process; and
- how EMBs can adequately use social media to provide citizens with access to information on the electoral process.

### Target Participants

The following are the target participants at the symposium:

- chairpersons and/or members of ECONEC member EMBs;
- communications directors of ECONEC member EMBs;
- communications and other thematic experts;
- civil society organizations;
- development partners involved in providing electoral support/assistance to EMBs (including the AU, ECF-SADC, International IDEA, IFES, EISA, UNDP, CHR, etc.); and
- the media.

### Working Languages and Documents

The symposium will be conducted in the three ECOWAS official languages (English, French and Portuguese) with simultaneous interpretation provided.

The *Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa*, the recently launched *Principles and Guidelines for the use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa* and the PowerPoint presentations of the various discussants will serve as the main working documents for the symposium.

# Annex B: Programme

## Day One, 11 November 2024

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                |                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 08:30–09:00                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Arrival and Registration of Participants                                                       | EC Sierra Leone/ECONEC |
| Opening ceremony                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                |                        |
| 09:00–09:04                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Welcome statement by Ms Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, Mayor of Freetown                                   |                        |
| 09:04–09:08                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Goodwill message by Dr Roba D. Sharamo, Africa and West Asia Director, International IDEA      |                        |
| 09:08–09:12                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Goodwill message by Mr Baidessou Soukolgue, Executive Director, EISA                           |                        |
| 09:12–09:16                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Goodwill message by Amb. Harouna Moussa, ECOWAS Resident Representative                        |                        |
| 09:16–09:20                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Goodwill message by Dr David Moinina Sengeh, Chief Minister                                    |                        |
| 09:20–09:25                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Opening statement by Mr Mohammed Konneh, Chair of EC Sierra Leone and President of ECONEC      |                        |
| 09:25–09:45                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Keynote address                                                                                |                        |
| 09:45–10:00                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Group photograph and coffee break                                                              |                        |
| Plenary sessions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                |                        |
| <b>Panel 1: Recent elections in focus:</b> The purpose of this session is to jointly review the elections conducted in the region in the recent past, giving the opportunity to election administrators to share their views on what went well, the challenges they faced, the lessons they learned and the opportunities they see for the future. |                                                                                                |                        |
| 10:00–10:05                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Introduction of panel and discussant(s):<br>Mr Serigne Mamadou Ka, Permanent Secretary, ECONEC |                        |
| 10:05–10:25                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | The 2023 General elections in Liberia:<br>Mr Alvin T. Jalloh, NEC Liberia                      |                        |
| 10:25–10:45                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | The 2024 Presidential election in Senegal:<br>Mr Biram Sene, DGE Senegal                       |                        |
| 10:45–11:30                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Questions & Answers—General Discussions:<br>Moderator, discussants and participants            |                        |
| <b>Panel 2: Normative frameworks on access to information and electoral processes:</b> The purpose of this session is to set the stage for understanding why EMBs are duty-bound to ensure citizens have access to information on the electoral process.                                                                                           |                                                                                                |                        |
| 11:30–11:35                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Introduction of panel and discussant(s):<br>Ms Hlengiwe Dube, CHR, University of Pretoria      |                        |
| 11:35–11:50                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Normative frameworks:<br>Mr Maxwell Kadiri, Open Society Foundations                           |                        |
| 11:50–12:05                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Normative frameworks:<br>Mr Jeggan Grey-Johnson, Open Society Foundations                      |                        |

### Day One, 11 November 2024

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 12:05–12:20                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Conceptual framework: electoral integrity and information integrity:<br><i>Dr Marystella Simiyu</i> , CHR, University of Pretoria |
| 12:20–13:00                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Questions & Answers—General Discussions:<br>Moderator, discussants & participants                                                 |
| 13:00–14:00                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Lunch break                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Panel 3: Providing access to information on elections:</b> This session will explore the types, scope and limits of the information that EMBs should make available to citizens in order to ensure informed participation in the electoral process. |                                                                                                                                   |
| 14:00–14:05                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Introduction of panel and discussant(s):<br><i>Ms Clara Cole</i> , Africa Director, IFES                                          |
| 14:05–14:25                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | An overview of good practices in voter information and communication:<br><i>Mr Mamadou Seck</i> , Director, Synapsus Consulting   |
| 14:25–14:45                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | An overview of good practices in voter information and communication:<br><i>Dr Emmanuel Akwetey</i> , Executive Director, IDEG    |
| 14:45–15:30                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Questions and answers—General discussions:<br>Moderator, discussants & participants                                               |
| 15:30–15:40                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Tea/coffee break                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Panel 4: Access to information in the digital era: Opportunities and challenges:</b> This session will explore how social media usage has created both opportunities and risks with regard to access to information in electoral processes.         |                                                                                                                                   |
| 15:40–15:45                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Introduction of panel and discussant(s)<br><i>Ms Lenny Taabu</i> , Programme Officer, EISA                                        |
| 15:45–16:05                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <i>Mr George Kofi Sarpong</i> , Executive Secretary, NMC Ghana                                                                    |
| 16:05–16:25                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <i>Mr Osama Aljaber</i> , Digital Democracy Specialist, UNDP (Virtual)                                                            |
| 16:25–16:50                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Questions and answers—General discussions<br>Moderator, discussants & participants                                                |

### 12 November 2024: Day two

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 08:30–09:00                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Arrival and registration of participants<br>EC Sierra Leone/ECONEC                               |
| 09:00–09:15                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Recap of day one<br><i>Mr Serigne Mamadou Ka</i> , Permanent Secretary, ECONEC                   |
| <b>Panel 5: EMB strategies for promoting access to information during elections:</b> This session will afford EMBs the opportunity to share their experiences in framing and implementing their voter information strategies, focusing on the <i>What?</i> , <i>How?</i> and <i>When?</i> |                                                                                                  |
| 09:15–09:20                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Introduction of panel and discussant(s)<br><i>Mr Tawanda Chimhini</i> , African Union Commission |
| 09:20–09:40                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | The experience of Sierra Leone<br><i>Ms Zainab Umu Moseray</i> , Electoral Commissioner, ECSL    |

## 12 November 2024: Day two

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 09:40–10:00                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | How EMBs could promote access to information<br><i>Ms Olufunto Akinduro</i> , Senior Programme Officer, International IDEA |
| 10:00–10:30                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Questions and Answers—General Discussions<br>Moderator, discussants & participants                                         |
| 10:30–10:45                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Tea/coffee break                                                                                                           |
| <b>Panel 6: Leveraging social media to uphold freedom of access to information:</b> This session will provide suggestions and pointers on how EMBs could use Social Media tools to fulfil their obligation to provide citizens access to information on the electoral process. |                                                                                                                            |
| 10:45–10:50                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Introduction of panel and discussant(s)<br><i>Mr Utloile Silaigwana</i> , Chief Elections Officer, ZEC Zimbabwe            |
| 10:50–11:10                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <i>Dr Kojo Impraim</i> , Director, MfPSD, Media Foundation for West Africa                                                 |
| 11:10–11:30                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <i>Mr Sy Mamabolo</i> , Chief Electoral Officer, IEC South Africa                                                          |
| 11:30–12:00                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Questions and Answers—General Discussions<br>Moderator, discussants and participants                                       |
| <b>Wrapping it up</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                            |
| 12:00–12:15                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Summary of Discussions<br><i>Ms Mariama Toure</i> , Junior Programme Officer, ECONEC                                       |
| 12:15–12:20                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Vote of Thanks<br><i>Mr Serigne Mamadou Ka</i> , Permanent Secretary, ECONEC                                               |

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## ABOUT ECONEC

The ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions (ECONEC) is the umbrella organization of electoral management bodies (EMBs) in West Africa. It is a member of the Association of African Election Authorities (AAEA).

Founded in February 2008 to promote free, fair and credible elections, the Network was inspired by the 1991 ECOWAS Declaration of Political Principles on Freedom, People's Rights and Democratisation. This is a reaffirmation of the commitment to the relevant provisions of the ECOWAS Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999); guided by the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) and the Decision of Heads of State and Government of Dakar (2003). This regional initiative demonstrates a renewed commitment to democracy in Africa and to the strengthening of a democratic order on the continent.

### Objectives

1. The promotion of free and credible elections in West Africa;
2. The promotion of independent and impartial election organizations and administrators;
3. Strengthening public confidence in the electoral process through free and credible electoral procedures;
4. The development of professional election officials with integrity, with a strong sense of public service and a commitment to democracy;
5. To bring predictability to the framework for elections;
6. Commitment to the promotion and consolidation of democratic culture to create a conducive environment for the peaceful organization of elections;
7. The sharing of experiences, information, technology and election documents;
8. Cooperation for the improvement of electoral laws and practices;
9. Gradual harmonization of electoral laws and practices, as appropriate, capitalizing on good practice in electoral matters;
10. Rationalization and pooling of resources to reducing the cost of conducting elections; and
11. Improving the working conditions of its members in the fulfilment of their mandate.

To achieve its objectives, the Network organizes and supports activities such as workshops, seminars, symposia, meetings, exchanges of personnel, funding relevant research, election observation, dissemination of information and experience sharing on electoral matters and, generally, all activities or initiatives that help to achieve its objectives.

### Membership

ECONEC membership is drawn from the EMBs of the fifteen ECOWAS member countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo).

### Get in touch with us:

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# About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with 35 Member States founded in 1995, with a mandate to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

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## WHAT WE DO

We develop policy-friendly research related to elections, parliaments, constitutions, digitalization, climate change, inclusion and political representation, all under the umbrella of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We assess the performance of democracies around the world through our unique Global State of Democracy Indices and Democracy Tracker.

We provide capacity development and expert advice to democratic actors including governments, parliaments, election officials and civil society. We develop tools and publish databases, books and primers in several languages on topics ranging from voter turnout to gender quotas.

We bring states and non-state actors together for dialogues and lesson sharing. We stand up and speak out to promote and protect democracy worldwide.

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## WHERE WE WORK

Our headquarters is in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

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## OUR PUBLICATIONS AND DATABASES

We have a catalogue with more than 1,000 publications and over 25 databases on our website. Most of our publications can be downloaded free of charge.

<<https://www.idea.int>>



The electoral management bodies (EMBs) play a paramount role in ensuring the public has access to accurate and timely information, as a precursor to electoral and information integrity. However, while the legitimacy of the elections EMBs oversee hinges on how well-informed citizens are, EMBs themselves must function in an increasingly complex information environment—one characterized by the spread of disinformation, deepfakes, AI-generated propaganda and other manipulative tactics.

This policy paper explores how EMBs can navigate such a dual challenge and what measures can help them strengthen their role in an era dominated by digital and social media. It examines the pressures and risks that EMBs face, considers strategies and best practices, and offers actionable recommendations to enhance both information and electoral integrity. The paper targets ECOWAS member states' EMBs, civil society organizations, communication experts and development partners.