



# REPORT ON EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR VOTER EDUCATION: EMPOWERING CITIZENS TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS

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United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)

UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance



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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

**S**everal elections have been held in the Kurdistan Region since 1992. However, a consistent low voter turnout has been recorded 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.

A well designed and effectively implemented voter education campaign can help increase voter turnout and encourage voters to make informed decisions. These campaigns can be more effective if conducted through collaboration between the Election Management Body (EMB) and other relevant stakeholders, such as civil society organizations.

With the aim of thoroughly examining the voter education challenges in the Kurdistan Regional elections and recommending measures to overcome such challenges through workshops, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) Office of Electoral Assistance (OEA), in collaboration with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Kurdistan Region and in coordination with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), planned two workshops to create a platform for CSOs to discuss above mentioned theme. This, being the second of these workshops was held from April 26-27 in Dohuk, with the participation of 48 CSO partners (24 female and 24 male) representing Shams network - a CSO network that has rich experience working on electoral issues, especially domestic electoral observation. This report is prepared to highlight the key discussions that took place during the workshop.

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"We can make a change, voting is a fundamental right, to make sure politicians are accountable. The more people vote - the more legitimate the government is"

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## Opening Session

**U**NAMI OEA Electoral Advisor, Ms. Sylvie Blanchier, welcomed the participants on behalf of the UNAMI OEA Director, Dr. Aamir A. Arain. In her opening remark she highlighted the main mandates of UNAMI such as advising, supporting and assisting stakeholders in the electoral process in Iraq.

She stated that in the context of the Kurdistan region, several elections have been held and while these elections are generally considered credible by national and international observers, more work still needs to be done, especially in the area of voter education and this calls for effective collaboration between the EMB and CSOs



*Figure 2 and 3: Ms Sylvie Blanchier and Mr. Hogir Chato Sheikha welcoming the participants*

Ms. Sylvie Blanchier spoke about the goals of the workshop such as providing a platform to discuss challenges and opportunities in voter education giving the CSOs necessary tools, defining strategy, and sharing information to effectively communicate and reach out to voters for increased turn out and also empower them so they can make an informed choice in future elections.

Mr. Hogir Chato Sheikha, the head of the Shams network, welcomed the participants and pointed out the importance of building the capacities of the participating CSO members in the field of civic and voter education. He also emphasized the priority of reaching a high number of voters to participate actively in the upcoming elections. He shared his expectations that the participants of the workshop would get useful information and impart same to their colleagues and communities.

## SECTION 2:

### The role of UNAMI in recognizing CSOs

**O**EA Electoral Officer Mr. Aso Amin Muhmmed Alkakee spoke about the role of UNAMI in the electoral process and recognizing civil society organizations. He explained the role of UNAMI in Iraq.

Mr. Aso noted that UNAMI focuses on supporting political dialogue and reconciliation, advising, and assisting in elections. UNAMI works closely with government partners and CSOs to facilitate collaboration, promote human rights, peace, and development in Iraq, and strengthen CSO's advocacy abilities for the people of Iraq, including minorities and marginalized groups. Additionally, UNAMI encourages coordination and networking among CSOs. Specifically in the region of Kurdistan, UNAMI supports CSOs to carry out their missions and tasks to enhance the electoral process and for the stability of Iraq. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer session, during which the participants were allowed to ask questions about UNAMI's mandate.



*Figure 4: Aso Amin Muhmmed Alkakee presenting the role of UNAMI*

Participants expressed their willingness to have a WhatsApp group of the workshop participants to facilitate future collaboration through sharing of relevant information.

Furthermore, the participants expressed the desire for UNAMI's continuous engagement in the electoral process for transparent and fair elections in the region.

UNAMI representatives highlighted their commitment to collaborate with the government, relevant authorities, and the CSOs to improve voter education and maximize voter participation. The support offered to CSOs to complement the voter education activities of IHEC in the 2021 CoR elections as an example of collaboration between the EMB and CSOs that needs to be built upon in future elections

“ The electoral commission should remain active all the time, even after elections. People should feel that it operates all the time, not only during elections. ”

## SECTION 3:

### Voter education and the importance of voting

**O**EA Electoral Advisor Ms. Sylvie Blanchier, gave a presentation on voter education strategies and the importance of voting. The presentation addressed the characteristics of the interactive communication model, the electoral cycle, and the composition of elections. The participants were engaged in discussions by answering questions about why people should vote and why voter education is important.

In her presentation Ms. Blanchier pointed out the importance of analysing and understanding the audience, as well as using demographic information, media consumption behaviour, and economic status, to develop effective voter education strategies. She emphasized the need for a clear and concise message that is relevant, credible, consistent, emotional, action-oriented, and memorable. The presentation covered various aspects of the communication process, in the context of the electoral process and voters' education. It 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 5: Ms. Sylvie Blanchier presenting during the workshop*

The presentation provided a recap of the voter education process and strategy to reach out to the voters including identifying the target audience, developing accessible materials, utilizing social media and other technologies, engaging with community organizations and local leaders, as well as providing opportunities for discussions and debates, training volunteers, and measuring effectiveness. The presentation highlighted measures of how to reach the voters through content, audience, and context assessments. The participants discussed the importance of analysing and understanding who the voters were and the importance of developing targeted messages reach them effectively. Ms. Blanchier concluded her presentation by describing the development of strategy in the voter education process.

After the presentation, participants were divided into two groups to discuss the role of CSOs in educating voters and to define who are the informed voters.



## Group work #1

Forty CSO participants split into four groups to discuss and present group outputs for given questions

### Topic 1 for the group discussion: What are the qualities and characteristics of an informed voter?

The informed or educated voter, according to the group is aware of:

- The electoral system,
- Voting process and procedures,
- Location of polling stations,
- Complaint process,
- His or her right to vote
- And also familiar with candidates and their programmes.

### Topic 2 for the group discussion: What are the responsibilities and duties of CSOs in voter education?

- Media campaigns using different strategies to increase awareness about the rights and create trust among citizens.
- Conduct seminars at universities and schools for awareness creation.
- CSOs should arrange mobile groups to raise awareness among voters in their communities, especially those in remote communities.
- They should increase voter awareness about filing of complaints, which is essential to know when someone's rights are violated.
- CSO members should educate voters about their eligibility and voting procedures.

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**"Social media plays a crucial role in elections and IHEC should utilize it for disseminating information and promoting voter engagement."**

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## SECTION 4:

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

**D**uring the session, Mr. Khalid Abbas, Duhok GEO Manager, delved into the history, and achievements of the Iraqi electoral commission in voter education. He briefed that since its establishment in 2004, the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission has been responsible for overseeing elections in Iraq, including in the Kurdistan Regional Government area, raising awareness and encouraging voters to participate in elections.



*Figure 6: Mr. Khalid Abbas speaking on the history of the electoral commission's work on voter education*

As highlighted by Mr. Abbas, building trust is an important process and voters should understand that IHEC is different from other government institutions, as it is independent, and is not part of any political establishment. He said that the electoral commission was creating trust among the voters, through public awareness mechanisms and tried to convince people that their votes are valuable.

The main principle of voter education is inclusiveness, and all groups of society should be targeted. He emphasised that 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 are being utilized for this purpose.

According to Mr. Abbas, CSOs' plans should be coordinated with the commission. They should have a media plan, organize regional meetings, do joint brainstorming, and coordinate with appropriate agencies. The voter education process should be conducted in steps starting from registration to addressing complaints after the final results. The presentation was followed by quick Q&A session regarding IHEC's activities and strategies in relation to voter education during the last elections. Issues raised include the following:

- The 2021 elections were better organised. However, there were issues with fingerprints, some people were reportedly taking pictures at the polling stations, and some polling staff were allegedly rude to voters.
- Participants alleged that there were civil servants who came to the polling stations and told people to vote for certain political parties.
- It was suggested to develop a map of the polling stations for people, so they know where to go.
- Participants complained about the influence of tribes and their leaders. They were allegedly controlling people and pushing them to vote for a certain candidate.



## Group work #2

**Topic for the group discussion: How could the electoral commission improve their in the performance of their duties?**

- IHEC's should increase their education to address the public perception that their role is temporary, and they work only during elections.
- The universities and the academic centres should be used as a main channel to reach out to the youth.
- Engaging the media channels to disseminate more awareness campaigns. It is important to know how to market it, what media sources to use, not just giving 'dry' information.
- There is a question of neutrality of the commission, many people think that the commission is not neutral but supports parties. More education is needed to address this.

IHEC has issues with trust. Political parties often blame and criticize the commission and question its function.

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

- The commission should demonstrate its openness to increase the trust of the public. Transparency about IHEC work before and after elections is crucial in terms of creating trust for trust building.
- Engaging Religious leaders, tribal leaders, and famous people have to influence among the public. Tribal leaders and religious leaders usually organize big events to educate voters. In 2021 the electoral commission asked the university lecturers who had the trust of the people to encourage people to vote.
- Recruit experienced and professional staff should be recruited to organize the voting process and provide better services (for instance, polling station managers).
- Many people still do not have biometric cards, so they cannot participate in elections. Increased voter education is required.
- Role of media, particularly, social media is crucial and IHEC should benefit from it.

## SECTION 5:

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

In his presentation, Mr. Hogir Chato Sheikha discussed the role of KRG political parties in establishing the political landscape in the Kurdistan region, particularly in terms of having elections and decision-making. He expressed his worries about consequences of the extension of elections, particularly in the KRG.



*Figure 7: Mr. Hogir Chato Sheikha speaking on the impact of human rights and political situations*

He started by asking including the influence of the political and human rights scenario on voters, and the expectations of voters regarding elections.

Mr. Hogir highlighted the existence of legitimacy of political power, the solitude and peace of life, and improved voter lives and services. He also noted that human rights are a set of natural rights that everyone must have regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, and language. It means that these rights are equal for all individuals without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated and inseparable and protected by international law and treaties.

Mr. Hogir discussed specific articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 21 and Article 25 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and excerpts from the Iraqi Constitution. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Everyone has the right to equal access to public services in his/her country. "The will of the nation is the source of state power, which is performed in conducting elections, universal and equal suffrage, secret free voting."

Mr. Hogir mentioned that the criteria for freedom of choice were respect for the principle of the rule of law, respecting the principle of competition, guaranteeing freedom of access to information, freedom of expression and assembly, freedom of the media, and freedom to form political organizations and independent executive branches. The criteria for the integrity of elections are general suffrage, inclusive voter registration, political impartiality of the electoral commission, fair and effective electoral law, guarantee of confidentiality of voting, non-discrimination, guarantee of the monitoring process, guarantee the protection of polling stations from any party or institutional interference in order to influence voter opinion, guarantee the security of polling stations from any violence or disruption of the electoral process, transparent vote counting and disclosure of results, and the complaint system.

## SECTION 6:

### The role of the electoral commission in voter education

**M**r. Khalid Abbas discussed the roles of the electoral commission and CSOs in voter education. He highlighted that the impact social media in voter education is much higher than TV and radio. IHEC disseminates booklets and brochures to raise the awareness of voters and defines target groups depending on audiences they want to reach out to.



Figure 8: Mr. Khalid Abbas speaking on the role of electoral commission in voter education

The electoral commission uses appropriate language (Kurdish, Arabic, and even Assyrian) depending on the location and population living in an area. He also mentioned that IHEC has mobile teams that travel throughout the country to spread the message about elections. They often go to remote villages and IDP camps to conduct voter education.

Mr. Abbas noted that the commission always specifies which audience it is targeting to understand how to deal with it and convey a message. IHEC regularly uses social media to reach out to voters. As young people constitute a major target group of the commission, voter education became a part of the school extra curriculum. Coordination with the Ministry of Education is crucial for IHEC, especially in encouraging young people to motivate first time voters.

As the voter turnout is decreasing, IHEC is trying to find out why people are boycotting elections. Mr. Abbas further stated that voter education is a comprehensive process that includes preparing proposals, acquiring resources, designing goals, outlining processes, identifying roles, evaluating, and documenting results.

IHEC uses various communication strategies such as visualizations throughout TV and social media, magazine, posters, and newspapers, as well as sending SMS messages in informing voters about elections, and the importance to register and vote. IHEC regularly organizes conferences, face-to-face meetings, seminars, and workshops with target various groups.

He also emphasized the role and responsibility of CSOs in the process of raising awareness of voters. He said CSO members should help IHEC to convey the message and educate people in coordination with IHEC.

“CSOs are the bridge between voters and IHEC. They share a message to both.”



## SECTION 7:

### Informing and educating voters in a digital context

In her presentation, Ms. Sylvie Blanchier's presentation covered digital literacy on electoral issues, countering misinformation, disinformation, mal information, and hate speech. She also covered the importance of educating people and teach them to follow authentic and official information, recognizing and reporting voter suppression, and advocating for fair and transparent electoral processes.

She highlighted that social media is a platform for electoral stakeholders to reach out to voters and engage with them, it is a useful tool for voters to stay informed and to connect with others. Ms. Blanchier highlighted that the number of internet users is growing in Iraq and reached 30.52 million in 2021. Therefore, social media is an important way to communicate with the audience, while almost 90% of internet users in Iraq use it on a regular basis. Social media can be an efficient tool in reaching out to the youth in Iraq, as most of the young people are connected through it.



“ Social media can be an efficient tool in reaching out to the youth in Iraq, as most of the young people are connected through it. ”

Ms. Blanchier gave an explanation of fake news and referred to it as false information presented as real news, which is circulating on the media and misleading on purpose. Moreover, in her presentation she explained the difference between misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and infodemic. All of the above-mentioned terminologies can have a negative impact on voter education by misleading or intimidating potential voters, causing confusion about the voting process, or spreading false information that undermines trust in the election system. Voter education can be an effective tool to tackle misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech by providing accurate and reliable information to voters. Ms. Blanchier also explained how to spot misinformation and verify the information and report misinformation by providing practical examples.

At the end of her presentation, she encouraged the participants to develop critical thinking and use social media responsibly, provide accurate and balanced information, address hate speech, foster civic engagement and advocate for a transparent electoral process, and finally to help people understand the need to identify and evaluate the sources of information they receive.

The presentation was followed by few comments from the participants including the following:

- The electoral commission should remain active all the time, even after elections. People should feel that it operates all the time, not only during elections.
- The electoral commission should encourage people to get biometric cards through the food distribution system, to do discounts when paying bills or at shops, etc.
- NGOs CSOs can play an effective role in promoting electoral participation and should distribute the voter education materials of IHEC.



Figure 9: Participants sharing their opinion during the workshop

## SECTION 6:

### Open discussion

Before the closure of the session, Mr. Hogir invited the participants to provide comments and address their questions to the presenters of the workshop.

Political parties are making decisions in Iraq and KRG about having elections, not the appropriate bodies.

It is important to encourage marginalized groups to participate in elections, especially people with disabilities. They often do not have access to polling stations and therefore, do not vote.

There is an association for disabled people in Dohuk that targets this group, however, they often stay invisible in raising awareness and voter education.

Timing of elections is important and delaying elections is not a positive trend. It is crucial to work together, encourage to have political elections on time, as handing over the power is a very important in building democracy.

KRG cannot copy-paste any experience of democratization. Democracy starts with the family; it is not something 'cooked' for a state. KRG aims for democracy gradually, it is an inevitable process.

Gender quota: electoral law has been changed to increase the gender quota to 15 %, later to 20%, and finally, 25% both in the government and the parliament. There is a special commission for empowering women.

Equality, justice, and respect should go together when speaking about the quota system.

Women in politics are often criticized, but many say that women in parliament are much better than men. There is no bad gender, equality is crucial.

During the electoral campaigns majority of women are criticized and belittled; there is always bigger pressure on women than on men.

There are laws protecting candidates. Candidates can file complaints if there is discrimination based on gender.

All the candidates agree and sign a memorandum of understanding, so no criticism is allowed during the electoral process. There is an improvement, as the electoral committee monitors, detects, and prosecute violations.

The situation with harassment of women candidates since the 2018 elections has changed drastically. There were the cases of posting fake pictures of nude women candidates previously. Asayish has special devices to track those violations and it is strictly prosecuted. Sharing pictures of women – candidates should be taken seriously, and special rules or regulations should be developed.

Cases of 'electronic harassment' against women leaders are growing. Those women didn't receive any legal assistance, so they have been fighting against perpetrators on their own. Neither political parties nor the government did anything to prevent and support those



## Closing session:

**I**n closing the workshop, UNAMI OEA Electoral Advisor, Ms. Sylvie Blanchier, expressed her gratitude to the participants on behalf of OEA Director Dr. Aamir Arain. She appreciated the willingness of the members of CSOs to spend two days participating and sharing their experiences and ideas with the organizers. She expressed her hopes that the participants had benefit from the workshop and as a result spread the knowledge among their colleagues and community members through door-to-door, social media, role-play methods. Moreover, the participants were encouraged to convince people to participate in elections and vote impartially. She expressed her hopes that the KRG has transparent and inclusive elections.

Ms. Blanchier also thanked the presenters, the Dohuk GEO manager, Mr. Abbas, the Head of the Shams network, Mr. Hogir, translators, and the UNOPS colleagues for their contributions.



*Figure 10: group discussion*





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