

REFLECTIONS

LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS: UNDP SUPPORT TO ELECTORAL PROCESSES

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global crisis of our time, with devastating social, economic, and political consequences worldwide, and a tragic loss of life. As a central actor in the United Nations Development System, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is playing an important role in shaping and driving the United Nations response to the crisis.

To support the UNDP response to COVID-19, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) has undertaken a review of lessons from past evaluations of UNDP's work in crisis contexts. The purpose is to provide evidence-based advice to UNDP country offices that are responding to requests to help prepare for, respond to, and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing particularly on the most vulnerable.

This paper focuses on electoral processes and is one in a series of knowledge products from the IEO focusing on important areas of UNDP support to countries in crisis.

METHODOLOGY

This is a rapid evidence assessment,¹ designed to provide a balanced synthesis of evaluative evidence posted to the UNDP [Evaluation Resource Centre](#) over the past decade. Country-level and thematic evaluations conducted by the IEO were an important source, given their independence and high credibility. Additionally, high-quality decentralized evaluations commissioned by country offices were considered. Within each review, the emphasis was on identifying consistent findings, conclusions and recommendations that capture relevant lessons for UNDP. The analysis seeks to offer practical and timely insights to support UNDP decision makers for effective crisis response. It is not a comprehensive study of the general and scientific literature on crisis support.

CONTEXT

Credible and inclusive electoral processes are critical components of peaceful, sustainable and inclusive societies. They allow for citizen participation and voice, hold governments accountable for their policies and actions and provide the political legitimacy that underpins stable states. UNDP supports a wide range of electoral cycle areas including national efforts for electoral reform; electoral administration; participation of women and marginalized groups; voter and civic education; prevention of electoral conflict and violence, and coordination of electoral assistance. UNDP does this through technical assistance, capacity-building, procurement of electoral materials, coordination of electoral assistance and efforts, and managing electoral basket funds. UNDP supports electoral processes in about 60 countries a year.

This paper identifies some key lessons learned from evaluating UNDP’s past electoral assistance in crisis contexts. Some are from countries affected by natural disasters; however, most are those affected by conflict or political crises. The lessons are distilled by examining how UNDP has supported these countries to strengthen their electoral processes during and after crises.

AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

<p>1 More effective interventions use fast-track mechanisms, existing relationships, and electoral cycle approaches.</p>	<p>2 More strategic UNDP engagement and coordinated efforts and standards can improve the credibility of the electoral process and reduce the potential for violence.</p>	<p>3 Focusing on inclusive electoral processes gives voice to marginalized people and strengthens women’s political participation.</p>
<p>4 UNDP support is more effective and sustainable when it uses a capacity-building approach and is flexible.</p>	<p>5 Investing in electoral technology can improve the quality of the processes if done strategically and through context-appropriate solutions.</p>	<p>6 Supporting risk analysis and early warning systems can help anticipate and reduce violence around elections.</p>

LESSONS LEARNED

1 More effective interventions use fast-track mechanisms, existing relationships, and electoral cycle approaches.

Elections are large-scale, time-sensitive and expensive operations that are difficult for many crisis-affected countries to implement on their own. Many of the problems faced are systemic in nature and require a longer-term developmental approach to address. UNDP’s electoral cycle programming, with assistance provided before, during and after an election, that reaches the broader range of actors and elements needed for credible and inclusive processes, helps electoral management bodies (EMBs) and national stakeholders to deliver their elections and strengthen the technical and normative quality of their processes. This is especially important in the uncertainty of a crisis and the level of mistrust in post-conflict environments.² UNDP’s electoral cycle programme in Nigeria focused on supporting institutional and legal reforms as well as strengthening the capacity of key stakeholders and processes in the years leading up to its 2015 elections. Its broad scope of stakeholders and interlinking efforts helped bring different institutions together building consensus on needed reforms, and increasing their capacity and knowledge around electoral processes, which was notable at technical levels once the elections were held.³

UNDP support for infrastructure development after the earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal helped restore the essential structures of the EMB needed to administer the elections, store electoral material, house polling stations, and disseminate information to voters. UNDP’s surge capacity and long-term procurement agreements for electoral commodities allowed for the rapid and flexible response needed to deliver logistically complex operations and meet the time-bound demands of the electoral processes in places such as in Kyrgyzstan, Haiti, and Afghanistan, among others.⁴ In Yemen, UNDP’s rapid gear-up and support for the 2012 early presidential elections called with a three-month notice, enabled a critical component of the negotiated agreement to be fulfilled, and averted a worsening of the political crisis. Its previous experience and relationship of trust with the EMB facilitated this process.⁵

UNDP’s use of the electoral cycle approach in Burkina Faso, which provided technical assistance, mobilized funds, facilitated dialogue among electoral actors, and supported voter education efforts, was crucial to building the credibility of the EMB and the holding of elections, contributing directly to the acceptance of results and the peaceful conclusion of its 2013 - 2017 electoral process.⁶ In Timor Leste, UNDP capacity-building for the EMB, support for voter education and strengthening the political engagement of women, youth and persons with disabilities (PwD) contributed to the effective conduct and management of the electoral process, and generally high levels of

participation which strengthened the integrity and legitimacy of its broader democratic process, resulting in a more stable political environment and the peaceful transfer of power.⁷

2

More strategic UNDP engagement and coordinated efforts and standards can improve the credibility of the electoral process and reduce the potential for violence.

Elections can be a means to exit a crisis and restore state legitimacy as was done in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti and Mali. However, unresolved or underlying issues can still drive election and post-election conflict as found in those same countries as well as in cases such as Libya, Yemen, and Côte d'Ivoire. Programme evaluations, including UNDP's thematic evaluation of its electoral assistance,⁸ recommend that UNDP make better use of its comparative advantage to focus more strategically on the critical issues underlying electoral instability and violence, and leverage its convening capabilities to promote dialogue and build consensus for needed reforms (Haiti, El Salvador, Mozambique and others).

In Sierra Leone, UNDP's proactive coordination efforts with the broad range of electoral stakeholders at technical and policy levels helped improve the credibility of the processes, reduced the potential for violence, increased participation and inclusion, and encouraged the peaceful acceptance of the results. In this case, UNDP, with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office and Government, successfully developed a tiered system of joint technical and political coordination platforms to share information, develop common strategies, assess and mitigate political and security risks, and ensure gaps were covered by national and international institutions. This continuous multi-layered and multi-sectoral engagement, which also emphasized adherence to standards, was a key factor in keeping the process on track, holding peaceful, timely and credible elections, and the transfer of power.⁹

In El Salvador, UNDP was central to the EMB achieving consensus on the residential voting system eliminating a contentious element of the process.¹⁰ In Mali, UNDP's ability to coordinate and work with the UN mission and other partners was a determining factor in the conduct of peaceful elections and higher voter participation,¹¹ while in Nepal, UNDP's close coordination and synergistic programming with other electoral assistance providers avoided duplications of effort and ensured complementarity of their technical approaches that strengthened the integrity of the process.¹²

In Tanzania, results were more evident in the uptake of UNDP's normative suggestions on inclusive participation, than for other parts of the electoral process receiving less attention, such as the quality of the electoral process and EMB independence.¹³ UNDP's use of basket funds helped ensure coordinated use and messaging for donor funding and programmes in contexts such as the DRC, Mali, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Yemen. In Sierra Leone, this process was used to track delivery of government funding commitments for EMB administration that were critical to the holding of timely elections.¹⁴

3

Focusing on inclusive electoral processes gives voice to marginalized people and strengthens women's political participation.

The UNDP conflict evaluation (2012) found that UNDP electoral support programmes can give voice to previously marginalized people and make notable gains in engaging women in political processes around post-conflict elections.¹⁵ In the Republic of Congo, UNDP helped increase women's representation among political party candidates through advocacy for electoral reform and leadership training for female candidates.¹⁶ In the DRC, UNDP built support for female candidates among civil society organizations and women's groups through information exchanges, while in the Solomon Islands, UNDP helped increase the visibility for female candidates in the media through journalist training that contributed to improving their coverage. It also continued its voter education efforts during COVID-19 through fixing voter information to commercial bags of rice for sale throughout the islands to extend its reach to geographically marginalized groups.¹⁷ In Somalia, UNDP's women's political participation project engaged women leaders before the elections with training in political advocacy and campaigning to encourage their participation as candidates, which helped Somalia to reach 24 percent women's representation in the 2016 elections.¹⁸

In Afghanistan, UNDP supported the EMB to develop gender-responsive policies, targeted outreach campaigns for women candidates and voters, and increase the proportion of women working with the electoral administration which increased the percentage of women in the EMB and in voting in 2015. However, the turnout gains were not sustained in the most recent election, which had a lower turnout overall.¹⁹ The online courses supported in El Salvador and Moldova allowed for an expansion of the EMB training programmes beyond parties and poll workers to interested persons and included modules on gender and participation that encompassed the importance of women's participation as well as the LGBTI community and PwD, increasing their access to information on the process and voting procedures.²⁰

UNDP Nepal expanded the concept of inclusion to gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) working with the EMB to adopt a GESI policy and raising awareness of GESI issues in the electoral process, and providing civil society groups with small grants for voter education targeting first-time voters, women and marginalized groups, including persons living with hearing and visual disabilities. UNDP Nepal continued to facilitate EMB outreach during COVID-19 through virtual learning-sharing programmes with their civil society organization (CSO) partners. These efforts resulted in the equal participation of women as poll workers and voter educators during the elections, and the development of new signs for electoral terms for sign language use in voter education for the hearing impaired, which encourage the first deaf candidate to run for office.²¹

In Sierra Leone, UNDP raised the profile and participation of PwD within the electoral process by hiring PwD to work within the EMB as advisers and grass-roots voter educators, improving the physical access to electoral sites, and developing a tactile ballot guide. These strengthened the confidence of some PwD to participate in the process and helped ensure the confidentiality of their vote.²²

4

UNDP support is more effective and sustainable when it uses a capacity-building approach and is flexible.

The human and physical toll caused by a natural disaster or conflict can change the nature of cycle assistance from strengthening national capacities to a more hands-on operational effort focused on getting the job done (Afghanistan, Nepal, Haiti, Indonesia, Yemen). These short-term solutions can be technically and politically expedient in the crisis context. Still, evaluations have found they are not sustainable if they do not include capacity-building, needed reforms, and the development of context-appropriate systems.

Embedding technical experts within the EMB has proven effective in transferring skills and increasing mutual accountability and ownership and led to more positive and sustainable programme outcomes (Jordan, Nepal, Haiti, Sierra Leone, El Salvador). Differences in outcomes between the cycles supported were notable in some of these same countries when the assistance was not embedded.²³ Being on-site and working as a team with counterparts increased the transfer of knowledge and institutionalization of practices within the EMB, and in many of these cases reduced the scale of assistance needed for the next cycle. The level of national ownership made a notable difference in UNDP's programme outcomes. In the Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone, the increase in ownership in the most recent cycles was notable and helped generate needed institutional change and receptiveness for the capacity-building elements offered by UNDP. This led to increased professionalism and more sustainable results. The use of national technical experts also strengthened EMB engagement in programme efforts in Jordan, Lebanon and Nepal where national experts were seen to have the language skills and knowledge of the context needed to facilitate interaction.²⁴ National ownership was more limited when national counterparts were not included in the programme identification and design phases (Libya, Aceh).²⁵

Flexible programme designs and implementation have allowed UNDP to adapt its programmes and remain relevant within the volatile and uncertain nature of the electoral processes in a crisis context as noted in cases such as Liberia, Lebanon, Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti, Nepal, and the DRC. This enabled UNDP to adjust its support to changed election dates or commissions, and late decision-making. In Liberia, during the Ebola crisis, UNDP was able to adapt its in-person training and assistance to include the health and safety precautions needed, including taking hygiene measures and voter temperatures at the polling sites, and social distancing in polling.²⁶ In Lebanon, UNDP and donor flexibility was critical to being able to extend the project's resources out for several years while the elections date was being set. In

the interim, UNDP used its cycle approach to build the capacity of electoral administrators which included developing an electoral timeline of tasks, the forms needed for election day, and regulatory input so that they would be ready once the date was set.²⁷ Flexibility also allowed UNDP to adjust its support to the changing security environment in Libya, managing its assistance at times from out of the country.²⁸ In the Palestinian Territories, where local elections were repeatedly delayed, UNDP anticipated the support needed by the EMB to carry out its work once the elections were scheduled. This required remaining responsive, committed, and engaged with key stakeholders as well as keeping politically informed so that the technical assistance could respond to political developments. Its evaluation found this approach to be one of the most successful elements of its programme and proved to be a worthwhile investment in the process and in building the institutional strength of the EMB.²⁹

5

Investing in electoral technology can improve the quality of the processes if done strategically and through context-appropriate solutions.

A lesson from UNDP's thematic evaluation of its electoral assistance (2012) was that the building of cost-effective, context-appropriate and sustainable IT solutions was not consistently prioritized in programmes, and limited UNDP's effectiveness in building national ownership and sustainable systems. Despite UNDP's increased attention to cost and sustainability, this can still be an issue, especially in a crisis context. A lesson from Nepal, where a multi-year effort to develop a software system update has yet to be accepted by the EMB, is to ensure that larger and/or sensitive procurements incorporate a dedicated risk analysis with timelines for decision making and development, mapping of financial interests in the various systems, and identification of mitigation measures.³⁰ System development also needs to fit within the budget and time-frame of electoral support projects. In Sierra Leone, UNDP was unable to complete its work on a civil registration system, from which the voter registry was to be extracted, as it required a more comprehensive approach, and time to implement, than could be accommodated in the project.³¹

In Haiti, UNDP successfully developed an innovative e-system that was context-appropriate and easy for the EMB and stakeholders to use. This included an online registration system for candidates, poll watchers and observers that increased EMB administrative efficiency, standardized systems, and reduced space for preferential treatment, human error, and fraud. This contributed to a more level playing field and depoliticized some aspects of electoral administration. The use of a cloud-based system also allowed direct interface of the database with the printer enabling last-minute changes in ballots. UNDP coupled this with a distribution of cell phones to poll workers to immediately capture and post the results sheets, speeding up the release of preliminary results, and enabled observers and monitors to check results in real time. This increased the transparency of the results process with 4.3 million hits in 2015, and limited opportunities for altered results or excuses to reject the election results.³² In Kyrgyzstan, UNDP successfully introduced a biometric voter identification system used in the 2017 elections; however, attention was also needed for the storage and maintenance of the software and hardware, as well as to include information the system, and privacy of the data, in the voter education efforts.³³

Accurate voter registration lists are problematic in a crisis context and can lead to delays in the electoral process (Côte d'Ivoire) or accusations of fraud (Afghanistan). In Afghanistan, biometric voter verification machines were introduced for the 2018 elections as a means to reduce opportunities for fraud, given the widespread perception that the voters' lists were unreliable. However, decisions on the systems were taken late in the process, not leaving enough time for testing, training or stakeholder familiarization, resulting in their limited use on election day. Their use was mandatory for the 2019 elections, with more training and spare batteries provided, but their use slowed polling, deterred some women from voting, and led to delays in the announcement of the results.³⁴ In Yemen, UNDP engaged only four months before the election, which did not allow enough time for the problems with its registry to be addressed or for new technology to be introduced. To avoid disrupting polling, and to ensure all citizens were able to vote, UNDP supported the use of indelible ink to prevent multiple voting and provided polling staff training on its proper application.³⁵

The level of risk for the security and integrity of the processes and for UNDP's engagement in electoral support increases in a crisis context. This can stem from poor planning, misinformation, implementation problems, inequitable systems and lack of political will, among others.

UNDP support for early warning systems for the EMB and CSOs helped anticipate and prevent electoral violence and contributed to peaceful elections in cases such as the Côte d'Ivoire. In Nepal, UNDP support for a joint operations centre facilitated close working relationships between the EMB and other agencies responsible for security, providing focal points for the collection and sharing of information from field offices, with GIS mapping that fed into wider electoral risk and mapping efforts. This centre was replicated by the EMB without UNDP support for subsequent elections.

In Sierra Leone, the multi-tiered steering committees, which UNDP coordinated at the technical level and provided technical assistance to the policy level, and which included the police and national security agencies, were also designed to identify and manage risk. This integration of efforts resulted in a comprehensive and integrated risk management and electoral security plan that was updated regularly and implemented across technical sectors, policy levels and stakeholders.³⁶ In Gambia, UNDP strengthened national capacity for election risk mapping and management through training and the deployment of conflict monitors and domestic observers, conflict data entry clerks, and police commissioners and development of its National Election Early Warning and Response Group of prominent citizens and persons from the EMB, police and CSOs was cited as a best practice. This group developed strategies and made recommendations to mitigate and resolve election-related violence and threats. The use of a WhatsApp Group as an early warning platform allowed for real time reporting.³⁷ Cooperative efforts with other UNDP projects focusing on social cohesion and peacebuilding strengthened efforts for peaceful elections and countered misinformation (Nepal, Tanzania, Kenya) but are not uniformly done. Missed opportunities to link these programmes with voter education efforts were noted in cases such as Mozambique, Liberia, Afghanistan, and El Salvador. Efforts for peaceful processes were also strengthened in Tanzania through the programme's engagement with religious leaders for widespread dialogues for peace which helped to identify and mitigate potential problems.³⁸

Deployment of Peace and Development Advisers (PDAs) through the joint UNDP-DPPA programme strengthened UN/UNDP's country-level risk analysis and mitigation efforts, and contributed to violence-free elections in Sierra Leone, Kyrgyzstan and Solomon Islands. Election scenario planning done by PDAs with national authorities in Sierra Leone and elsewhere strengthened national stakeholder contingency planning, preventive action and mitigation.³⁹

Collaborative programmes between UNDP and UN Women, and with other national and international stakeholders, focused specific attention on the issue of violence against women in elections (VAWE) which can be more pronounced in a crisis context, and becomes an act of political violence when it impacts on women's participation in the process.⁴⁰ UNDP and UN Women supported women's situation rooms in Sierra Leone and Liberia to mitigate VAWE through the engagement of stakeholders in peace advocacy and to coordinate information and action with electoral stakeholders and security agencies. This included tracking incidents and developing mitigation and messaging activities. In Tanzania, UNDP provided peer-to-peer professional training of police trainers on human rights, gender, including VAWE, and the role of the police in elections. This helped improve police capacity for electoral security and observers noted a reduced number of police incidents and increased police professionalism around election security.⁴¹

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- ⁴ [Automation of voters' identification process during the electoral cycle in 2015-2017, Independent Final Evaluation, Kyrgyzstan \(2017\).](#)
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ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OFFICE

By generating objective evidence, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) supports UNDP to achieve greater accountability and facilitates improved learning from experience. The IEO enhances UNDP's development effectiveness through its programmatic and thematic evaluations and contributes to organizational transparency.

ABOUT REFLECTIONS

The IEO's *Reflections* series looks into past evaluations and captures lessons learned from UNDP's work across its programmes. It mobilizes evaluative knowledge to provide valuable insights for improved decision-making and better development results. This edition highlights lessons from evaluations of UNDP's work in crisis settings.

