

Indonesia – Voter Education Media Centers : Civil Society’s Role in Election Management Bodies Participatory Voter Education

Ahead of Indonesia’s 2014 legislative and presidential elections, the Indonesian General Election Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum*, KPU) collaborated with civil society organizations (CSOs) to establish Voter Education Media Centers in six provinces. They worked together at national and provincial levels, along with media outlets and journalists, to improve information on election processes and engage the public more directly in voter outreach.

Indonesians in 2014 were more likely to rely on messages from the KPU for information than from any other source. Almost half of Indonesians (47 percent) said that the most important source of information leading up to the legislative elections was the KPU socialization materials. In 2014, the Voter Education Network for the People (JPPR) and the Association for Elections and Democracy (Perludem), two Indonesia-based civil society organizations focused on elections, established VEMCs with six provincial KPUs across Indonesia,¹ strengthening the role of civil society in informing voters and extending election administrators’ capacity to disseminate voter education materials.

Founded on the principle that civic and media engagement is essential to achieving comprehensive voter education, the VEMCs were a medium for CSOs and provincial KPUs to fill complementary roles. The VEMCs played an important role in voter outreach: distributing KPU materials; hosting interactive public discussions; and supporting multi-media voter education campaigns. Each Center was staffed by experts trained in elections, information technology, social media and voter education/communication. The Centers worked with provincial KPUs to strengthen media relations, communications and voter outreach activities.

The Centers collaborated with provincial KPUs to distribute materials – including leaflets and banners in well-trafficked areas – about voting processes and candidate information. The VEMCs also hosted public discussions on the importance of the elections, which engaged community members in practical simulations of voting procedures and relayed balanced information on both presidential candidates’ platforms. The simulations drove home the importance of understanding how to mark a ballot correctly, what actions are (and are not) allowed on Election Day, or what resources are available for those needing assistance. During public discussions, the VEMCs also relayed balanced information on the candidates, distributing both presidential candidates’ written platforms, and emphasized the need for peaceful and transparent elections

Beyond offering the opportunity for direct public engagement between provincial KPUs and the community, the VEMCs also contributed to the KPU’s voter education campaign through multi-media outreach. Across all six provinces, the VEMC program initiated a Visual Campaign Competition. With a theme of “*Peaceful Presidential Elections for a Friendlier Indonesia*”, the competition invited Indonesians to submit ideas for inspirational voter information campaign materials. The Visual Campaign Competition was open to high school and university students, along with the general public and professional agencies, and aimed to develop innovative campaign materials that underscore the importance of peaceful elections. The KPU announced the winners of the competition at the Voter Education Media Centers, in conjunction with a public forum discussion covering the competition’s theme of peaceful elections.

The VEMCs were established with the intention that the KPU would inherit sustainable, effective centers for media and voter outreach. Following the elections, civil society partners JPPR and Perludem worked to hand over the Voter Education Media Centers to provincial KPUs. To consolidate the guidance and lessons

¹ Voter Education Media Centers were established in Central Java, West Papua, North Sumatra, Aceh, Maluku and Papua.

learned during the 2014 elections, JPPR and Perludem developed two critical documents: a Media Center Manual and a Voter Education Guidebook. The Media Center Manual addressed the procedures and requirements to operate the Voter Education Media Centers.

The Voter Education Guidebook, meanwhile, provided information on voter education strategies, analyzed areas to focus on in future voter education campaigns, and underscored the need for inclusive, participatory voter outreach. Following the elections, JPPR looked back on the voter education and media efforts and identified three key ways to strengthen future voter education campaigns:

- Adapt and target voter education strategies for audiences with varying levels of knowledge or awareness of election processes.
- Leverage existing resources, especially community centers and spaces, for voter outreach.
- Reach marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, through targeted social campaigns, services and resources.

Civil society support for election management bodies' voter education campaigns can produce wide-reaching, inclusive and successful results. When done in combination with strategic media outreach, the impact can be magnified. The VEMCs' voter education activities were particularly successful in achieving the following results:

- *Understanding voting processes:* The interactive simulations of voting, vote counting and invalid votes brought home the importance of understanding Election Day processes. The simulations, which portrayed hundreds of people from the surrounding communities, drew attention to the practical steps voters must take to cast their ballots, as well as highlighting the need for amenities and resources to make polling stations accessible for persons with disabilities.
- *Knowledge of candidate and party platforms:* Impartially sharing the platforms of both presidential candidates underscored the importance for voters of knowing who and what they are voting for.
- *Direct engagement:* The VEMCs fostered direct engagement between provincial KPUs and the community, establishing deeper trust in electoral institutions and constructing a platform from which to urge peaceful elections. CSO partners' involvement, and the outreach expertise that they brought to the Centers, enabled provincial KPUs to grow positive community relationships.
- *Improved voter education resources:* The VEMCs quickly identified the need to improve resources for marginalized groups and materials that are accessible to voters with wide-ranging levels of knowledge of elections and processes. The VEMCs' activities broadened the reach of the KPUs' messaging but also allowed for targeted messaging for diverse audiences.

The VEMCs' reliance on collaboration between civil society and election administrators was its strongest feature, a strength that can be replicated in Indonesia and regionally.

Source: IFES

