

Kenya – Civic and Political Engagement

Backdrop:

In 2010, the Kenya Constitution put forth a vision of a democracy where all voters were fully enfranchised. Indeed, Kenya has made important strides to realize greater enfranchisement e.g. the constitution required official positions for women representatives in each of the new 47 counties in the country. This new requirement paved the way for the largest number of women in Kenya's history joining parliament; however, there is still important work to be done. For instance, the growth of women's participation and representation is still slow due to traditional practices and conservative views that ultimately restrict women's rights.

Kenya's last elections were largely hailed as successful, with one of the largest voter turnouts in the country's electoral history at 86%. However, it only represented 56% of the voting age population. An audit of Kenya's voter list showed a continued underrepresentation of women and youth in a number of constituencies throughout the country. For example, over 4.3 million eligible women did not vote in the country's 2013 elections as they were either not registered, or chose not to exercise their franchise. The reasons for this underrepresentation are still not fully known, but are speculated to be linked to both the shortened voter registration drive ahead of the 2013 election, the uncertain efficacy of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission's (IEBC) voter education efforts particularly in rural areas, and the aforementioned cultural norms.

An effective voter education program has many different goals, from informing voters on how to exercise their right to vote, to encouraging them to fulfill their civic responsibility, to developing attitudes of respect towards other members of society. Kenya is still a country divided along tribal lines and political tension, and the campaign period leading up to the last election was dominated by messages of one tribe contending against another rather than messages related to governance issues.

IEBC, Women, Youth, Persons with Disabilities and Voter Education Efforts:

Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) has been commended for its efforts to register 14.3 million voters before the 2013 election, the largest number of registered voters in Kenya's history. The registration exercise took place over 30 days in over 15,000 locations in Kenya and even included a fledgling effort to register some of the estimated three million Kenyans living overseas.

To increase civic and voter education efforts, IEBC conducted a comprehensive review of its voter education activities from mid-2012 to present. This included reviewing all voter education and civic education plans and reports, posters, brochures, videos, radio shows, magazines, road shows and other voter education products produced by the IEBC's civil society partners. The overall objectives of this exercise were to:

- Assess the types of civic education and voter information used by the IEBC to inform the target groups, particularly in regards to voter registration;
- Conduct interviews with election management officials, civil society and other electoral stakeholders to understand the shortcomings in civic and voter education and why they did not address the needs of the target groups;
- Provide support to the IEBC's Voter Education Department to formulate and implement a voter and civic education plan; and
- Map potential areas where the IEBC should pilot targeted voter education and voter registration drives to address underrepresentation.

As a follow-up to the IEBC's review, a national survey and a series of focus group discussions were conducted to serve as analytical tools which examined voter preferences, increased understanding of the factors that may have led to lower voter registration and participation rates among women, youth and persons with disabilities, and what sources of information are more relevant to this segment of the population in order to identify strategies that can be used to better target these groups.

Through the national survey and focus groups, the IEBC received several recommendations that provided promising opportunities to update its voter education strategy/ plan in order to make it even more effective for the upcoming elections. For example, the IEBC is currently going through an identification process of constituencies in which to pilot new targeted messaging for women and youth. In addition, the IEBC is planning new outreach platforms for targeted messaging. Of course, this is not without recognizing the challenges the IEBC faces with limited resources and competing electoral priorities. Nevertheless, the scarcity of resources can help the IEBC, and its partners, focus voter education and registration activities on both geographic and demographic populations with the lowest registration rates. This is an opportunity to develop cost effective voter outreach methods that capture the attention of younger citizens, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 25 who are not predisposed to voting. On reaching disaffected youth, studies of voting patterns in Kenya indicated that turnout of registered youth voters in 2013 was roughly equal to overall voter turnout. The core issue remains getting youth registered. One key issue that arose during the survey and focus groups was the 'lack of youth economic empowerment' thereby leaving youth vulnerable to participate in unlawful activities. An example is the 2008 Kenya Post Election Violence (PEV), where most perpetrators were youths who were manipulated by political forces.

Civil society is engaged in activities that seek to make a difference in youth engagement. Ongoza Peace for Africa and Economic Development (PAD) is a Kenyan non-profit organization that combines youth economic empowerment and community leadership as an approach to sustainable peace. Ongoza Institute was born out of the 2008 post-election violence and was active in mobilizing thousands of youth for peace during the elections. Ongoza Institute organized the Kenya National Youth Summit dialogue conference, which brought together over 250 young people representing all the 47 counties in Kenya. This provided a platform where youth from different parts of the country dialogued and shared ideas on best practices in youth engagement in the electoral process. They also identified key problems and set an agenda for action within their communities, by the government and political parties in the coming year. The summit gave IEBC the opportunity to engage first hand with youth from different parts of Kenya and to hear about their concerns for the upcoming 2017 elections.

Source: IFES