



Electoral Institutions and People: Money Well Spent?

Much of the money spent on electoral assistance over the past few years has helped electoral management bodies (EMBs) train polling staff and organize elections on time. Much less has been invested in EMBs as institutions, to support them in becoming less dependent on external funding and expertise while gaining and retaining credibility. Too often the international community invests large amounts of money for an intense period: which may work, but is not sustainable.

Our task this week is to consider how donor money would be best spent to meet the long-term objective of supporting the building of sustainable democracy. I would like to look at four things which this conference might explore:

- the development of professional electoral management;
- the factors which may inhibit professionalism;
- electoral sustainability and donor support; and
- networks, sharing knowledge and peer support.

1. The Development of Professional Electoral Management

What Is a Professional Electoral Administrator?

When I first fought election campaigns in the City of Newcastle upon Tyne as a candidate over 30 years ago, the election administration was in the hands of a civil servant called Joe Mackenzie. Joe and his small team had been responsible for the efficient organisation of electoral registration and of elections in the city for many years. As a young insurgent challenging previously safe political domination by one party, I was what we now call a stakeholder in the electoral process. I found I was able to rely on Joe not only to be committed to deliver first class free and fair elections for the City and to uphold the electoral law, but to give generously of his time to provide helpful guidance if he was asked sensible technical questions by someone genuinely interested in elections. He was a great example of a professional electoral administrator.

Professionalism in election administration is not merely a question of compliance with the legislative framework, including electoral regulations, procedures and manuals. In addition to these, a professional electoral administrator needs:

- a commitment to the principles that are the foundation of electoral good practice;
- a strong commitment to high-quality electoral service to all stakeholders; and
- an understanding of strategies for strengthening democratic development.

An EMB's capacity to perform all its electoral functions and responsibilities effectively depends very much on the capacities and performance of its secretariat staff. I suspect Joe Mackenzie had built up his store of knowledge and wisdom by learning on the job over the years, by reading, application and experience. That, however, would be a hit and miss approach if one relied on it generally. The capacities of EMB secretariat staff can be enhanced by implementing appropriate recruitment strategies and vigorous training and development programmes for both permanent and temporary staff.

No matter how great their commitment to their work, the bulk of members appointed to independent and mixed EMBs are not experienced in the full range of responsibilities associated with leading and managing electoral processes. Professional development for EMB members is as essential for attaining and maintaining high-quality EMB performance as is the development of EMB secretariat staff.

Recruitment and Gender Balance

As organisations that must set an example of acting equitably, EMBs need to implement recruitment and staffing policies that are conducive to gender balance in EMB staff, and that promote the employment of women to achieve this. This can be difficult when an electoral administration is being set up from scratch, as the South African IEC will testify. Women need to be afforded opportunities equal to those offered to men for employment, training, promotion and benefits for all EMB permanent and temporary positions.

Staff Training and Development

Planning the training needs of an EMB is a similar task to the planning task of a Ministry of Education. Whatever policy innovations are made, the base fact remains that a new group of children enters the school system every year. Equally, new people are involved in each successive election, as administrators, as participants and as voters.

One of the pillars of professionalism in electoral administration is the proper training and development of

- core permanent EMB staff (if any);
- temporary management staff appointed for specific electoral events; and
- the large numbers of field staff that may be temporarily engaged for large-scale events such as elections, referendums or census-style voter registration.

The principles of good electoral practice, such as impartiality, transparency, voting secrecy, equality of access, accountability and efficiency, form the basis of all EMB staff training. Staff training and development is a continuing activity. Changes in electoral procedures and technology, and the time that elapses between elections, mean that even the most experienced staff cannot rely entirely on experience to 'know' their current tasks. And every member of electoral staff has to perform. As Jean-Pierre Kingsley said to me this morning, the voters expect the same level of service from every one of Elections Canada's 190,000 people on the day, whether they are long term members of staff or have only had two hours' training.

Staff training and development is however not immediately tangible, as ballot boxes or voter education and information materials are. There can be difficulties in persuading governments or donors to approve EMB budgets that contain sufficient funds for this task. The management of staff training and development needs to occupy a sufficiently senior position in the EMB's

organisational structure to ensure that it has a strong input into organisational priorities, including internal budget determination.

Permanent Staff

Organisational and staff development (OSD) for the EMB's long-term staff addresses their capacity-building and skills requirements, and also takes into account staff career development. OSD aims to unify the EMB's strategic objectives and the skills required to attain these with the career and personal development goals of its staff.

Staff development may take a number of basic forms, such as customized short-term informal training, the mentoring of staff by senior EMB or another organisation's officials, and long-term formal training in the form of courses or academic development programmes.

Donor funded international advisers and consultants may be specialists in particular electoral and technical fields or skilled electoral managers. However, EMB projects which use advisers and consultants with experience in other countries need to be structured to ensure skills transfer and capacity building in order that the project's achievements do not depart with the advisers.

Temporary Staff

No EMB can justify or afford to maintain permanently the number of staff needed for all polling stations (which in a country such as Indonesia require over 4 million staff). Efficiency considerations may also preclude the permanent maintenance of secretariats or subsidiary EMBs at regional and local levels, or the full permanent staffing of functions that are only activated during an election period.

For Governmental and Mixed Model EMBs in particular, much of the management structure for major electoral events may be based on temporary appointments or made up of staff seconded from other areas of the public service. The office from which they are seconded may not be able to release the same staff to the EMB for every electoral event.

Temporary EMB secretariat staff are often not recruited long enough before elections, nor do they stay long enough after elections, to be trained thoroughly for their work.

SOME IMPORTANT STEPS TOWARDS DEVELOPING ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION AS A PROFESSION

- **the embedding of professional development courses and activities into the working patterns of an EMB;**
- **the introduction of formal training and qualifications;**
- **the establishment of a professional body to safeguard and promote the professional interests of electoral administrators and regulate their ethical conduct;**
- **the creation of a pool of resources and a network of expertise which electoral practitioners can refer to and consult in performing their professional work; and**
- **the development of a career path and opportunities for electoral administrators**

2. Factors Which May Inhibit EMB Professionalism

The EMB may have to overcome many problems to achieve an acceptable level of professionalism. Some may be within the EMB itself, such as behavioural, planning or resource prioritisation issues. Others may be the product of factors in the EMB's external environment, including:

- *The political climate* within which elections take place: in environments of political fear, intimidation and violence, and in societies with no respect for rule of law, or where governments have no transparency or accountability, it is difficult to manage credible and legitimate elections. Nevertheless, a professionally oriented EMB can still work hard under such circumstances to demonstrate a commitment to ethical principles and by so doing contribute to efforts to build confidence in the electoral process.
- *A sound electoral legal framework* is essential for the successful planning and conduct of electoral events and also for the professionalisation of the EMB. Where the legal framework falls short of the acceptable norms, the EMB may encounter difficulties in delivering electoral events that are acceptable to all stakeholders, and may thus appear to be unprofessional. Equally, while it is preferable that changes to the legal framework be finalized long before the date of an electoral event, many EMBs, particularly in emerging democracies, find that last-minute changes to the legal framework are common.
- *Lack of continuity* undermines professional development where EMBs are temporary bodies. While a permanent EMB may have time and resources to train its staff in between elections, a temporary EMB has limited time in office—in many cases not exceeding 90 days—which makes long-term training and capacity building very difficult.
- *Lack of adequate or timely funding* can also undermine EMB's professional development programmes. Some EMBs, especially in fledgling democracies, struggle to get enough funds for electoral events. When funds are eventually made available it may be too late to conduct meaningful training of staff, especially temporary electoral staff. Funding may also include conditions that inappropriately limit the EMB's choice of types of staff training or development.

3. The Sustainability of EMBs

What is Sustainability?

Is it true that 'you can't put a price on democracy'? Is it a statement of support for resourcing or a way of avoiding issues of effectiveness and efficiency? In practice, do the people that say this put their money where their mouth is, especially year after year?

Sustainability refers to electoral policies and practices which are realistic and cost-effective, and meet the needs of stakeholders in the electoral processes both now and in the future. Sustainability aims to minimize reliance on external inputs and resources.

There are several elements to EMB sustainability:

- An EMB has *institutional sustainability* if its structures and processes enable it to fulfil its mandate and responsibilities in the longer term—that is, over a series of electoral cycles. The electoral framework—the constitution, electoral law and regulations, and administrative and other policies—need to be adequate to enable the EMB to carry out its work in an effective and efficient manner.
- An EMB has *financial and economic sustainability* if the nature and level of its funding and expenditure are adequate to fulfil its institutional mandate and responsibility. The need for cost reductions in elections results from the rising costs of election goods and services—including the use of new technologies, dwindling public-sector budgets, and the increasing frequency of elections for different levels of political institutions.
- An EMB has *human resource sustainability* if it is able to engage and retain sufficient appropriately skilled staff to manage and implement its systems and procedures.
- Other forms of EMB sustainability include socio-political and environmental factors, for example, the extent to which EMB policies and practices promote social equality and political inclusion, minimize conflict and promote environmental sustainability.

Electoral Sustainability and Donor Support

Donors have responsibilities to ensure that the electoral assistance that they provide to EMBs not only is effective, but also promotes sustainability.

While donor support may include budgetary contributions and technical assistance, including advanced technologies, some donors avoid supporting EMBs' recurrent budgets, that is, core personnel costs and rental of buildings and furniture, as well as other non-technical items, such as motor vehicles and fuel. Equally, some donors do not consider the long term costs of maintaining the systems/equipment provided, or the appropriateness of proposed systems/solutions for the EMB's environment.

Donor assistance is sometimes accompanied by a tied aid concept whereby the recipient EMB is required to purchase goods and services from nationals of the donor concerned. Often the costs of purchasing from external vendors may be considerably higher than the costs of purchasing from suppliers in-country, inflating overall electoral costs. And is it possible for donor decisions on funding to be influenced by possible vendors?

The euphoria surrounding a successful, well-funded transitional election needs to be tempered by the reality that similar levels of funding may not be available for future elections. High integrity costs relating to confidence-building processes such as peacekeeping, voter education and information, and election observation and monitoring, may be financially unsustainable. Even if a high level of international assistance for second and third elections in emerging democracies is available, it may not result in greater efficiency or effectiveness if it inhibits the development of local capacity.

Staffing for Sustainability

Staffing can be a significant proportion of an EMB's costs, but also represent the EMB's greatest asset. Inability to retain sufficient experienced staff can have a negative effect on the EMB's sustainability. Experienced staff, including temporary polling station staff, hold the

institutional memory of the EMB—the knowledge of what has and has not worked, and the experience to pass on to new staff and to other stakeholders. Staff retention requires active planning by the EMB, using measures such as reward schemes, professional training and development programmes and opportunities for promotion. Exit debriefings for departing staff may help identify issues of staff satisfaction. Advance planning of staff changes, including timely recruitment processes and mentoring of more junior staff, combined with accessible archiving of electoral records, will help the EMB operate sustainably when key staff leave.

4. What Are Electoral Networks and Why Do they Matter?

Both globalisation and international involvement in democracy building have brought rapid and dynamic changes to organisational management, including election administration. Such changes are influencing EMBs to move away from the hierarchical structures and routines of the past. Both at regional and at national level, an increasing number of electoral practitioners are also working together through well-established networks to find solutions to common problems and to build innovations through sustained sharing of ideas, information and experience.

Electoral networks are important for supporting electoral managers around the world to cope with the rapidity of change in the environments in which elections take place.

Regional EMB Networks

Through regional associations of electoral organisations, new EMBs can draw on support and experience from more established electoral authorities, can accelerate their capacity-building by exchange of personnel, and may even be able to borrow electoral materials at relatively short notice. The development of common standards with respect to free and fair elections and the quality of electoral services may have a positive effect on losers accepting election results.

Global Electoral Networks – GEO and ACE

The development of regional associations of electoral organisations and the increasing internationalisation of elections through advocacy for international standards for democratic elections led to the establishment of a global forum for discussion of EMB collaboration. The Conference of the Global Electoral Organisation (GEO) Network, which was first convened in Ottawa in April 1999, is a worldwide meeting of regional associations of election officers. The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, which we are launching later today, will be a tool to enable this discussion to take place on a continuing basis both at regional level and between regions.

Global networks may revolve around the promotion of knowledge and experience, joint research, and the promotion of international discussions on electoral issues. They can encourage and facilitate the publication of electoral materials by regional associations and promote the exchange of expertise and the secondment of technical specialists.

5. Conclusions

As an electoral community of practice, and in particular as donors designing programmes and spending money, it is time to move away from habits of the past, however convenient. A conscious effort in programme design and implementation is needed to ensure longer term investment in institutions and staff development are first considered and then implemented.

- Investing in the EMB as an institution at the same time as investing in staff development will complement the other. Investing in training only will not guarantee sustainability as staff leave or laws change.
- Sustainability is not an easy task. It takes careful planning in terms of structure, budget and human and material resources. It is often impeded, particularly between elections when donors, governments and the EMBs themselves do not see the institution as a high priority. The attitude that “you’re only important when there’s an election to run” or “there’s nothing to do after the elections” will further entrench event-driven, ad hoc assistance.
- Systematic documentation of the electoral process will stay long after the staff who wrote it have left.
- Staff incentives are key: professional development leads to increased promotional prospects. People want to be seen as professionals and take pride in their work.
- Electoral reform is important to improve the process but consistency is also important for institutional memory
- Monitoring and evaluation should come from within and not only from external audits or observation reports – which might suggest a requirement for needs assessment tools to empower EMBs to determine what type of assistance they want.
- Strategic planning is important not just for specific electoral events but for the EMB as a whole.
- Networking is crucial, involving peer support and advice in a worldwide and in a regional context. This is one of the aims of the new ACE Electoral Knowledge Network.