

Implementing and Overseeing Electronic Voting and Counting Technologies

Concluding Remarks

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

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This Manual has introduced the challenges and opportunities relating to the use of electronic voting and counting technologies in the electoral process. General principles and issues, which need to be considered at every stage of the process of consideration and implementation of these technologies, have been covered. A step-by-step guide to the different stages of consideration and implementation of the technologies has been provided to assist EMBs as they move through the process or seek to understand it better, as well as to help other stakeholders, including civil society and electoral contestants, understand how to engage in and monitor these processes. Finally, several detailed case studies have been provided to show how different countries have addressed these general principles and issues as they have implemented electronic voting and counting technologies.

A few concluding remarks are worth making to reemphasize key points for any EMB considering the use of electronic voting or counting technologies, for international donors and technical assistance providers involved in working with EMBs on such decisions, and for oversight actors, including civil society groups, the media and electoral contestants. In particular, EMBs considering these technologies must use well-considered approaches to the decision to adopt or not adopt electronic voting and counting technologies, institute pilot projects as a key component of the decision-making process, ensure that enough time has been allocated for the implementation of electronic voting and counting technologies, and secure appropriate financial and human resources to meet the technological and logistical challenges inherent in the implementation of these technologies.

The decision making process is critical to introducing electronic voting and counting technologies. The potential advantages of such technologies also come with many challenges that EMBs need to effectively consider and address to ensure that the integrity of the electoral process is not undermined. It is important that the decision is taken carefully and with due consideration, that electoral stakeholders understand the rationale being used for moving toward these technologies, and have opportunities for their viewpoints to be taken into account.

Additionally, electoral contestants and stakeholders can view changes in the mechanics of the electoral process with deep suspicion, as they may suspect that a change benefits one competitor over another. The EMB, or other institution tasked with taking the decision on whether to use electronic voting or counting technologies, should be very clear on the issues that the introduction of the technology is meant to address and the objectives that it seeks to achieve. Clarity and consultation with electoral stakeholders on these issues will help the stakeholders understand the motivations for using the technology, and accept the technology if it is adopted for well-founded reasons.

Pilot projects are an essential component of the decision-making process. It is very important that pilots are not implemented only after the decision to adopt a technology has been made, but rather before that decision is made. The pilot project plays a vital role in testing the assumptions about the advantages the technology offers, determining whether the risks and challenges can be adequately managed, and properly evaluating the costs associated with using the technology. Pilots need to be properly assessed after being completed, and this process takes time if it is to be conducted properly – requiring surveys, consultations and internal review.

While there may be political pressure to adopt and implement new technologies quickly, these pressures should be resisted. The implementation of electronic voting and counting technologies can be a costly endeavour, although the costs need to be considered over the course of the many elections for

which the equipment will be used. If a decision is taken to adopt such technology without due consideration and is subsequently reversed because of hasty decision-making, then financial and human resource investments may be lost, potentially wasting a large amount of state funds, and public confidence in the electoral process could be reduced.

While it is difficult to generalize what an appropriate timeframe is for deciding on and implementing electronic voting and counting technologies, this Manual has emphasized that a great deal of caution should be taken to ensure sufficient time is allotted for such a transition. The time required for making a decision will depend on the amount of resources applied to the feasibility process and the opportunities that exist for pilot testing the technology in a real electoral environment, for example through by-elections. Still, it is imperative that electoral authorities take appropriate time within the existing context to consider all aspects of the decision and leave ample time for consultation with key electoral stakeholders at all stages of the decision-making process.

Once the process moves on to implementing electronic voting or counting technologies there are a number of other critical pitfalls to take into account. Just as with the decision making process, realistic timeframes for implementation are vital, especially when legislation needs to be amended to permit and properly regulate the use of these technologies. In many countries this alone can take months or years through the parliamentary process. Similarly, there should be ample time allotted for testing and certification, voter education, election official training, and other key elements of the implementation cycle. EMBs must be properly resourced to manage technology projects. Examples from countries implementing electronic voting or counting technologies have shown that often the EMB is not prepared for the complexities of implementing elections using these technologies. Not only have they not had the technical expertise in-house to properly manage or oversee the implementation of the technology, but sometimes they have lacked the project management skills and resources.

This can lead to the project being poorly managed, risking the quality of the elections, and/or vendors of the technology playing too central a role in the implementation of the technology without proper oversight by the EMB. Vendors have very different priorities than EMBs, and when vendors are empowered in this way, these conflicting priorities can have dangerous implications for the conduct of the elections and the perception of the elections by stakeholders.

Just as EMBs must ensure they have the capacity and resources to manage elections involving electronic technologies, civil society groups, political parties and the media also have a responsibility to the public to build their expertise and capacity to provide informed and constructive input during all aspects of the decision making, design and implementation phases, as well as to effectively monitor these processes. Since not all voters can fully understand all aspects of these technologies, they rely heavily on oversight actors to promote transparency and to assess the integrity of elections that involve electronic technologies.

While each implementation of election technology may be different, with a different product and a different electoral environment, there is much that EMBs can learn from others who have implemented similar technologies. Successful implementation approaches and pitfalls experienced can be shared between EMBs so that good practices can be developed and shared between EMBs in this still emerging field of elections. Likewise, civil society groups can also learn from others that have observed transitions to electronic voting and counting technologies.

It is hoped that this Manual will help EMBs, international donors and technical assistance providers, civil society groups, media and electoral contestants to properly take into account these common pitfalls in implementing, supporting and monitoring electronic voting and counting projects in order to strengthen the integrity of electoral processes around the world.