

Sri Lanka- Voter Education Initiatives

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka developed a strategic approach to bolster voter education and address other issues being faced in the electoral field. Not only did they integrate inclusive voter education throughout their Strategic Plan to further institutionalise electoral integrity in time for national elections in 2020, but also ensured that “no qualified elector is left behind” in their 2016 voter registration drive.

This strategic plan includes

- a. implementing a nationwide citizen education program on existing election laws and procedures
- b. regularizing the use of SMS and social media platforms to distribute voter education messages
- c. training CSOs to conduct outreach on citizens’ voting rights and responsibilities
- d. developing and distributing a wider array of voter education materials
- e. co-sponsoring Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) training, with international participation, to develop its voter education strategy and strengthen participants’ ability to deliver their own voter education trainings.

Moreover, with an aim to further the voter education outreach and promote participation of all voters, a series of Voter Education days were organised throughout the country, wherein materials (like multi-language pamphlets) on voters' rights and responsibilities were distributed and messages motivating the marginalised groups were shared. The youth was targeted through collaborations of the Election Commission with Youth Organisations, commemoration on International Youth day and partnering with youth advocates at public awareness events like "Kites for Rights".

The voter challenges faced by marginalised groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities, seasonal workers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and homeless or low caste citizens, were eliminated through various strategies. For instance, Home for Human Rights implemented voter education-focused street dramas, released public announcements and print media encouraging community members to cast their votes and displayed posters in all non-government owned buses; while Caritas Sri Lanka held its own voter education programs with local groups, engaged voters in an evaluation of their Election Day experiences and conducted voter education campaigns targeting students.

The Civil Society Organisations also targeted the youth through youth camps to build their knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of citizens within a democratic system. Certain male and female youth were chosen from various villages to attend an electoral conference, following which they staged civic education-focused activities in their own villages, including dramas and cricket games to distribute voter education materials.

In order to counter the isolation of Muslim women from political engagement, the Islamic Women's Association for Research and Empowerment (IWARE) raised awareness about Muslim women's rights and empowered them to act on those rights, including that of voting. Complementary training focusing on how to communicate the importance of women's representation in politics within the framework of Islamic principles were held for Muslim women leaders and male stakeholders. Door-to-door voter outreach campaigns to encourage women's participation as voters too were conducted.

The voter education initiatives undertaken in Sri Lanka and their success are a source of inspiration for Election Commissions all over the world. It is observed that local interaction is critical to implement effective voter education programs. Moreover, the engagement of youth has a multiplier effect, such as in Sri Lanka, expanding voter messaging beyond workshop participants. Most importantly, voter and civic education should be viewed as an empowerment tool to build citizens' capacity to assume leadership in their own public process.

Source: IFES