

Sarah Tinsley

International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), 1987

Transcript

My name is Sarah Tinsley. I was contacted by former USAID Administrator Peter McPherson in early 1988 to serve as the first director, the acting director of a new organization, IFES, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. IFES had been registered the previous summer in July of 1987 as a non-profit of 501c3 with the IRS.

By way of background, I had previously served at USAID, beginning in February of 1981, first working as an assistant to Administrator McPherson, and then later as one of the policy directors of USAID. In my capacity as policy director, I also managed a portfolio of small economic development assistance projects in the neighborhood of about \$10 million, and these projects were operating around the world, in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

In a much earlier life, I had also served in political campaigns in several statewide elections. Because of that background, Peter thought I was the right fit to bring both the election experience coupled with my six years experience working in international development managing small economic development projects.

To remind, IFES was set up as a non-profit, bipartisan organization to provide technical election assistance to requesting countries, organizations, or other governments. We were set up to be a resource with the capacity to recommend election specialists, those who were well-schooled in drafting constitutions, election specialist vendors, or we could provide those experts to travel to countries, to organizations, to actually provide this sort of hands-on assistance in country. We provided, I need to say, no election assistance, no technology, nothing to any organizations based in the United States.

Peter had selected Clifton White to serve as the founding chair of the organization. Clifton had decades of political and campaign experience and was well-respected by both sides of the political aisle. Cliff White went on to recruit a bipartisan board of directors, and served as our chair from 1987 until his death in 1993.

I was hired in the summer of 1988, and served as the first director. I was also head of programming and asked to begin the process of staff recruitment. I focused on hiring people who had both international economic development experience, people with specific subject matter expertise who had worked in specific regions around the world, and many of whom had also served in leadership roles in other non-profit voluntary organizations around the world.

My goal in the early days was to identify other private sector individuals, people in the United States, primarily in the legal and the university settings. I needed subject matter experts. I needed individuals who were experts in constitutional law, ballot design and transport for ballot counting, election monitoring, as well as expertise providing technical support to local democratic election organizations. I knew we would be receiving requests for that type of assistance. We

wanted these US based individuals to serve on unpaid teams to travel to these countries, as requested, to assist with, as I said, how to draft a constitution, how to draft a secure ballot, how to move ballots from one place in the country to another for counting. Many of these countries had had years and years of experience in working with single-party elections, think Eastern Europe, but had almost no experience managing multiple candidate elections, multiple parties with new ballots, and they needed assistance in all aspects of running a free and fair election.

During my tenure at IFES, I hired staff. I drafted and defended funding proposals to USAID and other, larger non profit foundations. Often USAID mission directors, embassy staff would contact IFES to say that they had been contacted by overseas organizations, prospective candidates, asking "How do we conduct a multiparty election?" Our U.S. government professionals overseas were extremely talented, but this was an area that they wanted election experts, and IFES was able to provide accomplished election experts, election vendors, and actually fund these individuals. These experts were volunteers who traveled and provided a week or two or three of election assistance.

After the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, we had more and more requests from Eastern Europe. Concurrently, during that time, it was necessary for us to expand the network of funding institutions beyond USAID, beyond other Western governments who were also contributing to, providing technical election assistance and providing assistance to IFES.

I traveled on several occasions with IFES Chairman Cliff White to New York to introduce IFES to other larger foundations interested in supporting multiparty elections and in country democratic organizations. Providing organizations with this kind of assistance was becoming increasingly of interest to larger, nonprofit institutions around the world who wanted to be supportive of this effort.

Today, despite reduction in funds from USAID, IFES continues to support election assistance in over 20 countries. We're extremely proud of what IFES has been able to accomplish since 1988.

Despite the reduction in support that we have enjoyed over the past 35 years from USAID, IFES continues to enjoy support from other countries' development assistance programs. IFES also has significant support from the private sector as well as other governments including the UK, Canada and Sweden among others. Google has been a fantastic supporter. We have a website, IFES.org, where you can learn more about what IFES has accomplished, our worldwide programs, our successes we have enjoyed and our plans for the next 10 years. I encourage everyone to check out the IFES website.

I am proud to have served as a member of the IFES board of directors for the last several years.