as implementing partner

Report on Effective Strategies for Voter Education: Empowering Citizens to Make Informed Voting Decisions

SULAYMANIYAH, 14-15 MARCH 2023

United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)

UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance

Contents

SECTION 1:

Background

The electoral process is a multi-stakeholder engagement process, and for the success of any election, each stakeholder, including civil society organizations (CSOs), in addition to the electoral management bodies (EMBs), has a crucial role to play. One of the major roles of civil society organizations is voter education.

In the context of the Kurdistan region, several elections have been held since 1992. While these elections have regularly and periodically been held, are generally considered credible by national and international observers, there are certain concerns remain about the transparency and integrity of the electoral process, including low voter turnout, which highlights the need for more emphasis on voter education.

Voter education is the process of informing and educating voters on various aspects of the elections, enabling and empowering them to make informed decisions during the electoral process. Moreover, giving voters the right information at the right time is key to a successful election. Therefore, educating voters on their rights and responsibilities in the electoral process is crucial. Voter education campaigns can help increase voter turnout and encourage voters to make informed decisions. These campaigns can be more effective if conducted through collaboration between the EMB and other relevant stakeholders, such as civil society organizations.

With the aim of thoroughly examining the electoral challenges in the Kurdistan Region and recommending measures to overcome such challenges through workshops in collaboration with civil society organizations, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) Office of Electoral Assistance (OEA), in coordination with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), planned a series of workshops to create a platform for CSOs to discuss various electoral themes, including electoral integrity, voter registration, strategies for voter education, and empowering citizens to make informed voting decisions. The first workshop was held from March 14-15 in Sulamaniyah, with the participation of 40 CSO partners (19 female and 21 male) representing Shams network - a CSO network that has rich a experience working on electoral issues, especially domestic electoral observation. This report is prepared to highlight the key discussions that took place during the workshop.
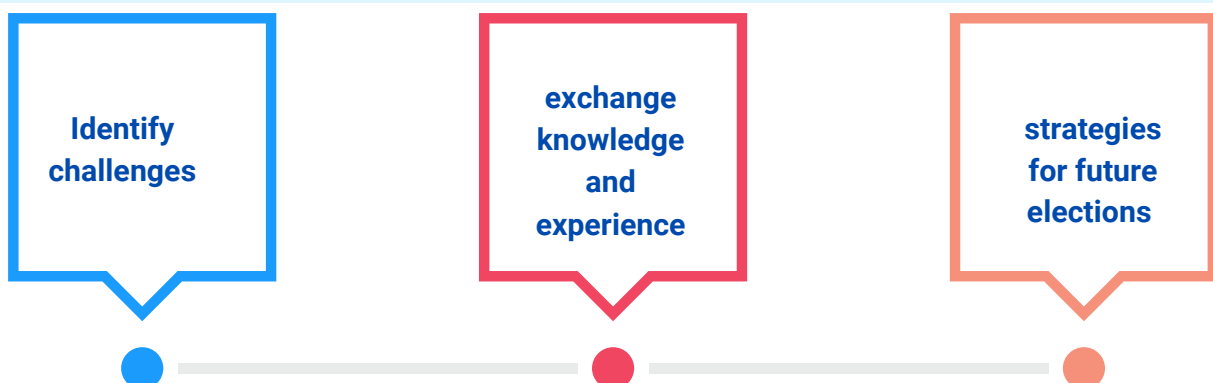
Identify challenges

exchange knowledge and experience

strategies for future elections

Figure 1: Main goals of the workshops

Introduction and welcome:

UNAMI OEA Electoral Advisor, Mr. Benjamin Osei-Bugyei, welcomed the participants on behalf of the UNAMI OEA Director Dr. Aamir A. Arain and the workshop organizers.

He highlighted the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the electoral process, shared the purpose of the workshop, and urged participants to express their opinions freely.

He also shared his expectations that by the end of the workshop, the CSOs would be better equipped with knowledge, information, and strategies regarding voter education for future elections.

Figure 2: Mr. Benjamin Osei-Bugyei welcoming the participants

> Although turnout was low in 2021 elections, trust in electoral institutions increased, which must be sustained in the future. CSOs play a crucial role in achieving this goal by assisting and amplifying electoral body messaging, providing both educational and motivational electoral awareness on voting requirements, the electoral system, and the importance of higher turnout to encourage the silent majority to vote in future elections.

SECTION 2:

The role of UNAMI in recognizing CSOs

OEA Electoral Officer Mr. Aso Amin Muhmmed Alkakee spoke about the important role of UNAMI in recognizing civil society organizations (CSOs). He explained that UNAMI's mandate includes supporting inclusive political dialogue and national and community-level reconciliation, as well as assisting in the electoral process

To achieve these goals, UNAMI works with government partners and CSOs to facilitate dialogue and collaboration. UNAMI also supports CSOs in promoting human rights, peace, and development in Iraq, and provides capacity building to strengthen their ability to advocate for the rights and interests of the people of Iraq. In addition, UNAMI promotes women's participation and youth in civil society, and encourages coordination and networking among CSOs. Specifically in the region of Kurdistan, UNAMI supports NGOs to carry out their missions and tasks for the stability of Iraq and enhances the electoral process through various means. By building a strong and vibrant civil society that can effectively advocate for the rights and interests of the people of Iraq, UNAMI aims to create a more peaceful and prosperous future for the country.

Figure 3: Aso Amin Muhmmed Alkakee presenting the role of UNAMI

The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer session, during which participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about UNAMI's mandate. UNAMI officials were available to respond to the questions posed by the CSO representatives.

Participants expressed concern about the declining voter turnout in Iraq and inquired about UNAMI OEA's role in addressing this issue. UNAMI representatives highlighted their commitment to collaborate with the government, relevant authorities, and CSOs to improve voter education and maximize participation. They explained that the workshop aimed to explore CSOs' role in voter education and engagement, with the UN eager to understand their perspectives and increase citizens' involvement in the electoral process. UNAMI OEA representatives further mentioned that the 2021 elections in Iraq received praise from a majority of national and international electoral stakeholders.

In 2019, changes were made to the IHEC law and commissioner selection process to eliminate political pressure and manipulation. The new IHEC formation lacked electoral and technical knowledge, necessitating international support. OEA provided technical and public outreach support to connect IHEC with CSOs and enhance voter awareness. Although turnout was low, trust in electoral institutions increased, which must be sustained in the future. CSOs play a crucial role in achieving this goal by assisting and amplifying electoral body messaging, providing both educational and motivational electoral awareness on voting requirements, the electoral system, and the importance of higher turnout to encourage the silent majority to vote in future elections.

SECTION 3:

Voter education and the importance of voting

OEA Communications & Outreach Advisor Brabim Kumar KC gave a presentation on voter education strategies and the importance of voting. The presentation began by addressing the three main questions of voter education: why, what, and how. The audience was encouraged to participate by answering questions related to electoral issues and voter education.

The presentation covered various aspects of the communication process, in the context of electoral process and voters education. It also discussed the reasons for voter education and the key information that voters need to know, such as the electoral system, registration process, voter list, candidate information, and complaints mechanisms.

Figure 4: Brabim Kumar presenting on importance and process of voters education

The presentation highlighted the importance of analyzing and understanding the audience, including demographic information, media consumption behavior, and economic status, to develop effective voter education strategies. It emphasized the need for a clear and concise message that is relevant, credible, consistent, emotional, action-oriented, and memorable.

Figure 5: Participants sharing her observations on voters education process

In addition, the presentation addressed the challenges and opportunities of the digital age, such as digital literacy, misinformation, and disinformation. It provided a recap of the voter education process, including identifying the target audience, developing accessible materials, utilizing social media and other technologies, engaging with community organizations and local leaders, providing opportunities for discussion and debate, training volunteers, and measuring effectiveness.

The presentation also included potential educational elements, such as printed materials, arts and performances, face-to-face interactions, training and workshops, call centers, bulk SMS, digital and social media outreach, and group discussions. The group was further divided into four groups to discuss the role of CSOs in educating voters and the most effective voter education strategies for future elections. These group discussions provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of voter education and how CSOs can play a critical role in promoting informed and active citizen participation in elections.

The forty CSO participants were divided into four groups, each group was given a question to discuss within given time and to present the group outputs

Topic 1 for the group discussion: What is the role of CSOs in educating voters?

- CSOs can play a vital role in educating voters about the importance of their participation in the electoral process.
- CSOs can help create awareness about the electoral process and the importance of exercising their right to vote.
- CSOs can help increase the understanding of the electoral process among voters to ensure that they can make informed decisions.

Using Mass Media and social media:
- CSOs can use various mass media and social media platforms to reach out to a broader audience.
- Social media can be a potent tool for educating voters, particularly the younger generation, who are more active on these platforms.
- Monitoring Electoral Process:
- CSOs can monitor the electoral process to ensure transparency and accountability in the voting process and to prevent irregularities and ensure that all eligible voters can participate freely and fairly.
- CSOs can educate voters on the voting procedures to ensure that they can exercise their right to vote effectively.
- CSOs can use different mechanisms to communicate with people, including community outreach programs, public forums, and social media.
- The use of different communication mechanisms can help reach a broader audience, including marginalized communities and those with limited access to information.

Laws and Human Rights:
- CSOs can educate voters on the laws and human rights that protect their right to vote.
- CSOs can help voters understand the importance of exercising their right to vote and how it relates to their human rights.
- CSOs can also monitor the electoral process to ensure that the election is conducted in accordance with the laws and human rights standards.

Based on the Needs - Voter Education:
- CSOs can tailor their voter education programs based on the needs of the community and the target audience.
- Voter education programs can be customized to meet the specific needs of marginalized communities, youth, and women, among others.
- Raising Awareness - Voting Not on the Basis of Tribalism but the Strengths of the Candidates:
- CSOs can raise awareness among voters about the importance of voting based on the strengths of the candidates rather than on tribal or ethnic affiliations.

Topic 2 for the group discussion: What could be the most effective VE strategies for future elections?

- Strategies can include the use of different communication mechanisms, community outreach programs, and public forums to disseminate information about the electoral process, voter registration, and voting procedures.
- CSOs can act as a bridge between people and electoral commissions by promoting transparency and accountability in the electoral process.
- CSOs can also work with electoral commissions to develop effective voter education programs and encourage voter participation.
- By acting as a bridge between people and electoral commissions, CSOs can help build trust in the electoral process and promote a more inclusive and democratic society.
- Various approaches can be used to develop effective voter education strategies for future elections, including leveraging social and cultural events and using multiple communication channels to reach a broader audience.
- CSOs can leverage festivals and social activities to raise awareness about the electoral process and the importance of voting.
- Festivals and social activities can provide an opportunity to reach out to a broader audience, including those who may not be engaged in the electoral process.
- CSOs can use face-to-face and door-to-door communication to engage with voters and provide them with information about the electoral process. These approaches can be particularly effective in reaching out to marginalized communities and those with limited access to information.
- CSOs can use multiple communication channels, including mass media, social media, radio, short videos, and brochures, to reach a broader audience.
- Short videos and brochures can be used to provide voters with easily digestible information about the electoral process and voting procedures.
- Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, can be leveraged by CSOs to engage with a broader audience and encourage voter participation.

Figure 6 and 7: CSO representatives presenting after group discussions

SECTION 4:

The history of the electoral commission's work on voter education

During the session, Mr. Amanj Aziz, the director of IHEC Sulaymaniyah GEO, delved into the history of the electoral commission's work in voter education. Established in 2004, the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) was responsible for overseeing elections in Iraq, including the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) area. In 2010, biometric data was incorporated into the voter database to ensure that only legitimate biometric holders could cast their votes.

Mr. Aziz briefed on the various electoral stakeholders, the role of NGOs, and the responsibilities of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) in raising awareness, fostering inclusiveness, and promoting impartiality. He underscored the significance of clear messaging, disseminated through diverse media channels such as television, radio, and brochures. Furthermore, Mr. Aziz touched upon the history of elections in Iraq and Kurdistan, touching upon the challenges faced by voters under pressure and their aspirations to vote freely. He recounted an instance of a voting ballot being threatened by certain elements, emphasizing the importance of voter education for the majority of individuals who lacked knowledge about whom to vote for and the proper voting procedure

After his presentation, participants asked a couple of questions regarding IHEC's activities and strategies in relation to the voter education in the last elections. Mr. Aziz emphasized that the IHEC's public outreach was mainly focused on web, digital and social media. There were couple of other door-to-door activities like mobile awareness team, the mobile teams visited many places which tried to reach out voters and encouraged people to be the part of electoral process.

Figure 8: Mr. Amanj Aziz, director of IHEC Sulaymaniyah GEO delivering his speech.

> " "Through seminars and workshops, CSOs can convince people to participate in elections. There are 28 minority organizations covering all over Iraq, which can be utilized for this purpose." - Amir Saddam Mahdi, Alliance of Iraqi minorities network "

Mr Aziz concluded his session by asking two questions for the group discussions. Below are the questions with response from the participants after group work.

Question A: What is an informed voter, and what are their qualities/characteristics?

- Voting based on political agendas rather than religion or tribal affiliations
- Not influenced by monetary bribes
- Believing in democracy and respecting the smooth transfer of power
- Understanding that voting is their right
- Being knowledgeable about electoral procedures and laws
- Recognizing that elections will shape their future.

Question B: To what extent have the messages published by the commission impacted voter awareness?

- The commission attempted to disseminate its message through social media; however, there were several economic, social, and other obstacles:
- A gap between the commission and NGOs
- The commission could have utilized NGOs to relay their message to the public more effectively
- NGOs could have played a larger role in disseminating the message
- A slow registration processes of the EMB.
- Lack of interest in voting among young people who have reached 18, particularly secondary school students who are not included
- In some areas where Kurdish is spoken, the commission used only Arabic
- The commission has not been fully successful in raising public awareness
- UNAMI's small grants project was only open to CSOs registered in federal Iraq, excluding CSOs in KRI that were registered locally but not at the federal level.

Figure 9:Participants during the group work

SECTION 5:

The impact of human rights and political situation to the process of voter education

Mr. Halsho Abulfattah, the Director of Human Rights for the NGO NOOR, emphasized the crucial role of human rights in connection with electoral issues in line with the political landscape of the Kurdistan region.

Mr Abdulfattah mentioned about the three different levels of authority responsible for monitoring and addressing human rights issues: the federal level, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and independent NGOs. International organizations, such as the United Nations, also play a critical role in preserving and improving human rights conditions. The first authority, the constitutional and legal body in the country, is responsible for creating legislation to protect human rights. The second authority, the executive power, is led by the prime minister's office and the cabinet, which implement policies to safeguard these rights. The third level of authority consists of the council of judiciary, responsible for ensuring adherence to human rights laws.

Mr. Abulfattah highlighted the importance of transparency and effective communication of people's rights by NGOs and national institutions. This collaboration will empower citizens, promote awareness, and strengthen the overall democratic process in the Kurdistan region.

Figure 10: Mr. Halsho Abulfattah highlighting the issues human rights in the electoral context

"CSOs can have a significant influence on individuals and communities, reaching those who the government cannot. If CSOs do their job well, they can have a great impact" - Resa Fahid, Public Aid Organizations

SECTION 6:

The role of electoral commission in voter education:

Shorish Hassan, Head of KIHEC's media section, discussed the electoral commission's role in voter education, addressing challenges, and ensuring inclusiveness.

He identified some of the obstacles, such as citizens' impressions of previous elections, short timeframes, electoral law amendments, negative messaging, and confusion between IHEC and KIHEC. To address these issues, appropriate budgeting, human resources, strategic vision, NGO coordination, international support, and IT usage in voter education efforts are necessary.

He then emphasized the role of NGOs in the electoral process. "NGOs play a crucial role in elections, and collaboration between EMBs and CSOs is essential, as CSOs can reach people in difficult geographic locations. Ensuring the commission's message is impartial, language-appropriate, and inclusive is vital to encourage voter participation," he said.

Hassan further stated that respecting a voter's right not to participate is important; however, NGOs and EMBs should not promote such messages. Voter education is a comprehensive process that includes preparing proposals, acquiring resources, designing goals, outlining processes, identifying roles, evaluating, and documenting results.

Figure 11: Mr. Shorish Hassan explaining the tole of electoral commission in voter education

Inclusiveness should be guaranteed for all, including women, youth, the elderly, and those with special needs. Both direct and indirect approaches, such as social media and TV, should be utilized. CSOs' plans should be coordinated with the commission, involving media plan comparisons, regional meetings, brainstorming, and partnering with appropriate agencies. The voter education process should be conducted in phases, from registration to addressing complaints after the final results.

SECTION 7:

Fundamental of monitoring and evaluation of project management for CSOs

OEA Reporting Advisor Zarina Isakova spoke about the significance of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). She emphasized the importance of understanding the evolution of project management and M&E concepts.

M&E is a critical part of project management for civic society organizations. It allows organizations to monitor and evaluate progress towards goals, with steps such as record-keeping, planning, coordination, communication, and data analysis. Zarina highlighted the differences between monitoring and evaluation and their significance in the project management cycle. Monitoring involves tracking project progress to identify issues and make adjustments to ensure that goals are being met. Evaluation involves assessing the impact of the project, determining whether the goals have been achieved, and identifying areas for improvement.

Furthermore, Zarina elaborated on the components, steps, and process of M&E, including the theory of change from the inception to the closure of the project cycle. Zarina emphasized the importance of M&E for CSOs to ensure that they are meeting their goals and making a positive impact in their communities. By implementing M&E processes throughout the project management cycle, CSOs can improve their effectiveness and make a real difference in the lives of the people they serve.

Figure 12: Zarina Isakova conducting the session on Importance of M&E

> " I gained valuable information and knowledge from these workshops that I will share with my organizations. It would be beneficial to take these activities to remote areas and focus more on minority groups, such as the Kakies."

Before the closure of the session, participants discussed on four different questions and presented their ideas.

Question A: The relationship between the political situation and the voter trust.

- Political stability can have a positive impact on voter trust, and vice versa. When there is stability, voters may feel more confident that their voice will be heard and their votes will count. On the other hand, when there is instability, voters may become skeptical about the fairness of the electoral process, which can lead to a decrease in trust.
- Political instability can lead to an increase in violations and fraud, which can further erode voter trust. When there is chaos and uncertainty, it becomes easier for individuals or groups to engage in corrupt practices, such as ballot stuffing or vote buying.
- Political instability can also lead to violence and fear, which can create an intimidating environment for voters. This can result in a further decline in trust, as voters may be reluctant to participate in an election that they perceive as dangerous or unfair.
- Political stability can encourage voters to participate in elections freely, especially when there is competition among candidates or parties. When voters believe that their vote can make a difference, they are more likely to turn out to vote.

Question B: What are the human rights violations in elections.
- Changing the vote of a voter, especially one who is illiterate, by a polling station manager who works for a specific political party is a form of election fraud. This undermines the integrity of the electoral process and violates the right of the voter to have their vote counted fairly.
- Buying the vote of an unaware voter through various promises is another form of election fraud. This can involve offering money, goods, or services in exchange for a vote. This type of practice is illegal and undermines the democratic process.
- Violating the rights of minority voters by excluding them from the general voter list is a form of voter suppression. This can result in minority groups being underrepresented in the electoral process and can prevent them from having a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.
- Obliging voters to take a photo of their ballot paper by a political party is a form of voter intimidation. This practice can create a perception that the party is monitoring how individuals vote, which can lead to fear and a sense of violation of privacy.
- Some armed forces of political parties may create chaos and deprive voters of their right to vote. This can involve using violence or the threat of violence to intimidate voters and prevent them from participating in the electoral process.
- Specifying a specific age for someone to be a candidate can create a barrier for young candidates. This can prevent talented and capable individuals from participating in the electoral process, which can result in a lack of diversity and fresh perspectives in politics.
- Specifying a specific age for someone to be a candidate can create a barrier for young candidates. This can prevent talented and capable individuals from participating in the electoral process, which can result in a lack of diversity and fresh perspectives in politics

Question C: The relationship between transparency and the voters' trust.

- Transparency can increase voter trust by creating a sense that the electoral process is fair and accountable. When voters have access to information about how the election is conducted and how votes are counted, they are more likely to believe that their voice is being heard.
- Transparency can also provide guidance to voters by helping them understand the rules and procedures of the electoral process. This can reduce confusion and increase confidence in the fairness of the election.
- Transparency can create aware voters by providing them with information about the candidates, their platforms, and the issues at stake. This can lead to a more informed electorate that is better equipped to make decisions about who to vote for.

Question D: . The role of CSOs in reducing violence in elections

- Monitoring the electoral process from beginning to end can help ensure that it is conducted fairly and transparently. This can involve monitoring polling stations, vote counting, and the announcement of results.
- Educating voters about the importance of participating in elections can increase voter turnout and engagement. This can involve campaigns that emphasize the role of citizens in shaping their communities and the importance of having their voices heard.
- Having observers in polling stations and centers can increase transparency and accountability. Observers can monitor the electoral process and report any irregularities or violations, which can help ensure that the process is fair and impartial.
- Training civil society organization (CSO) staff about violations during the election process can help them identify and report any issues that arise. This can involve training on how to recognize and document voter suppression, fraud, or other irregularities.
- Creating a network among CSOs can help ensure that there is coordinated monitoring of the electoral process. This can involve sharing information and resources, as well as working together to report any issues that arise.
- Educating people about violations and how they are done can help prevent them from occurring. This can involve public awareness campaigns that educate citizens about their rights and the importance of fair elections.
- Having seminars to pass a law expressing the rights of minorities can help ensure that everyone has equal access to the electoral process. This can involve educating voters about their rights and working to pass laws that protect those rights, such as laws that prohibit voter suppression or discrimination based on race, gender, or ethnicity.

SECTION 8:

Summary of the workshop & Closing ceremony

In closing the workshop, UNAMI OEA Advisor Mr. Benjamin Osei-Bugyei expressed his gratitude to the participants on behalf of OEA Ddirector Dr. Aamir Arain. He appreciated their willingness to spend two days sharing experiences and ideas and looked forward to organizing more workshops in the coming months. Mr. Benjamin also thanked IHEC, KIHEC, presenters, facilitators, and UNOPS for their contributions, as well as photographers and translators.

Mr. Benjamin also thanked IHEC, KIHEC, presenters, facilitators, and UNOPS for their contributions, as well as photographers and translators. During the final discussions, concerns were raised about minority representation and the need for advocacy to change policies. Participants were encouraged to push for electoral law reform and investigate the reasons behind low voter turnout, particularly among the educated population. To avoid misunderstandings, they were advised to use the term "alleged manipulation" when discussing unproven allegations of electoral fraud.

Emphasizing that change is a process, not an event, Mr. Benjamin urged participants to support the electoral commission and recognize its limitations. While the commission focuses on voter education, CSOs could contribute by concentrating on civic education to help bring about change in the electoral landscape.

"Through seminars , workshops and other activities, CSOs can convince people to participate in elections. There are 28 minority organizations covering all over Iraq, which can be utilized for this purpose."