

Transcript

Therese Pearce-Laanela: Hello, it's lovely to be with you on this Stories of Democracy, Institutions of Democracy, oral history space, and today, I'm going to speak to you about the ACE Project. I'll explain what it is and where it is in a moment, but just to say a few words about myself, my name is Therese Pearce-Laanela, and I'm currently the head of electoral processes, currently this being 2026, don't know when you're listening, but I am currently, in 2026, the head of Electoral Processes at International IDEA, which is an intergovernmental organization focusing on democracy and elections, and based in Stockholm, but with offices pretty well all over the place.

But the story I'm going to tell you today begins much, much longer ago, if we think mid-90s, and I think that the mid-90s really features in this story, because I was asked to do an origin story, and it is the ACE Project, which today you can find on www.aceproject.org, and I think you'll see a link, wherever you press this, there should be a link there. And I know that these days, that's not how you search for anything, but in the old days, that was how you found something, and so to understand what this site looks like, not using AI, you could go to that website. But for its time, it might look anachronistic now, but for its time, it was really an ambitious and forward-leaning endeavor to put this together.

So this was meant to be an encyclopedia where people could find what they needed about electoral processes when they needed it, and it was special in a number of different ways, but one was that it was put together by a number of different organizations working together. And so this partnership really is, to me at least, an important part of the story. What we wanted to do as a partnership was to make sure that anyone who was interested in designing or organizing elections was able to find what they needed when they needed it. So that was the vision that guided all of us from these different organizations. And, just to frame this story that I'm going to tell, it's pretty amazing that 30 years on, that partnership not only lives on, but it's grown and the resources that we put out then have grown and are still foundational to anything that you look for, not anything perhaps, but a lot that you look for about the foundations of election administration does have its origins in the ACE Project, even if you might have found it through a search in a different way. So, I think the partnership dimension, and the long-lastingness of it, and the ambition to make information not something that was difficult to find, but something that was easy to find, I think, is part of this story that I do feel very proud of.

And it is an honor for me to do this story, but I should say that this origin story isn't really mine to tell necessarily. It was many, many, many people, so the version I'm telling you is the one that I know best, because it's the one that I experienced, but it wouldn't have happened except for the motivations of all of those who came together to put it together, so I'm acknowledging them herewith, and I hope to mention a few by name, but you know who you are out there. But over the 30 years, so many people have contributed to the resources of the ACE Project. Really, anyone who's contributed to election administration becoming the profession that it is today.

But my engagement with this was that I was the program manager from the International IDEA side, and we were one of the founding partners for this, and a real shout out to the other two founding partners. The partnership is much, much bigger now. The two founding partners, the ones who had the kind of the leadership and the audacity to step into this and to work together with someone else to pool resources with other organizations, were the United Nations, at the time, it was the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. It even had a different name at one point, DDSMS, but anyways, this section that worked with public administration, had different names over the years. But also very, very much IFES, which was, like International IDEA, a new organization in Washington at that time, and we worked together absolutely seamlessly, as did all the other organizations that onboarded after those first years.

And the origin of the ACE story is very much the story of election administration becoming a field, a professional field, the field that we know today, because before this period, it really wasn't. Before the democratization wave, different countries organized elections in their own way, and there wasn't really any reason to look outside your own borders, perhaps to a colonial power, but not a sense that there was global norms around this in the same way that there is today.

And so, if we think of election administration as having a turning point, the ACE Project is really comes in lockstep with that turning point, which is, of course, for those of you who are studying political science or recent history, is, of course, the democratization wave of the late 1980s and early 1990s. And so, if we imagine back to that period, and we imagine this tidal wave of democratic transitions, and peace agreements, and it was just one after the other of countries that were organizing elections for the first time, and were really hungry for different kinds of information, and I can just give a few examples.

So, in Latin America, for instance, the focus was really how to build institutions that could withstand authoritarianism. Like, just strong institutions that were just like, no, you're not interfering with these elections again, no more dictatorships. But in Southern Africa, for example, an extraordinary amount of effort was put into civic education to just onboard new democratic citizenry into democracy, so getting people on board to be democratic citizens. And we also had, at that time, war-torn places, like Mozambique or Cambodia, with almost no infrastructure, just absolutely damaged from war or poverty, who were really doing the logistics or operations of elections from scratch. And perhaps I can just add one more example, which is the Philippines and [the People Power revolution], which is not only how election administrators organize elections, but how, as stakeholders, you monitor and you keep your eye on what elections should be and what you should be looking out for.

So the kinds of information that was emerging, the kinds of, the field was being shapen. It wasn't pre-existing, it was being shaped *a la minute*. And the knowledge of what was being shaped was of value to the next country who was going through the same thing straight away. And so the vision was, how do you get that information out to the people who need it, without using, as was originally the case, perhaps a fax? Someone you knew sent you a fax of something that they did in one place, and so what was a more efficient way of doing that? So all this, just to summarize,

is that the field was being tested and renewed really at breakneck speed, and that the norms and practices really needed to be codified.

So that was this imperative that drove the beginnings of the ACE Project. And so each of those founding organizations, which was the United Nations and IFES and International IDEA, all came to the table with those two sets of needs. One is to codify the rapidly evolving knowledge about what we knew about how to organize or design elections, and two, how to share it quickly and efficiently with those who needed it when they needed it, even if you didn't know exactly who they were.

And so, this was on the minds separately in each of the organizations. For IFES, I think they'd originally thought of doing a technical paper series to codify what they knew. For the United Nations/UNDP, this organizing of elections was being codified in their own practices on how they did this as part of a larger public administration codification. And for International IDEA, I can explain our entry point, and it was that we had member states, and we met with the electoral management bodies (EMBs) of our member states, and they said that the most important thing for them was, the most important topic that we should focus on in our work, was the cost of elections. So this was something that was common to all of them, is just understanding how much elections should cost, how to bring down those costs, and so forth.

But we realized that if you're going to talk about cost, you actually need to talk about choice points. And if you're going to talk about choice points, you have to kind of break down the electoral system into its bits, and then each of those bits has different choices that you can make. For example, if you're vote counting, you can choose to count your votes at a polling station or at a counting center, and those choices have cost implications. So it was hard to do some kind of just generic, here's how you reduce the cost of elections without making trade-offs between different choice points. And so, for us, this idea of breaking the elections down into its bits was on our minds. So these are the different entry points that the organizations came with, but somehow, together, we had this need to codify, and the need to get the information out.

And so, in a meeting in Stockholm in 1996, I should say October, we brought together the best expertise that we knew of, or those that were available at the time, to come and help us with this breakdown of the electoral process into its bits. And we broke it down into 59 bits, and it was a bit unwieldy. Later, we brought it down collectively to 9. But more importantly, those 59 bits were difficult to work with, but at that very meeting was the seeds of the partnership, this decision to do this together, and the buy-in from IFES and the UN to take the ideas that they had had and to pool them together with this one, and that we would work on something together.

And so that togetherness was something that we designed during a very, very snowy February in 1997, and we just hammered out a Memorandum of Understanding, how we would work together, and the vision that we had. So, in some ways, the partnership was the easy part, but the hard part was breaking down. So, what we wanted was a resource, and it's what you can see now. You may not be able to see the architecture behind it, but we designed, we booked a week in a cabin on the Potomac River, and just sat there, in the end, we were just in our pajamas, just

because it was relentless, but breaking down the election process into... so just to explain, if we took broad nine topic areas, which largely followed the electoral cycle, but everything from electoral system design, voter registration, voting operations, dealing with parties and candidates, vote counting, civic education, and so forth. And for each of those, we broke those down into high-level overviews, basic design choices, and then for each of those choices, steps, cost implications, and so forth. And we didn't write the text then, but we wrote the outline of it. And each section in the outline was to be a piece of text, which would be put together, and that users would be able to find without having to navigate through the whole thing.

So this breakdown of the electoral process that took us a week to do came at the same time as technology was developing, and this ability to break things down. Remember that before the internet, before floppy disks, before CD-ROMs, text was sequential. I mean, if you had a lot of text, it was a big book. But what we could see, we began this even before the internet was available, but we could see already with computers and word processing that sometimes you could bypass something, or you could not look at everything. You could look at headings and click on them if you were interested. So that technology was available in the late 90s, and we wanted to take advantage of it.

One thing, because this is an oral history, I can tell a few anecdotes about that process of breaking down the electoral process. In a way, it brought forth some things which are now common knowledge, but at the time, we just realized how differently words were used all over the world, and we had to try and find some kind of terminology that would work everywhere, so I'll just give some examples. In Latin America or in Spanish-speaking countries, they talk often about tables, voting tables, so you'll hear, even today, people talking about mesas de voto and translating it to tables. So we just decided systematically that polling stations would be the small units, and polling centers would be the big unit. Of course, in many countries, polling stations are the big units, and there's a different word for the small unit, but we tried to find some kind of uniformity.

We argued a lot. Was it redistricting? Was it delimitation? Was it limitation? Was it drawing of boundaries? What were we gonna call that? And Ray Kennedy, who was a director at IFES at the time, he said something which I remember to this day, which was, he said, "the words that we pick now may be the words that are used from now on, so we just have to pick wisely." And I think of that when words are being used, so we picked boundary delimitation, and you can still see that word being used now. We also stuck to, not a great word, but electoral management bodies, and this acronym, EMBs, is still used, to this day, and yeah, sorry about that, it's not a great word, but it's just this idea of vocabulary as unifying a profession is one that really stayed with me.

We also decided then that when in doubt, when there were two words for the same thing, we would pick the one that was most intuitive, and that's something I really recommend for anybody who's doing international work. So I'll give the example of 'returning officer.' A returning officer is very well understood in Canada, or in the UK, or in Australia, or in India even, but it makes no sense if you don't come from a country with those traditions. The word returning doesn't mean anything, and so we would choose the word, district electoral officer. Or similarly, in Australia, for example, they use formal and informal votes, but we would pick valid or invalid, because the word

itself helps you understand what it's trying to convey. So even though different words are used for that phenomenon, we would always try and pick the one that was the right one.

So I think part of the contribution of the ACE Project is just to help with a vocabulary that has since then, helped to bind a field together, and has helped with cross-border learning because you have access to the same words. So that week in Potomac was very important for me, I think, personally, in my development of understanding of electoral processes, but also hopefully for the field.

So we emerged from the Potomac with 9 topic areas and a list of files that needed to be written. We divided them up into three, so each organization took on the responsibility for hiring lead writers to fill each of these headings with text. We developed a set of protocols that would cover everything, so all of the lead writers were working from the same terms of reference, whether they were hired by IFES or the UN or ourselves. And then, because there was so much overlap, you can't really talk about vote counting without talking about voting operations. And there was just these things... there were things that needed to be harmonized between topic areas, so we gathered, the nine lead writers at that time, in Cambridge, to just talk all of that through, talk with each other, and get to know each other so that they would have that personal connection as they were writing and check in with each other and create that kind of informal network.

So, that was quite an exciting phase of developing all of that, and meanwhile, we had hired an external facilitator to hold it all together. Shout out to **Harry Neufeld**, and then to **Lisa Handley**, who played that role. External facilitators who just kept everything on track as it got more and more complex, and a software developer who helped, who basically just invented coding and stuff to have this in the sequence that we wanted, and he worked in lockstep with us throughout. That's something I really recommend, is to have your software developer in-house with you, and shout out to **Jim Carrico**, who was with us every step of the way, and kind of invented stuff as he went.

Later, we expanded from the 9 topic areas to 12, and we repeated the lead writers meeting, this time in beautiful Banff, a couple of years later, in 2001. But, getting ahead of myself, because once all of the text was together, by this time, I think the internet was slowly emerging, but nonetheless, the first outputs were a CD-ROM, and a user's guide, which was a little book with the outline of what you would find on the CD-ROM, but also the basics that you would need to understand each of the topic areas. The guiding principles, the main choices, and so forth were in that book, for those who were maybe not quite accustomed to CD-ROM at the time.

So the launch was in New York at the General Assembly foyer, and there are pictures on the ACE Project site of that, in 1998, I think. October, yes. Meanwhile, we realized that, yes, that was wonderful, we had the basics of election administration available, on CD-ROM, and later, as the internet developed, we made it available on the internet as well, on the website, same website as where you can see it today, on the aceproject.org website.

But, it was in English. Not everybody speaks English, and this was one of the big turning points for the project, and I'm just so hugely grateful to two just wonderful election commissions. They

were wonderful then, they remain wonderful now. They are absolutely key partners for the ACE Project, and that is Elections Canada, who took full responsibility for French, complete French version, and then became very, very active members of the partnership more broadly. And also, IFE at the time, INE now, which is the election management body of Mexico, hugely committed, and who now hold the Secretariat of the ACE Project, and lead it from Mexico City, and are part of the renewal that will come soon. So the onboarding of two election management bodies was just a huge boon for the project, and the usership just expanded exponentially with the additional languages.

We were then, thanks to the just wonderful work of UNDP with their partners in the Arab region and the donors who supported. Shout out to Sweden, I know, were part of the donors, and I'm sure there were others. But an Arabic language version, which also became hugely popular. And I should say that the development of the Arab language version also helped develop the skill sets of all those who were involved, and was seen as a real milestone in... it wasn't just translation as such, but it was a real way of embodying the knowledge that was in the ACE Project through the translation.

Other things that happened in parallel were more features. So, one of the features was a practitioner's network. This was the idea that would be more interactive, maybe alongside the ideas that were behind Wikipedia, or maybe following it, I'm not sure which, but for a while, when resources allowed, there was quite a vibrant, curated part of the of the ACE Project, which was questions, answers from the practitioner's network, and curated answers.

Other features that existed for a time was there was a period where we had regional hubs who were able to collect sample materials, examples, and so forth, and keep the website vibrant as such. So those were days of many resources. We're not there now, but I'm very, very grateful that those resources, they're still up now. You'll see plenty of sample materials from all over the world from that period.

Another development, and I should say that those features were launched in a reboot of the project, which I didn't write down the name here, but let me just remember... it was 2006, April, in Ottawa. And this was known as ACE2, but it was the rebranding to not being the ACE Project, but to being the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. So the idea that it wasn't just a static encyclopedia, but that it was a lively network came with that one.

And since then, additional features or developments have been the linkage with the Bridge Project Partnership and Curriculum, which is curriculum for election administrators, used all over the world, and the access of facilitators to the ACE Project resources. Of course, anybody has access to them, but it's systematically included in the curriculum to keep in alignment with

the vocabulary that's being taught out, and the vocabulary that you would find if you looked something up on the internet, so to make sure that the field of election administration was kind of being held together.

Other developments were the expansion of the partnership to really, really important partners, one of which is EISA with the name has changed over the years, but it was initially, I think it still is, the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa, and it's had a few other names, but basically they are the premier organization in Africa working with electoral processes, have been doing it for 30 or so years, and also, the Carter Center as partners, and the Carter Center were really important because they are the holders and the curators of the legal obligations for elections, and so the introduction of the database on legal obligations was really important for the development of the ACE Project, as was the Election Observer Report repository, which is now there.

So, it brings us to this day. I'm not as connected now, I'm telling you older history, and those who have been involved in more recent years can tell more about what's happened in the last number of years. But certainly, we're in a different period now, and those who are working with the project now are dealing with both the wonders of artificial intelligence as the way that we look for information, but also how best to make sure that when people do search for information about elections, that they find good information and solid information. And up until very, very recently, it was really the ACE Project and other reputable, great publications, that is, practitioner-anchored publications from organizations such as IFES or IDEA, or the United Nations, or others, or there's more and more academics in the field, and those would be the publications that you would find if you looked on the internet.

These days, there are political actors who are putting information on the internet for politicized reasons, to perhaps undermine elections, and it really, really worries me, that if you look up something like voting by mail, that you might find something that really isn't as neutral and thoughtful as what you would have found in the ACE Project or in other resources that are developed by reputable organizations. So I think that's something that we really need to keep an eye on, and I know that the ACE partners are very vigilant about this, and they'll be meeting shortly to discuss where the project goes next. I'm really excited to see it, and I am so proud that the partnership continues.

I think in these days of democracy both backsliding and with very, very little resources, a partnership approach is one I really, really believe in. Let's pool what we know, and let's make it available to everybody. That was the vision then, and I think it still holds now. Thank you so much, for those of you who have listened to the end. I hope you've appreciated this personalized story about the ACE Project. Thank you.