18th European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies "Lessons learned from the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis on electoral processes"
Friday, 29 October 2021, online

I will talk about some of the most significant challenges to political inclusion that different groups are facing both directly because of the pandemic as well as the way in which some governments are responding. Then I will highlight some good practice examples from around the world and end by focusing on a few areas that really need more attention from all stakeholders – including EMBs, policy makers, and civil society.

Challenges

When we talk about political inclusion of "marginalized groups", **we are talking about almost everyone.** Nearly half of the world's population are women, 15% people with disabilities, 41% are under 24 years old, 5% are Indigenous people, and 27% religious minorities. Need to have tailored approaches, that address the unique challenges experienced by different communities.

Election delays – elections have been delayed in some countries. eg. young people that come of age in the time between an originally scheduled election and a delayed one, how do they register to vote?

Government closures – Indigenous people may live in remote areas that were underserved by government offices before, more so now with closures – hard to access official identification needed to vote.

As governments consider alternative voting methods (such as mail-in ballots, online voting, advanced voting) to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, some groups are impacted by **not having an official address** at which to register or receive voter education information. Eg. **Young people** university address vs home address, with last minute closures, might not know where they will be.

Digital divide – we are fortunate to be able to all gather here together online, but as government services moved online, not everyone has equal access to internet at home, assistive devices such as a screen reader to use if you are blind, a laptop, or even knowledge of how to use all of the myriad video conferencing tools available. Uptick in hate speech, disinformation targeting different marginalized communities that in some cases discouraged engagement in elections.

PPE personal protective equipment – people who are hard of hearing or deaf relied on lip reading, behind masks. Much PPE is built to fit male bodies, leave women voters and election officials with poorly fitted PPE.

Stigma and discrimination. Ageism – some EMBs automatically released older poll workers from duty, without asking them. Another challenge we've seen has been related gender. With the pandemic, many individuals are encouraged to stay home – that could **provide an excuse for male household members to prohibit women relatives from participating in politics**.

So there have been some unique challenges to political participation related to the pandemic, but also some good practices.

Good Practices

EMBs can do two main things: *Consult with marginalized groups:* **Ukraine CEC held a virtual working group with DPOs** to hear their concerns and proposed solutions for ensuring the last elections were accessible and inclusive.

In **Nigeria**, youth focused CSOs collaborated with the EMB to organize a **virtual town hall** with the public, local leaders and members of the EMB to discuss a new policy on the conduct of elections during COVID.

In the **Pacific, the EMB of Bougainville visited schools** to promote youth engagement in elections including as voters and temporary election workers.

In **Pakistan**, IFES collaborated with women's rights advocates to prepare an analysis on the gendered impacts of COVID-19, including context-specific recommendations on how to ensure women's equal participation in politics during the pandemic. In some countries, there is evidence that **women are more hygiene-conscious and, therefore, may be less likely to vote in person**. Consultations with women's organizations will help EMBs to design and carry out appropriate messaging and responses.

During the pandemic, consulting with marginalized groups has become more important than ever. Something else that's also become particularly relevant is developing voter education materials in accessible formats: During the working group I mentioned earlier that the Ukrainian CEC held, one unique solution that was identified was to put a QR code on posters in polling stations that outlined the COVID safety protocols. When a voter scanned the code, it took them to a Ukrainian sign language version as well as audio version of the content of the poster.

In **Bolivia,** it was not safe to have poll worker trainings in person because of the health context, so the EMB developed **online trainings for poll workers which included Bolivian sign language.** The EMB also developed 21 animated training and public awareness videos of polling processes in Spanish with sign language, as well as three Indigenous languages.

In some countries, **mobile apps with information on COVID-19 have been repurposed** to also deliver voter education messages. Something unique we saw here was that DPOs were often already in touch with officials from Ministries of Health before the pandemic, so in many cases, they have served as valuable interlocutors between the Ministry of Health and the EMB. DPOs have also partnered with Ministry's of Health and EMBs to disseminate disposable masks and hand sanitizer along with voter education materials.

So there are many positive examples of political inclusion during the pandemic, but there are some challenges still not getting adequate attention:

- o **Stigma and discrimination** – root of many other barriers. Pre-pandemic example: Georgia transportation to polls example – *Solution could be civic education (focus on preventing stereotypes from developing in the first place)*
- o **Some political actors (EMBs, parties, observers) lack awareness** of the unique barriers to political participation experienced by different communities. *Solution could be to codify inclusive practices, such as by the creation of EMB gender and disability rights policies, and increasing training of EMB staff at all levels on inclusion.*
- o **Lastly, it's not all bad** – have opportunity to build back better. But if we can make some of the alternative voting measures developed because of COVID-19 permanent such as postal voting,

electronic ballot delivery, and advance voting, that could really go a long way towards increasing participation of women, people with disabilities, young people and other marginalized groups.