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

ERBIL, 29 - 30 MAY 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
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

INTRODUCTION

Since transitioning to democracy in 2003, Iraq has held several elections. However, due to a various of political and technical issues, there has been a decrease in voter participation, with many abstaining 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. Regrettably, a 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. The second workshop was held in Erbil from May 29 - 30, which brought together 20 participants from CSOs and 20 participants (13 female) from the IHEC's HQ and governorate offices of Ninewa, Kirkuk and Salahdin in northen 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.
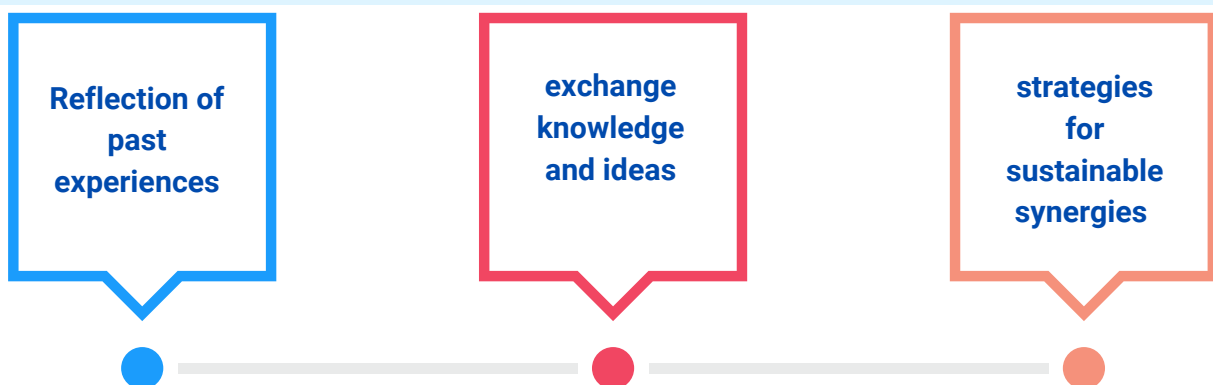
Reflection of past experiences

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. Nabeel Subhi Noori, the Director of the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq (IHEC) and Public Outreach Directorate, delivered the opening remarks. Mr. Noori emphasized the workshop's goal to enhance the partnership between the IHEC and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). He expressed his gratitude to UNAMI for supporting these events' organization and recognized CSOs as key electoral partners. Mr. Noori conveyed optimism for open dialogue, aiming to develop a mechanism for ongoing collaboration.

Figure 2: Ms Shiqpe Hebibi, Aous Ali (left) and Mr. Nabeel Subhi Noori during opening session

Ms. Shqipe Hebibi, the UNAMI Senior Electoral Advisor, expressed her appreciation for all collaborators. She highlighted the unique aspect of the workshop: equal representation from both governmental and non-governmental entities for the first time. Ms. Hebibi elaborated on the series of workshops organized by UNAMI OEA, of which this is the second session, with the third to take place in Basrah.

She underscored 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 workshop aims to facilitate idea exchange, encourage learning, and foster network-building among participants. She assured that UNAMI is keen in supporting the collaboration between the IHEC and CSOs. In preparation for this, the IHEC is drafting recommendations on how to maintain this collaboration, to be submitted to the Board of Commissioners after the completion of all workshops.

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

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. 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.

Mr Qabas further laid out the cycle of voter education, starting with education, participation, ensuring ease of access, targeting audiences, addressing voter reluctance, availability of data, uniformity in electoral terminology, and empowering people through education.

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

CSOs also collaborate with IHEC in two main capacities: oversight and voter education. Mr. Qabas appreciated the oversight work done by CSOs but expressed disappointment over the less effective role in voter education. He emphasized the need for CSOs to harness their grassroots networks to improve voter education, something IHEC struggles to do as a government entity bound by rules and regulations.

During the Q&A session, issues around CSOs' performance and their politicization were discussed, as well as the need for CSOs to be independent and not to align with political operations or blocks. Other discussions included funding and resources for CSOs, the challenges posed by limited internet access in certain areas, and strategies to ensure effective communication. The importance of security and proper operational rules was underscored. Mr Qabas reiterated that IHEC is always keen on working with CSOs to ensure a transparent and credible electoral process.

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> *"This is the first time, I am attending such workshop where CSOs are equally valued and are allowed to openly interact and engage with IHEC"*
> *- CSO participant*
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Presentation 2: CSOs efforts and roles in civic and voter education

Mr. Michael Benjamin Dawood, the Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Iraqi Minorities Alliance, and Alliance Surveillance Networks, outlined an initiative aimed at enhancing voter participation and creating sustainable interaction between partners in the Iraqi electoral process.

Mr. Dawood highlighted the importance of monitoring elections according to international standards and norms. He emphasized the need for CSOs to raise awareness among the public and submit detailed reports on their monitoring activities.

The 2021 election process in Iraq was deemed successful compared to previous ones, indicating progress. However, Dawood stressed the significance of starting CSO activities well in advance of elections to allow ample time for the process. He urged for continuous motivation of people to vote, emphasizing the importance of engagement throughout the entire electoral cycle.

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

Dawood proudly mentioned that over two thousand individuals actively participated in CSO activities, and he stressed that with dedicated efforts, they could reach and educate even more people. He underscored the credibility provided by monitoring, highlighting how international observers further bolstered the legitimacy of elections. He also noted the challenges faced by internally displaced persons (IDPs) in finding their voting locations and mentioned conducting interviews with parliamentary candidates to address this issue. Finally, Dawood acknowledged the helpfulness IHEC, with CSOs regularly visiting and receiving data from them during the last elections.

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

Figure 5: Ms. Ayat from Al-Nidhal Association for Human Rights sharing her experiences and Insights

Ms. Ayat Abdulatif from Al-Nidhal Association for Human Rights, started her presentation with a powerful story of a woman from an IDP camp who reached out to the CSO for guidance on running for elections. Despite not disclosing her name, it was revealed that she successfully filed her candidacy, highlighting the CSO's impactful engagement and considered a success. The organization dedicated four months to electoral education, conducting training and awareness sessions for men, women, and youth.

They also produced videos targeting youth and women to raise awareness. However, CSOs faced numerous challenges from the government and other institutions, hampering their monitoring efforts during the elections. To address this, they suggested that the IHEC include national partners on their website alongside international partners and emphasize the role of CSOs in the electoral process.

Additionally, she proposed that IHEC establish partnerships with the Ministry of Youth and similar institutions to effectively engage each target group. The prevalence of hate speech during elections, both organized and on social media, was highlighted as a concerning issue. The CSO had undertaken a three-month project to detect hate speech and found that a certain community was particularly targeted. Despite the sensitivity surrounding hate speech, the CSOs and IHEC emphasized the need to take a stand against it and put more efforts to minimize the spread.

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 existence of electoral law.
- Experience with both IHEC and CSOs
- The "neutrality" of both IHEC and CSOs
- Positive communication between IHEC and the CSOs
- Easy to locate registration and polling stations.
- The use of modern technology to reduce fraud.
- Scope to use social media more professionally and organized way.
- CSOs connected with general people and Gender diversity in CSOs.

Group B: Weakness
- Lack of knowledge of CSOs and observers of the IHEC's rules of conduct.
- Some organizations lack knowledge of polling day procedures.
- Polling officials are not aware of the rights and duties of the observers.
- Lack of communication between the IHEC and CSOs in the post-election period.
- Not allocating centers for people with disabilities in polling stations.
- Not sharing election results in polling stations.
- Lack of procedures.

Group C: Opportunities:
- Technological and media development for education
- Increased participation of women and youth
- Engage more state government institutions to spread electoral awareness
- The security situation has improved.
- Existence of international organizations with significant international experience.
- More Iraqis are connected via social media.

Group D: Threats
- The dominance of political parties, and their control over the voter.
- IHEC Media activities is confined only with governmental media.
- Tribal affiliation and its bias in the voting process.
- The weakness of some CSOs in delivering the correct information
- Difficulty accessing persons with disabilities at polling stations.
- Lack of regular funding to CSOs.
- Cybercrimes and attacks from different blocks – there are no higher committee for cybercrimes.

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

Brabim Kumar KC, the Communications and Outreach Advisor of the UNAMI OEA, presented on "Understanding Electoral Misinformation and Disinformation: Strategies for Election Commission and CSOs to Combat Together."

The session began with an overview of the communications framework, the importance of voter education, the impact of social media on elections, and an elaboration on the concepts of misinformation and disinformation. A significant portion of the discussion was focused on the impact of misinformation and disinformation on electoral processes, emphasizing the urgent need to identify and effectively address these issues.

Mr. Kumar presented case studies and lessons from past experiences to provide participants with practical insights into this complex issue.

The participants discussed potential barriers that could arise during the electoral cycle and the necessary analysis of voters' behavior and perceptions. Mr. Kumar acknowledged the growing influence of social media in Iraq, recognizing it as both a boon and a potential challenge. While the digital age has enabled broader reach and opened new avenues for IHEC and CSOs, it has also heightened the risk of online misinformation and disinformation, thereby presenting serious challenges to the electoral process.

Figure 6: Brabim Kumar presenting during the workshop

Mr. Kumar warned against the dangers of hate speech, defining it as any expression aimed at degrading, intimidating, or inciting violence against individuals or groups. He underscored the potential of such speech to trigger violence and disrupt societal unity, highlighting the urgent need for countermeasures.

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.

The session concluded with Mr. Kumar proposing the establishment of joint task forces and working groups, resource and best practice sharing, joint fact-checking initiatives, and the formation of a dedicated committee within IHEC to counter misinformation and disinformation.

SECTION 5:

Enhancing IHEC-CSOs collaborations and engagements through digital means

Mr. Mohammed A. Yaseen, head of IHEC's POD digital media unit, presented an overview of the significant updates made by the IHEC on digital front including the IHEC website and social media platforms. 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 further developed as a digital platform to continue with the organized regular communications.

Figure 7 Mr. Mohammed A. Yaseen discussing about IHEC digital initiatives

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. Four different groups (from IHEC and CSOs) came with suggestions that included:

- Create a WhatsApp group and Telegram channel that has both IHEC and CSOs (also should have IHEC officials in order to share required documents).
- Make a code of conduct for the digital group.
- IHEC to provide the statistics of voters (registered, updated, etc.).
- CSOs would notify IHEC about electoral violations
- Providing the organizations with statistics about the position of the distribution of biometric cards, as well as the biometric registration process and the numbers of those registered in the concerned governorates of the organizations and within their administrative unit.
- Provide CSOs with the number of polling centers and stations in each governorate.
- Creating a website as a mechanism for communication between the partners of the electoral process and linking it with a work group on the WhatsApp platform.
- The electoral stakeholders are committed to a code of conduct and rules for communication.
- One of the sections of the website is a question and answer, which is a platform for direct dialogue and interaction between electoral stakeholders.
- The website also provides the latest updates on the electoral process.
- A full calendar of IHEC and CSOs activities and events.
- The news of each of the provinces of Iraq separately.
- The latest news related to the work of the organizations and the impact of this electoral process.
- A proper documentation and comprehensive archive of electoral data and information.
- Questions and answers page.

SECTION 6:

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

The workshop concluded with group discussions focusing on the key question of how the IHEC and CSOs can enhance their partnerships and cooperation and continue with the collaboration for the benefit of voters and the general public. Participants were divided into four groups and were tasked with brainstorming ideas and activities to strengthen communication and collaboration between these entities.

Group A:
- Working to create an electronic group containing representatives from civil society organizations and the IHEC in cooperation in launching an educational awareness campaign related to the current campaign, especially updating biometric data for first-time voters.
- The establishment of educational seminars by IHEC for representatives of civil society organizations due to their need to receive information and procedures related to the stages of the electoral process.
- Share IHEC's educational productions on the social media platforms of civil society organizations.
- Invite civil society organizations by the IHEC to participate in the activities it carries out and vice versa.
- Do joint activities between IHEC and the CSOs.
- Provide partner organizations with official letters for the purpose of facilitating their work when carrying out their educational activities.
- Publish the names of CSOs on the official IHEC website.

Group B:
- Involve organizations in IHEC meetings periodically to clarify work mechanisms.
- Conduct joint educational seminars between the IHEC and civil society organizations.
- Provide CSOs with a database of registration and polling centers, their stations, and the number of voters.
- Facilitate CSOs work in polling centers.
- Use CSOs reports by IHEC.
- Utilize CSOs' efforts to boost electoral awareness campaigns.
- Work closely with CSOs to combat electoral misinformation.

Group C

- Providing legal protection for the observers of the organizations and taking action against the violators.
- Finding and creating an electronic platform for communication between the organizations and the IHEC.
- Participation between the IHEC and the CSOs in organizing awareness and educational workshops, promoting media materials, and providing statistics on the number of non-updated voters.
- Develop a legal procedure against the organizations that grant the observers' badges, which are affiliated with the political entities.
- The need to involve the organizations in the official websites of the IHEC.

Group D

- Providing effective and continuous channels of communication.
- Awareness and training for organizations.
- Clarity and transparency.
- The possibility of opening a window/place for people with disabilities in all governorates of Iraq.
- Participation of civil society organizations in most of IHEC's activities.
- The United Nations should work on the participation of organizations in all activities that serve the process of communication.
- Support IHEC through human efforts in the process Media and Communication Providing media support by activists through social communication.

Figure 8,9,10 and 11: Participants during the group work

SECTION 7:

Closing session:

In his closing remarks, Mr. Nabeel Subhi Noori, the director of the IHEC public outreach directorate, reflected on the productive discussions held between the IHEC and CSO participants. He emphasized their unity of purpose, stating, "We are moving in the same direction, our main goal is to educate people, and our doors are open for everyone." As the head of the outreach department and media, he expressed gratitude for the support extended by the UNAMI office of electoral assitances and UNOPS. Furthermore, he acknowledged the strengthening of both personal and professional relationships through the workshop, emphasizing that these connections should continue to grow in the future.

Speaking on behalf of Dr. Aamir A. Arain, the Director of the UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance, the Senior Electoral Advisor, Ms. Shqipe Hebibi, extended her gratitude to the attendees. She appreciated the dynamic discussions that had taken place, attributing the success of the workshop to each participant's active engagements.

"Nothing would have been possible without your presence," she said, emphasizing the importance of IHEC-CSOs contributions. Ms. Hebibi noted that the feedback received from participants confirmed this as one of the most useful workshops held to date.

Looking to the future, she expressed UNAMI OEA's anticipation for the continued collaboration between IHEC and CSOs. She assured them that OEA would remain a supportive partner in future endeavors. Ms. Hebibi concluded by encouraging IHEC and CSOs to carry forward the momentum from the workshop, looking forward to sustained and productive engagements in the future.

> "The coordination between IHEC and CSOs should not be limited during elections, there should be continued and sustained cooperation and coordination before, during and after the elections." - IHEC participant

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

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