

Nepal – Keeping Voters Engaged

Since Nepal's first democratic elections without a monarchy in 2008, its political transition has been rocky at best. From waiting seven years for a constitution to be passed to enduring the instability of eight prime ministers in eight years, these events could leave even the most enthusiastic citizen apathetic about voting. Yet, the voter education programs led by the Election Commission, Nepal (ECN) and a grass-roots network of civil society organizations have managed to keep voters engaged in the electoral process, both before and after the country's second major election in 2013.

Due to multiple promises of upcoming elections later canceled by the government, many groups in Nepal were skeptical that elections would actually take place in the lead up to the November 2013 elections. Less than two months before the election, even the ECN was fearful to begin election preparations lest they need to be repeated were elections postponed again. However, once the ECN closed candidate registration on October 3, elections preparations, including a nationwide voter education campaign to reach 12 million Nepalese of voting age, kicked into gear. The key role of any election management body (EMB) is to provide people with information about their voting rights.

In Nepal before the 2013 elections, voter education had to be designed with **two major needs** in mind: ensuring voters understood how to vote and mobilizing disenfranchised voters, weary after 5 years of stagnation following the high hopes of democracy. In order to address both of these issues, a central component of the ECN's election preparations was the training of voter education volunteers known as "Nirwachan Sikshya Karmachari" (NISIKA). The ECN developed a voter education training manual that allowed a core group of regional level voter education trainers to give the same training to thousands across Nepal. The ECN trained merely 187 voter educator who eventually trained over 30,000 additional NISIKA in their districts.

A unique component of the campaign to train NISIKA, was the ECN's policy that female representation among voter education volunteers reach at least 50%. In fact, nearly 24,000, or 76 percent of the voter education volunteers were women. A women-to-women approach, where female voter educators traveled to homes of people in marginalized communities to distribute voter education messages, proved particularly effective in reaching women who lacked resources to travel to events.

The ECN also coordinated with other stakeholders to conduct voter education programs that targeted women and other marginalized groups. One of the largest programs was called "Chodnai Nahune Mauka" (an opportunity not to be missed) led by local NGO Worldview Nepal, across 40 districts. Worldview Nepal sought to educate people at the local level through drama performances that emphasized the importance of voting. They targeted districts with high numbers of marginalized groups and illiterate populations who would otherwise have difficulty understanding the voting process through a standard voter education publication. Furthermore, the script was adapted and performed by local artists in at least four languages to reach different ethnic groups who often struggle to connect with awareness events conducted in Nepali. Beginning less than a month before the elections, Worldview performed 755 street theater performances reaching over 200,000 people.

Voter turnout in the 2013 elections was 78% making it the largest election in the history of Nepal and especially impressive compared to 62% turnout in the 2008 elections. While the ECN and Nepalese civil society groups accomplished an impressive amount in a short period of time, in an ideal situation, voter education is an unending process that continues even without an impending election. This is particularly important in a country like Nepal where electoral systems have changed frequently and there are high rates of unregistered voters specific to certain classes and ethnic groups.

In an informal voter education survey conducted jointly by five CSOs following the election, almost 50% of those who did not vote said it was because they were not registered or did not have their citizenship

certificate. As a primary legal document in Nepal, the citizenship certificate helps facilitate access to formal banking, higher education and employment; voter registration; and social security, government allowances, health services and other benefits. Yet despite its importance, there are significant barriers – including issues relating to gender, caste and extreme poverty – that hinder individuals’ ability to obtain a citizenship certificate. An estimated 2.1 million Nepalese citizens are without citizenship certificates further isolating the most marginalized groups from local governance and economic opportunities. While the ECN has made an effort to continue its voter registration efforts in the post-election period, numerous among the most marginalized voters live in remote areas, making it extremely difficult for the ECN to reach them.

To address this gap, voter education campaigns in Nepal have continued to operate in the aftermath of the 2013 elections, specifically targeting women and other marginalized groups. The ECN continues to collaborate with four local civil society partners to implement a campaign across 21 districts, assisting Nepalese to obtain their certificates, register to vote, and learn about their civic responsibilities.

The campaign begins with an identification phase. The CSOs meet with their respective district election offices (DEOs) to choose target villages where there were low turnout rates in the 2013 election. CSOs then orient community members on the importance of citizenship and voter registration, and seek their support in reaching those residents of the villages in need of citizenship or voter registration. While voter registration can take place at the village headquarters, citizenship certificates must be obtained at the District Area Office (DAO) which could be many hours away from a person’s house. After providing information about the process and importance for obtaining citizenship, CSOs provide stipends for stamps, photos, and other necessary documents as well as transportation to the DAO. If the CSO identifies a large number of people in need of citizenship or voter registration in a village where access to the DAO is particularly difficult, DAOs or DEOs are sometimes willing to bring mobile camps to the village. In these cases, the CSOs continue to be involved in the process by publicizing the camp and mobilizing volunteers to provide support during the camp; an impressive example of coordination between government officials and local organizations.

Since 2013, CSOs have already supported over 50,000 people to acquire their citizenship certificates through these individual and group support programs in addition to supporting 500,000 people to register to vote. The promulgation of Nepal’s new Constitution in 2015 has made voter education for the most marginalized groups all the more important. The new federal structure increases the opportunities for exercising the right to vote and also participating in government especially with new provisions for reserved seat at every level of government. But this can only be a reality if Nepalese citizens especially women, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups have access to the electoral process.

The ECN has been able to reach out to citizens of Nepal through numerous programs implemented in 2013 elections and also due to the continued voter education efforts in the post-election period.

Source: IFES

Community health worker who participated as a NISKA preceding the 2013 election (below)



Worldview performs the voter education street drama in 2013 (below)



Women line up to receive their citizenship certificate at a mobile camp in Kailali, Nepal (below)

