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

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United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)

UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance

Contents

LIST OF ACRONYMS

BOC	Board of Commissioners
CoR	Council of Representatives
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
GEO	Governorate Electoral Office
IHEC	Independent High Electoral Commission
OEA	Office of Electoral Assistances
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

Since its transition to democracy in 2003, Iraq has conducted numerous elections. Despite this, issues both political and technical have caused a downturn in voter participation, with many choosing to abstain from voting.

In the 2021 elections, even though only 42% of voters participated, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) received commendation from electoral stakeholders for the transparency and integrity of the process. However, the subsequent delay in government formation diluted this success and adversely affected public opinion about the electoral institution and process.

In response to these challenges, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) Office of Electoral Assistance (OEA), with operational support from UNOPS, initiated a series of workshops. The primary goals of these workshops are to maintain the institutional independence of IHEC and to create a space for dialogue and collaboration between IHEC and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), which would allow them to support IHEC in promoting awareness of democratic processes that truly represent the people's interests.

These dialogues present significant opportunities for both IHEC and the CSOs. IHEC can share its strategies, plans, and challenges experienced in past elections and lay out its expectations for CSOs in promoting voter education. On the other hand, CSOs have the opportunity to express their concerns and those of the voters while seeking ways to enhance IHEC's voter education efforts.

After the first workshop held in Baghdad from April 26-27 that covered the central region and the second workshop held in Erbil May 29 - 30 covering the northen region of Iraq. The third workshop was held 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.
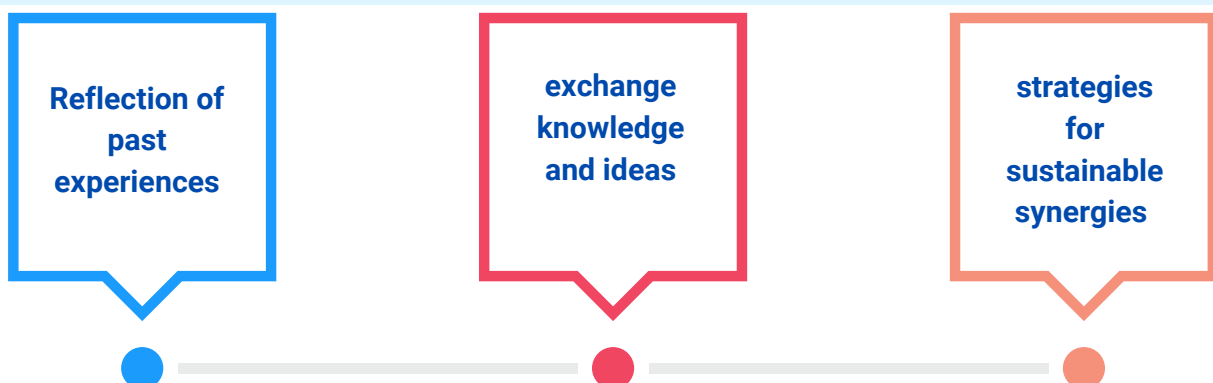
| Reflection of past experiences | exchange knowledge and ideas | strategies for sustainable synergies |

Figure 1: Main goals of the workshops

Opening Session

Mr. Aous Ali, Media and PR officer at OEA, extended a warm welcome to all participants. He introduced the agenda for the two-day workshop and shared the expectations from the event.

Mr. Al-Hassan Qabas, the Head of the External Relations of the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq (IHEC) and Public Outreach Directorate, in his opening remarks welcomed all participants, expressing appreciation for the CSOs' willingness to collaborate and work alongside IHEC. He then encouraged the attendees to introduce themselves. Mr. Qabas thanked UN team for conducting the workshops, which has brought IHEC and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) more closer.

Figure 2: Ms Shiqpe Hebibi, Aous Ali (left) and Mr. Al-Hassan Qabas during opening session

Ms. Shqipe Hebibi, the Senior Electoral Advisor in the OEA of UNAMI, extended a welcome to everyone on behalf of Dr. Aamir A. Arain, the Director of OEA. In her speech, Ms. Hebibi emphasized that successful elections are the result of cooperation among all electoral stakeholders. She underscored the multi-faceted role of CSOs, which goes beyond monitoring, highlighting their unique position in providing voter education as they represent the voters' voice.

She underlined the vital role of CSOs as electoral partners, emphasizing that successful elections cannot be achieved without their support. The CSOs not only observe and monitor but also serve as the population's voice, playing a substantial role in civic and voters' education. She expressed hope for idea-sharing and cooperative work with CSOs.

According to Ms. Hebibi, the primary objective of the workshop is to foster a safe and conducive environment for all participants to collaborate effectively. Throughout the workshop, IHEC will have the chance to share their strategies, while CSOs will be able to voice their ideas. The ultimate goal by the end of this workshop is to establish a platform for effective communication between both entities and to formulate a comprehensive communication strategy through a consultative process.

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SECTION 2:

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

The first presentation by Al-Hassan Qabas, Head of Electoral Relations Unit, POD IHEC, revolved around the role of the IHEC and its public outreach efforts and CSOs engagement with CSOs. Mr. Qabas recounted how the concept and role of CSOs emerged post-2003 following a military conflict and how it had grown ever since, particularly in the realm of elections.

CSOs act as a link between the people and IHEC, representing the voice of the people, especially during crises. They serve multiple roles including advocacy, public education, and, importantly, election monitoring.

Further elaborating on the cycle of voter education, Mr. Qabas underscored its various phases, including education, participation, ensuring accessibility, audience targeting, addressing voter hesitance, data availability, consistency in electoral terminology, and the empowerment of individuals through education.

During the Q&A session, participants addressed the main hurdle in the voter education process—the registration phase. The significance of this phase was emphasized as no other stages can proceed without it. One of the CSOs suggested liaising with clan heads in the south, where such associations are commonplace and effective, to broaden voter reach. Through this method, the group managed to significantly expand their outreach.

In the end, recommendations were made concerning the need for intensive collaboration between IHEC and CSOs throughout all stages of the electoral process, starting with the registration phase. The discussion also included considerations for people with disabilities, their voting rights, and how voter education can be improved to target them more effectively. In his closing remarks, Mr. Qabas reaffirmed IHEC's commitment to working closely with CSOs to ensure a transparent and credible electoral process.
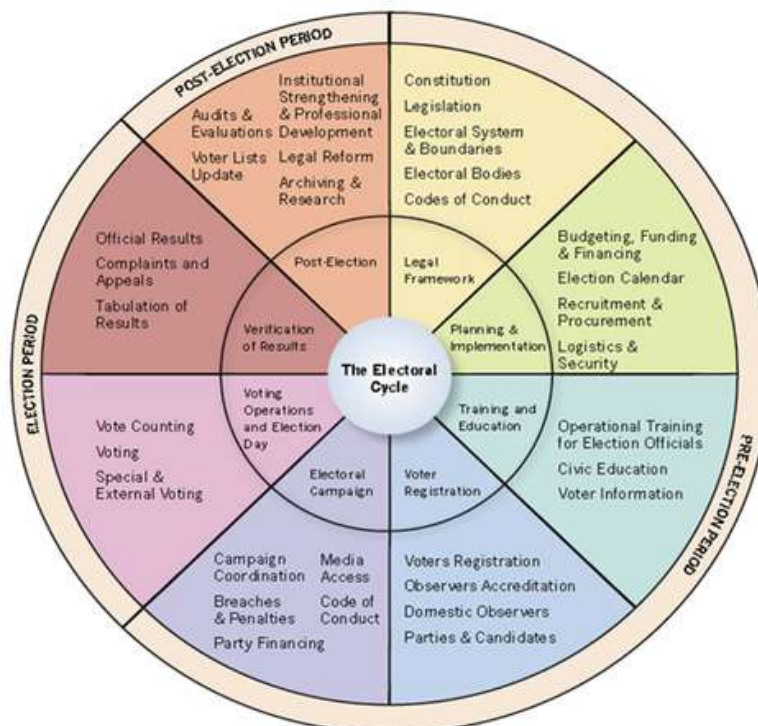

Figure 3: The electoral cycle presented by Mr. Qabas

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

Mr. Salam Zayir , the representative of South Youth Organizations started by elaborating the role their efforts towards voter education in Basra, ThiQar, Muthanna, and Missan. Mr. Zayir, while addressing the challenges and weaknesses in the electoral process, emphasized several issues.

Mr. Zayir listed the challenges being the lack of financial and human resources for CSOs working on elections to sustain their activities. He also mentioned the inadequate resources for IHEC offices, particularly concerning electoral awareness and education.Mr Zayir also noted the challenges to distribute updated voting cards to the concerned voters, the need to expand mobile teams and strengthen their logistics, the some sorts disconnect between the citizens and IHEC after the elections.

Figure 4: Mr. Salam Zayir the representative of South Youth Organizations

Mr. Zayir also discussed the politicized media working against IHEC, the ineffectiveness of procedures for monitoring and holding violators among political blocs accountable, and poor maintenance procedures for devices on election day. He noted that most government institutions do not cooperate with IHEC unless mandated by higher authorities.

Mr. Zayir highlighted the strengths of the electoral process in the context of 2021 CoR elections. These include the high level of coordination and cooperation between IHEC and CSOs, support from the UN and international agencies, robust security efforts and protection during elections, commendable performance by IHEC staff, international monitoring, and active participation of numerous CSOs in voter education and monitoring.

Wrapping up his presentation, Mr. Zayir made several recommendations including strenthening IHEC's resources, empowering CSOs' election monitoring, enhancing international cooperation, and improving IHEC's coordination with government institutions and citizens. He proposed creating effective digital communication platforms between IHEC and CSOs.

Presentation 3: CSOs efforts and roles in civic and voter education

Mr. Amer Fahim Al-Guraifi from Rasid Center for Human Rights introduced his organizations and their efforts in voter education. He discussed the challenges they faced in supporting IHEC and the electoral process. Mr. Al-Guraifi underlined the limited oversight role of CSOs in some areas, leading to a concentration of control by heads of VRCs, which shadows the electoral transparency. Mr. Al-Guraifi also pointed out the lack of clear and comprehensive understanding about democratic principles in Iraqi society.

Moreover, Mr. Al-Guraifi mentioned issues in the electoral process that could hamper their collaboration with CSOs, including the casual handling of monitoring reports by civil society, the public's mistrust in the electoral process, inadequate financial and human resources for CSOs monitoring elections, irregularities in the electoral process, and the rise of misinformation during elections. A chart outlining steps for enhancing voter education awareness was also presented.

Figure 4: Mr. Michael Benjamin Dawood, the Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Iraqi Minorities Alliance

Mr. Al-Guraifi proposed several recommendations, urging IHEC and the Iraqi government to promote the concept of diversity, curtail hate speech among candidates by monitoring media, and implement stringent laws against violators. He suggested raising awareness about democratic principles and the concept of fair competition. Mr. Amer recommended that mechanisms be implemented to safeguard and boost women's electoral participation and to monitor speeches inciting violence against women.

Mr. Al-Guraifi emphasized the need to activate all legal articles in the Political Parties Law No. 36 of 2015, for instance, party financing, and called for guidelines to facilitate the participation of people with special needs. Lastly, he recommended that UN agencies and international organizations increase their support to IHEC and CSOs to foster electoral awareness and boost voter turnout.

During the discussion followed after the presentation Dr. Emad Jameel, Head of the Media Productions Unit at IHEC, noted the growing professionalism of CSOs and their keen interest in partnering with IHEC, especially in voter education. Dr. Jameel stressed the importance of CSOs' understanding of IHEC procedures, particularly voter registration, and educating voters about receiving their voter cards and interacting with IHEC staff.

Various concerns were raised about the collaboration between IHEC and CSOs in the electoral process. A significant issue was that CSOs felt their reports were not adequately addressed by IHEC. The discussion also identified TV shows and social media, along with partnerships with community leaders and influencers, as effective voter education tools. The need for IHEC to share electoral information with CSOs to target specific voter demographics was highlighted.

Concerning electoral devices, IHEC assured that comprehensive training would be conducted to prevent the malfunctions experienced in past elections.

SECTION 3:

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

Mr. Al-Hassan Qabbas, Head of electoral relations section presented the importance of strategic analysis and SWOT analysis; he then asked all participants to be divided into four different 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
- The credibility of CSOs with the public.
- Geographical distribution of CSOs and IHEC through VRCs
- Experience accumulated through previous experiences with local and international organizations.
- The presence of CSOs in all stages of the electoral process enhances the integrity, impartiality, and transparency of the electoral process.
- Inclusivity of CSOs from different backgrounds.
- Organizations specialized in gender and people with special needs.
- IHEC effective role in communicating with electoral stakeholders and government institutions.

Group B: Weakness
- Poor government performance.
- Instability of the political process.
- Partial media affiliated with political parties and blocks.
- The absence of special centers for people with disabilities.
- The existence of customs and traditions in some areas prevented women from voting.
- Lack of voter confidence in conducting elections electronically

Group C: Opportunities:
- The social media used by young people, "Instagram - Tik Tok", targets young people born after 2000 .
- Engaging media that have many followers.
- Educating university students and educating large numbers, and thus influencing students' families.
- Partnership between IHEC mobile teams with the CSOs' voluntary teams to implement a joint action plan.
- Awareness materials "leaflets - shopping bags - watches - flash drives".

Group D: Threats
- Presented by Bushra Altaee – Sabaa' Center for development studies
- Unstable security situation.
- Lack of trust in the electoral and political process.
- Media spreading misinformation.
- Electoral breaches.
- Weak cooperation by some government departments.
- Lack of financial and human resources at CSOs.

SECTION 4:

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

Mr. Brabim Kumar KC, Communications & Outreach Advisor of the Office OEA, presented on the crucial issue of electoral misinformation and disinformation.

Mr. Kumar invited participants for a communications exercise aimed at illustrating the potential obstacles during the communication process that messages may encounter, leading to the spread of misinformation. This practical approach helped attendees grasp the intricacies of communication and the ease with which misinformation can spread unintentionally.

The digital age provides significant opportunities for both the IHEC and CSOs to educate, engage and empower voters in the electoral process. However, it also poses certain risks, particularly the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which could undermine the electoral process, incite conflicts, and instigate disorder. Therefore, it is essential that the IHEC, and CSOs are sufficiently prepared and well-equipped to tackle these challenges and mitigate the associated risks.

Figure 6: Brabim Kumar presenting during the workshop

To understand the concept better, the presentation distinguished between misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and fake news. Participants were provided with a series of case studies to understand the differences between these terms and their potential implications on elections, in the Iraqi context. Participants also contributed their perspectives on distinguishing between these terms during electoral periods.

Mr. Kumar presented several strategies to combat misinformation and disinformation, including public education campaigns, fact-checking and debunking initiatives, media literacy programs, cooperation with social media platforms, promoting transparency and accountability, creating reporting channels for misinformation, collaborating with relevant stakeholders, implementing legal measures, and conducting regular monitoring and research.

Mr. Kumar also highlighted the concerted efforts of the UNAMI OEA and IHEC in combating misinformation and disinformation during the 2021 CoR elections. This included their strategic approaches, initiatives, and preventive measures to maintain the integrity of electoral information. Mr. Kumar urged the IHEC and CSOs to strengthen their collaborative efforts in addressing these challenges.

SECTION 5:

Action points on enhancing collaborations and engagements through digital means.

One of the workshop's goals was to explore methods for maintaining and enhancing communication and dialogue between the IHEC and CSOs using digital platforms, while also gathering feedback from both parties.

Dr. Nawal Hussain Khalaf, a representative from the IHEC's Public Outreach directorate (POD) digital media office, provided an overview of the substantial digital advancements made by the IHEC, including updates to the IHEC website and other social platforms. She presented the various sections of the website, demonstrating how users can easily access and retrieve information. Dr. Nawal shared data on website traffic and introduced a new page dedicated to engaging electoral stakeholders, which could serve as a valuable resource for CSOs and a digital platform for ongoing, structured communication.

Figure 7 Dr.Nawal Hussain Khalaf taking notes of feedback

Dr. Nawal also shed light on the diverse target audiences that the IHEC prioritized during the Council of Representatives (CoR) 2021 elections. After her presentation, participants were invited to share their thoughts and suggestions on the proposed digital platform, particularly how it could enhance cooperation between the IHEC and CSOs.

- Disaggregated data of all elections
- Create a tool/ window to identify false and fake news and to report/banned.
- CSOs can use the platform to submit ideas and thoughts to IHEC PoD in terms of drafting tailored messages to different voter segments.
- Share video products and other educational materials within this platform for CSOs to further share and amplify CSOs availability of data on previous elections for the purpose of analyzing CSOs.
- Data on previous electoral elections and all technical and educational materials.
- A library of materials and training manuals.
- Activities and events conducted by the CSOs in the field of awareness and education for the electoral process.·A window for reporting violations of the electoral process, the campaign, and the campaigns of the candidates, in order to help IHEC in the monitoring process.
- Username and a unique password for each civil society organization through which it can access this platform.

SECTION 6:

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

In line with this objective of enhancing constructive collaboration between the IHEC and CSOs, a group discussion was organized, ensuring an equal representation of participants from both the IHEC and CSOs. This balanced representation facilitated a comprehensive dialogue, promoting a mutual understanding of each party's perspectives and ideas.

Following these group discussions, representatives from each group were invited to share their collective insights and suggestions. These included:

Group A:
- Organizing training workshops by IHEC for CSOs, including topics such as biometric updating, registration, distribution, the definition of the law and the voting mechanism, etc.
- The CSOs have the right to access information through joint meetings.
- Seeking continued financial support by IHEC from the government for sustained communication with CSOs
- Establishing a particular office within the IHEC for monitoring networks (CSOs) and choosing a representative for them according to criteria set by the CSOs.
- Creating a joint team (CSOs and IHEC) with IHEC's mobile teams to facilitate their tasks.

Group B:
- Sharing the data by IHEC to CSOs would help CSOs to determine their target audience for voters' education.
- Creating a hotline for communication by IHEC.
- training and holding seminars between IHEC and CSOs.
- A memorandum of understanding and partnership between IHEC and the CSOs.
- Preparing awareness and educational programs in consultation between IHEC and other parties, including CSOs
- CSOs to support IHEC to combat mis/disinformation.

Group C

- Equality in rights and privileges between international organizations and local organizations in election monitoring,
- CSOs Establishing a coordination operations room between IHEC and CSOs.
- IHEC and CSOs work closely to monitor electoral irregularities and violations CSOs.
- Submit proposals and reports that contribute to raising awareness and educating voters.

Group D

- Formation of a joint working group between IHEC and CSOs.
- Holding workshops by the CSOs to mobilize citizens with the presence of the IHEC and vice versa.
- CSOs to disseminate the electoral information produced by IHEC.
- IHEC to publish CSOs reports.
- Provide the organizations with all updates and procedures regarding the work and activities of IHEC.
- Directing the Commission's staff to cooperate with the CSOs.
- Providing organizations with a result sheet [BKK1] of election results.
- Allowing the use of mobile phones inside the PSs by members of CSOs for the reporting purpose.

Figure 8 and 9 Participants during the group work

SECTION 7:

Closing session:

The workshop concluded with final remarks from representatives of the IHEC, UNAMI, and the participating CSOs. They collectively expressed their appreciation for the fruitful discussions and the spirit of cooperation between the stakeholders. The atmosphere demonstrated mutual respect and shared goal of enhancing voter education efforts and ensuring transparent, inclusive, and successful elections.

Both the IHEC and CSO parties agreed to work towards implementing the recommendations and strategies discussed during the workshop. This commitment demonstrated the productive nature of the workshop and the shared vision of all participants.

Ms. Shiqpe Hebibi, the Senior Electoral Advisor for UNAMI OEA, on behalf of Dr. Aamir A. Arain, the Director of OEA thanked both the IHEC and the CSOs for their active and productive participation throughout the workshop. Ms. Hebibi expressed her optimism about the IHEC's initiative to draft recommendations for the IHEC Board of Commissioners (BoC) on voter education and CSO engagement. This initiative, she noted, was a clear indication of the IHEC's commitment to improving its processes and strengthening its relationships with CSOs.

Mr. Al-Hassan Qabas, the Head of the Electoral Relations unit within the Public Outreach Directorate (POD), conveyed his heartfelt thanks to UNAMI for organizing a successful workshop. He noted that the discussions and outcomes of the workshop had exceeded his expectations, reflecting the high level of engagement and the quality of the contributions from all participants. He expressed his hope that UNAMI would support organizing more such workshops in the future, as it would help strengthen voter education through improved coordination between the IHEC and CSOs. He emphasized that such workshops are very productive and useful in cultivating a culture of collaboration and mutual learning, which would ultimately benefit the electoral process.

> " *These workshops are very productive and useful in cultivating a culture of collaboration and mutual learning, which would ultimately benefit the electoral process.* "