REPORT ON
PROMOTING VOTER TURNOUT AND CREATING SUSTAINABLE SYNERGIES AMONG ELECTORAL PARTNERS IN FEDERAL IRAQ

BAGHDAD, 26 -27 APRIL 2023

United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)

UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance

Contents

LIST OF ACRONYMS

BOC   Board of Commissioners
CoR   Council of Representatives
GEO   Governorate Electoral Office
IHEC   Independent High Electoral Commission
OEA   Office of Electoral Assistance
POD   Public Outreach Directorate
UNAMI   United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNDP   United Nations Development Programme
UNOPS   United Nations Office for Project Services

SECTION 1:

INTRODUCTION

I raq has held several elections since the country transitioned to a democracy in 2003. Various political and technical factors have resulted in a decline in voter turnout with a significant number of voters abstaining from elections.

Despite the voter turnout of only 42% during the 2021 elections, IHEC received positive feedback from electoral stakeholders regarding the transparency and credibility of the process. Unfortunately, the delayed government formation hindered the sustainability of this success, impacting public sentiment against the electoral institution and process.

United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) Office of Electoral Assistance (OEA) with operational support from UNOPS planned a series of workshop aimed at sustaining the achieved institutionalized independence of IHEC and creating space for dialogue and engagement where Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) can best support Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) in a collaborative means towards increasing awareness on valid and healthy democratic processes that best represent people and achieve their interests.

These dialogues are crucial for both IHEC and the CSOs. IHEC can benefit by sharing their strategies, plans, concerns, and challenges encountered during previous elections, as well as outlining their expectations for CSOs in reinforcing IHEC's message of voter education. In turn, the CSOs can discuss their concerns and those of the voters, while exploring ways in which they can effectively complement IHEC's message.

The first workshop was held in Baghdad from April 26-27 workshop, which brought together 20 participants from CSOs and 20 participants from the IHEC's HQ and governorate offices in central region of Iraq for enhancing the coordination between the IHEC and CSOs, to further promote effective voter education, civic awareness, and increase voter turnout. Participants from both sides exchanged their experiences, discussed the challenges and future collaboration strategies. Through discussions, participants emphasized achievements in the previous elections and that it should serve as a benchmark along with proposing recommendations for IHEC's future improvements. This report has been prepared to highlight the key discussions that took place during the workshop.
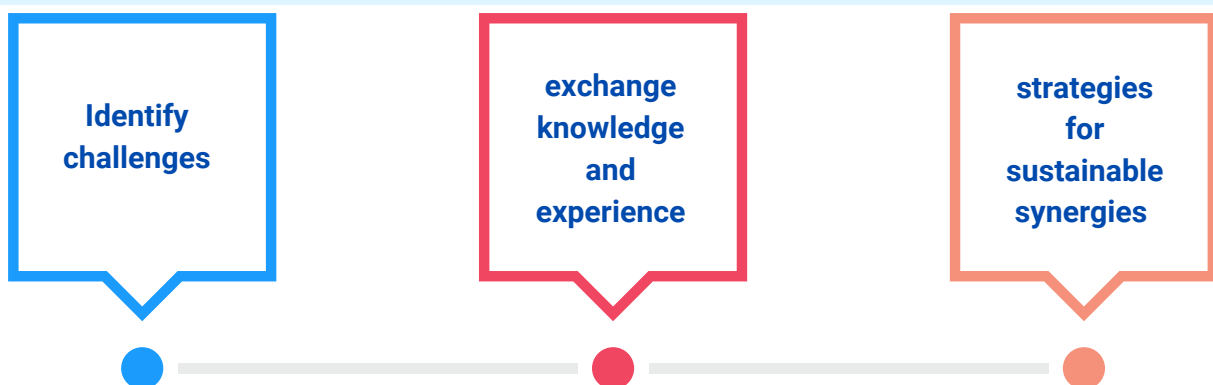
Identify challenges

exchange knowledge and experience

strategies for sustainable synergies

Figure 1: Main goals of the workshops

Opening Session

UNAMI OEA Electoral Affairs Officer, Israa Al-Omar, initiated the workshop by extending a warm welcome to the attendees and proceeded with introducing the participants and the agenda.

Mr. Muayad Hadi Jaafar, the Deputy Head of the Public Outreach Directorate (POD) of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), expressed his appreciation for the participants, particularly acknowledging the Civil Society Organizations' (CSOs) readiness to collaborate and work in unison with the IHEC.

Figure 2: Ms Shiqpe Hebibi along with Israa Al-Omar (left) and Mr. Muayad Hadi Jafar opening the workshop

Ms. Shiqpe Hebibi, UNAMI OEA Senior Electoral Advisor, delivered a welcoming speech on behalf of Dr. Aamir A. Arain, the Director of OEA. She stressed that successful elections are a product of cooperation among all electoral stakeholders. Notably, she highlighted that the role of CSOs is not limited to monitoring; it extends to civic and voter education, as they relate to voters and articulate voters' voice. The primary aim of the workshop, she elaborated, is to foster an environment conducive to cooperation, where the IHEC can share their strategies, and CSOs can put forth their ideas. By the conclusion of this workshop, the objective is to form a communication platform between both parties and devise a comprehensive communication strategy to facilitate ongoing collaborations.

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SECTION 2:

Presentation 1: IHEC's roles and efforts for public outreach and CSO engagement

Head of IHEC External Relations Unit, Mr. Al-Hassan Qabas shared insights about IHEC's role and activities concerning civil society engagement. He provided information on the IHEC External Relations Unit and its role. He then explained the two main roles of CSOs:

1. Monitoring: This is crucial to ensure that the electoral process proceeds according to laws and respects the people's will in choosing their candidate

2. Voter education: This can be broken down into several key points:

- Raising voter awareness that elections are the primary method to bring change.
- Advocating for electoral education from a young age, citing India's practice of beginning election education at age 14.
- Emphasizing that voting is a constitutional right for all Iraqi people.
- Highlighting the negative consequences of boycotting elections.

Figure 3: Al-Hassan Qabas speaking about IHEC's roles and efforts

He further detailed the registration process at IHEC for the CSOs, intended for observation purposes, and invited CSOs to provide feedback if they encountered any difficulties during this process. He concluded by emphasizing the close cooperation between IHEC and CSOs throughout all stages of the electoral process and affirmed IHEC's commitment to supporting CSOs. Regarding IHEC procedures and techniques, IHEC is happy to share with the CSOs either digitally or in the field through participation in their activities. Qabas concluded by suggesting that CSOs should target the groups that they specialize in.

Responding a query posed by CSO representative, Dr. Emad Jameel, Head of Media Support Unit in IHEC's Chairman Office, stated that CSOs, along with media, security forces, and voters, are the most important electoral stakeholders for IHEC. "We are ready to cooperate with CSOs in all phases of the electoral process, starting with registration until Election Day," he added. While IHEC lacks the financial ability to fund CSOs, they are prepared to participate in CSOs events in all other ways. IHEC, being a governmental institution, has no secrets and nothing to hide; on the contrary, they are the ones seeking more future cooperation.

"To my knowledge, this is the first time that an equal number of IHEC and CSO members are discussing collaboration with UN's support, this fosters a real partnership betweenIHEC and CSOs. This practice should continue." -
Dr Emad, IHEC

Presentation 2: CSOs efforts and roles in civic and voter education

Mr. Saa'd Albattat from the Ain Network for Election Monitoring and Democracy discussed the role and efforts of CSOs in promoting political participation and electoral awareness. CSOs employ various strategies such as awareness campaigns, social media engagement, and direct communication to engage voters.

CSOs collaborate with both the IHEC and various United Nations entities in Iraq, including UNAMI, to foster communication and public education about the electoral process.

However, to ensure a fair electoral process, CSOs require effective cooperation from the electoral commission. This cooperation entails transparency in providing comprehensive information about the election process and data impacting the electoral process. Open and ongoing communication is also necessary to discuss critical issues related to the electoral process and address any emerging problems.

Figure 4: Saa'd Albattat from Ain Network presentign on CSOs efforts and roles in civic and voters education

Moreover, CSOs need to monitor the electoral process for its integrity and transparency by forming specialized election monitoring teams. They also require training on how to organize elections.

Presentation 3: CSOs efforts and roles in civic and voter education through digital means

Figure 5: Wissam Jaa'far sharing his experiences and Insights

Wissam Jaa'far from Jaa'far CSO started his presentation by citing examples of voting percentages in various Arab countries over the years, noting a steady decline in each electoral cycle. He discussed the importance of digital media, the roles of electoral stakeholders, and the necessity for high-quality, up-to-date data collection and management on a single open-source platform. He further underscored the significance of real-time monitoring, detailing its various aspects such as the use of technology, regarding citizens as information sources, and the value of data.

Jaa'far provided an example of an open-source website used during the 2021 CoR elections, which pinpoints electoral violations in each area of Iraq, along with details of the violation incidents. He praised IHEC's digital media engagements and initiatives while suggesting areas for improvement in communications and engagements with the public and stakeholders.

In response to a question posed to IHEC about the significance of the IHEC website in voter education, Mohammed Ali Hassan from IHEC's web unit stated that the website is regularly updated with all IHEC information concerning elections and are well-organized and easily accessible. He mentioned that the website is set to expand its reach, becoming available in English and Kurdish.

SECTION 3:

SWOT Analysis: enhancing IHEC's effort on public outreach and CSOs. Assessing Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

After the presentations, the participants were divided into four groups to discuss further on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the context of IHEC-CSO collaboration in the voters and civic education. The SWOT analysis provided valuable insights into the current state of voter education, highlighting areas for potential improvement. Here are the highlights from each group's presentation.

Group A: Strenghts
- Availability of data and information
- Established partnership between IHEC and CSOs
- Coordination among UN agencies, IHEC, and CSOs
- Existence of IEC materials
- Support for disability-related organizations
- International and local networks to develop CSO capacities.

Group B: Weakness
- Lack of timely budgeting and insufficient funding for IHEC
- Financial challenges for CSOs
- Media's lack of cooperation with voter education
- Dissemination of misinformation and incorrect messages to voters

Group C: Opportunities:
- Effective partnership between CSOs and monitoring networks
- Favorable security environment
- Availability of digital platforms and social media for further communication and educational campaigns

Group D: Threats
- Affiliation of many monitors with political parties
- Influence of political funding and candidates securing wins due to financial resources
- Ineffectiveness of electoral campaigns in reaching voters
- Lack of trust between voters and IHEC
- CSO participants expressed concerns about the damage done to IHEC's reputation by political parties spreading misinformation, particularly targeting undecided voters. They pointed out that IHEC's silence in response to these allegations was troubling.

SECTION 4:

Understanding electoral misinformation and disinformation and strategies in combating together by IHEC and CSOs

Brabim Kumar KC, Communications & Outreach Advisor for the Office of Electoral Assistance (OEA), delivered an engaging presentation on the pressing issue of electoral misinformation and disinformation. Conducting elections in the digital age presents significant opportunities for both IHEC and CSOs to educate, engage, and empower voters. However, it also poses risks, such as the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which could undermine the electoral process, fuel conflicts, and create chaos. Therefore, it is crucial that electoral management bodies and CSOs are adequately equipped to address these challenges and mitigate the associated risks. He discussed the collaborative strategies employed by IHEC and CSOs to counter these threats. Conducting elections in digital age presents a huge opportunity for both IHEC and CSOs in educating, engaging and empowering voters, at the same time there are also risks like spread of misinformation and disinformation, which has the risks of undermining the electoral process, fueling conflicts, and creating chaos. The electoral management bodies and CSOs should be better equipped to combat those challenges and mitigate the risks.

To further illustrate the topic, the presentation drew a distinction between various forms of false information: misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and fake news. Through a series of case studies, participants were able to grasp the nuances between these terms and comprehend their potential impact on elections, particularly in an Iraqi context. The participants also shared their insights on the importance of differentiating between these terms during electoral periods.

Figure 6: Brabim Kumar presenting during the workshop

The presentation also showcased the efforts of the UNAMI OEA and IHEC in their fight against misinformation and disinformation during 2021 CoR elections. This included outlining their strategies, initiatives, and measures to ensure the integrity of electoral information. Brabim encouraged both IHEC and CSOs to enhance their cooperation on this pertaining issue.

During the discussions, some of the CSOs put forth a recommendation to establish a dedicated committee or unit tasked with combating misinformation and disinformation. They strongly urged the IHEC to consider establishing a 'countering rumors unit'.

While CSOs expressed their appreciation for the efforts made by IHEC and suggested forming a partnership with them. This collaboration would entail CSOs providing IHEC with instances of misleading or false information for IHEC to investigate and take appropriate action. This proposal underlined the need for a collective and concerted effort to combat the scourge of misinformation and disinformation in the electoral process.

SECTION 5:

Enhancing IHEC-CSOs collaborations and engagements through digital means

One of the objectives of the workshop was to navigate the ways to continue the communications and dialogues between IHEC and CSOs through digital means and collect feedback from both IHEC as well as CSOs.

Ali Hassan, a representative from the IHEC's Public Outreach Division (POD) digital media unit, presented an overview of the significant updates made by the IHEC on digital front including the IHEC website. He explained the various sections of the website and demonstrated how users can easily access and extract information. He shared statistics on website visitors and introduced the new page dedicated to electoral stakeholders' engagement, which will be very useful for CSOs and could be used as a digital platform to continue with the organized regular communications.

He also highlighted the different target audiences that IHEC focused on during the Council of Representatives (CoR) 2021 elections. Following the presentation, participants were asked to share their ideas and input on the proposed digital platform, focusing on how it could enhance cooperation between IHEC and CSOs. The suggestions included:

- Adopting internationally recognized terminology for people with disabilities, replacing the current term "people of high determination.".
- Developing the IHEC website to be more accessible for people with disabilities.
- Incorporating signage and instructions within polling stations that cater to the needs of people with disabilities.
- Ensuring the digital platform is exclusively for CSOs involved in electoral work.
- Adding a feature that allows reporting of electoral process violations by CSOs.
- Creating a digital group for IHEC and CSOs that runs parallel to the digital platform for faster communication.
- Integrating a live chat service on the platform for direct communication between IHEC and CSOs.
- Some participants suggested that the new platform be entirely separate from the IHEC's website, while others proposed it should have a login page with a username and password for access.
- Including IHEC's current plans on the digital platform to enable CSOs to view them and allocate resources accordingly for collaborative campaigns.
- Limiting access to the digital platform only to registered CSOs.
- Featuring all procedures, laws, and Board of Commissioners' decisions on the platform for easy access by CSOs when needed.
- Providing the option to publish CSO reports on the electoral process, enabling other organizations to view them.

These recommendations aim to create a more inclusive, accessible, and efficient digital platform that fosters increased cooperation and engagement between IHEC and CSOs in the electoral process

SECTION 6:

Group discussions on how IHEC and CSOs can enhance their partnerships and cooperation.

The workshop concluded with group discussions focusing on the main question of how the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) can enhance their partnerships and cooperation and continue with the collaboration for the benefit of voters and general public. Participants were divided into four groups and were tasked with brainstorming ideas and activities to strengthen communication and collaboration between these entities. IHEC public outreach directorate wanted to use the opportunity to collect the recommendations to be shared with the IHEC Board of Commissioners. They were also asked to provide suggestions and recommendations to be presented to the Board of Commissioners on this subject.

Group A:
- Targeting eligible voters, particularly the younger demographic.
- Conducting joint seminars on IHEC's operational plans in collaboration with CSOs.
- Providing CSOs with adequate information to create educational materials tailored to their vision.
- Establishing a joint operations room for effective coordination between IHEC and CSOs.
- Organizing joint seminars at universities and state government departments to facilitate cooperation.
- Sharing IHEC's media materials on CSOs' platforms
- Collaborating on the distribution of undelivered voter cards and ensuring they reach their owners.

Group B:
- Organizing joint workshops between IHEC and CSOs during election period.
- Cooperating on the exchange of confidential information.
- Facilitating communication by creating dedicated communication channels or special numbers.
- Establishing an Organizations Affairs Division to collaborate with CSOs.
- Activating the Media Committee initiated by the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers.
- Publishing and approving reports from reputable CSOs.
- Training IHEC staff and focusing on the role of polling center representatives on election day.
- Prioritizing media in promoting electoral awareness.

Group C

- Collaborating with CSOs in all election procedures, from registration and updating to election day and beyond.
- Establishing a group on approved social networking platforms for IHEC and CSOs to discuss, share, and implement seminars.
- Publishing IHEC materials and jointly combating misleading news.
- Nominating individuals from CSOs to be present in IHEC's operations room.
- Facilitating logistical details for CSOs, such as issuing badges.
- Creating a dedicated office for CSOs within IHEC offices.
- Providing CSOs with approved awareness and educational materials, including brochures and posters.

Group D

- Forming a joint working cell between IHEC and CSOs for all electoral stages.
- Developing a sustainable strategic action plan encompassing communication, electoral awareness, and capacity building.
- Creating joint work teams to periodically evaluate the electoral process at all stages.
- Encouraging CSOs to publish and support IHEC's educational media content.
- Establishing a joint work charter, including a memorandum of understanding.
- Appointing an IHEC employee close to decision-makers to communicate with CSOs.
- Setting up a common electronic platform for exchanging messages, procedures, and promotional materials.
- Providing accredited observers with a copy of the results tape from polling stations.
- Suggesting the display of election results on special screens across all governorates and centers.

Additional Recommendations to be submitted with IHEC Board of Commissioner.

- Emphasizing electoral behavior guidelines and signing a memorandum of understanding between IHEC and CSOs.
- Inviting CSOs to governorate offices for training sessions.
- Reestablishing the electoral training center and use of digital platforms
- Providing facilities for CSOs to participate in IHEC-organized activities and vice versa.
- Submitting names of active CSOs in electoral matters to supporting parties for funding purposes.
- Involving IHEC in evaluating CSOs' work in the electoral field.

Figure 7 and 8: Participants during the group work

Closing session:

The workshop concluded with with closing remarks from representatives of IHEC, UNAMI, and participating CSOs. They expressed appreciation for the productive discussions and the spirit of collaboration throughout the event. Both IHEC and CSOs parties agreed to work towards implementing the recommendations and strategies discussed during the workshop to improve voter education and ensure transparent, inclusive, and successful elections.

Ms. Shiqpe Hebibi, UNAMI OEA Senior Electoral Advisor, on behalf of Dr. Aamir A. Arain, Director of OEA, thanked both IHEC and the CSOs for their active and productive engagement. She expressed her excitement about IHEC using this opportunity to draft recommendations for the IHEC Board of Commissioners (BoC) on voter education and CSO engagement.

Mr. Muayad Hadi Jaafar, the Deputy Head of the Public Outreach Directorate (POD), expressed his gratitude to UNAMI for conducting a successful workshop. He mentioned that the discussions and outcomes exceeded his expectations and requested UNAMI to host more such discussions to strengthen voter education through smooth IHEC-CSO coordination.

> **such workshops, especially before the provincial council elections, are crucial in creating partnership between all electoral process partners in Iraq, including IHEC, civil society organizations and media.** - Saja Waa'd, Women Leadership institute

> "Partnership and trust between parties need to be enhanced, recognizing CSOs as supporting bodies of IHEC that need to be supported and strengthened." - Evan Kareem Al-Faili, Tammuz CSO

Figure 9: Photo collage capturing the various moments of the workshop

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