

# Chapter 1: Introduction to Operational Planning

## What Is Operational Planning?

Operational planning is a key step in the electoral process. It is critical to the implementation of credible elections and sustainable election administration capacity.

Operational planning is the **process** of mapping all core and supporting electoral processes in an integrated manner to develop a coherent and flexible overarching plan of action. It involves reflecting on the electoral context and lessons learned in previous elections; assessing resource requirements; identifying legal, operational and administrative priorities; developing a timeline; allocating responsibilities; managing risks; and developing a schedule of activities.

Operational planning has several **outputs**, including the operational plan — a narrative plan of action for the entire electoral operation and budget. Other outputs that support the operational plan include a concept of operations; an operational plan schedule; sub-plans focused on specific areas such as logistics, voter registration or procedures and training; unit work plans; and monitoring and communication tools. Each EMB will ultimately determine the number and breadth of these supporting documents based on its priorities and capacity.

Operational planning is broader than merely planning for polling and counting operations (which can be described as Election Day planning). Operational planning should cover all electoral processes, such as voter registration; candidate nomination and campaigning; training of poll workers, observers and party agents; procurement and logistics; polling; counting; results tabulation; electoral dispute resolution (EDR)<sup>2</sup>; and voter education, as well as any special voting arrangements (such as out-of-country voting,<sup>3</sup> out-of-constituency voting, postal voting<sup>4</sup> or advance voting) and the provision of assistive devices or other support for people with disabilities.

Importantly, as election management is a dynamic and complex endeavor, operational planning is an ongoing process that requires regular monitoring and review to support flexible and proactive management. It should involve a range of relevant stakeholders to support comprehensiveness and acceptance by external stakeholders such as other state institutions, political parties and voters.

## Why Operational Planning Is Important

While most EMBs appreciate the importance of planning for their elections, not all of them engage in comprehensive, transparent and integrated operational planning.

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<sup>2</sup> EDR refers to “the rules, institutions, arbiters and processes...to resolve electoral disputes and violations.” Effective EDR plays an increasingly important role in election credibility and the acceptance of election results through procedural justice for the individuals involved in the dispute and *open justice* for the public at large. For information on EDR, see Ellena, K., Vickery, C. and Reppell, L. (2018).

<sup>3</sup> For information on out-of-country voting, see Erben, P., Goldsmith, B. and Shujaat, A. (2012).

<sup>4</sup> For information on paper-based distance voting, see Wally, M. (2020).

“A comprehensive, well-structured operational plan, developed concurrently with budget and resource management processes, supports accountability, inclusiveness, cost-effectiveness and ultimately leads to more effectively managed — and therefore credible — elections.” - Iurie Ciocan, Former Chairperson of the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova

Insufficient operational planning can result in higher costs, the inability to build institutional memory, lack of transparency and, in the worst-case scenario, undermining of a country’s electoral process and political stability through loss of credibility. While operational planning requires an investment in time and resources in the immediate term, a robust operational planning process will reduce financial costs in the long term and support the preservation of trust and confidence in the EMB (see text box).

**Barriers to comprehensive operational planning** can include lack of knowledge about how to conduct it; underestimation of the work involved; limited resources; competing demands; a concern that operational plans may become outdated and therefore irrelevant; or a belief that, because past elections have been conducted without such planning, it is not necessary.

Elections are often described as the largest logistical events a country undertakes during peacetime. They are time-bound and highly regulated. The process and its outputs provide a shared framework for stakeholders to understand key activities and the timeline and to help identify risks that can be managed throughout the election management cycle.

While elections are highly regulated, legal frameworks often provide some flexibility regarding when they are held and how they are administered.<sup>5</sup> Comprehensive operational planning provides a robust framework for EMBs to consider relevant operational factors when an election date is being determined (see text box).

**Operational planning to model an election date**

While most elections are held within narrow legally mandated timeframes, operational planning may be needed to determine options across a longer timeframe. The referendum on the Autonomous Region of Bougainville’s future political status was to be held between 10 and 15 years after the election of the first Bougainville government in 2005, after two pre-conditions were met. The Bougainville Referendum Commission conducted comprehensive operational planning to develop several operational models and advise on the timeframes required to deliver a legally compliant and credible referendum.

By engaging in operational planning, EMBs can better position themselves to deliver an election through proactive and measured management and avoid taking a reactive position in the face of unanticipated issues and potential crises.

## Relationship to Strategic Planning

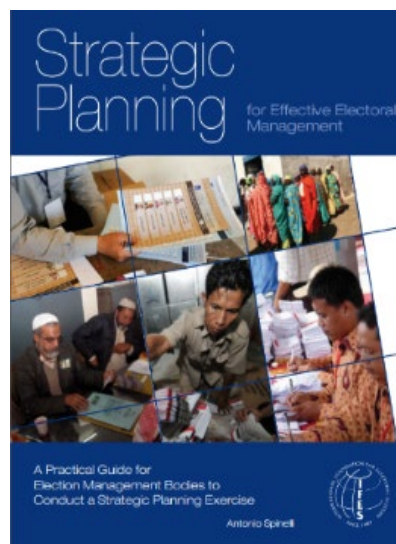
Operational planning is different from strategic planning, but the two are linked. Operational planning is the process of comprehensively planning all electoral processes to deliver a specific election. Strategic planning, on the other hand, is systematic planning to institutionalize a culture of continuous improvement at all levels of an organization and to articulate organizational purpose and values.

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<sup>5</sup> For information on implementing legal frameworks for elections, see Clegg, M., Ellena, K., Ennis, D. and Vickery, C. (2016).

A key output of strategic planning is the strategic plan. Without going into significant detail in this guide, strategic plans generally identify an EMB's mission, vision, guiding principles and strategic pillars (priority areas), supported by specific goals and a plan of action to achieve them. For more information on strategic planning for EMBs, see IFES' *Strategic Planning for Effective Electoral Management* (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup>

If an EMB has a strategic plan, an operational plan should align with it by providing the detail needed to govern the electoral cycle in a manner consistent with the EMB's goals. Although establishing a strategic plan is recommended for all EMBs, operational planning can (and should) proceed in the absence of such a plan.



**FIGURE 2: IFES' Strategic Planning for Effective Electoral Management guide**

## When Should Operational Planning Take Place?

Operational planning should commence in the pre-election period of the electoral cycle,<sup>7</sup> (Figure 3) be monitored throughout the pre-election and election periods and be evaluated in the post-election period. Precisely when to start operational planning depends on the unique circumstances of each EMB and may be affected by several factors that can be considered enablers, or pre-conditions. The most important pre-conditions are:

- An electoral **legal framework** (note: a government may be considering amendments to the legal framework, but operational planning can proceed during this period; however, operational planning should anticipate the implications of the acceptance or rejection of amendments);
- An **established EMB** (note: when a temporary EMB is established for a specific electoral event, for example to administer a one-off event such as a referendum, operational planning may need to commence while the EMB is being fully established and staffed; however, the EMB's scope and structure should be known to inform operational planning); and
- A **budget** (note: sufficient funds are required to undertake the planning process, initial funds to commence implementation should be available and further refinement of the budget should occur as part of operational planning).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> IFES' *Strategic Planning for Effective Electoral Management* can be found at [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/strategic\\_planning\\_guide\\_2011\\_0.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/strategic_planning_guide_2011_0.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> The electoral cycle is "a visual planning and training tool designed to assist development agencies, electoral assistance providers and electoral officials in partner countries to understand the cyclical nature of the various challenges faced in electoral processes...developed by the European Commission (EC), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)..." (ACE Project, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> To improve the accessibility of comparative data regarding election administration costs, IFES developed the Pricing in Election Database, intended for the use of EMBs, academics, donors, international and domestic non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations seeking to understand the costs of high- and low-tech approaches to improving the inclusivity and integrity of election processes. <https://www.pricinginelections.org/ExploreTheData>

FIGURE 3: The Electoral Cycle



The type of election (e.g., scheduled, unscheduled or post-conflict) will affect both the timing and the components of operational planning. Regardless of the type of election, operational planning is a significant and complex undertaking, and EMBs should give themselves as much time as possible. For scheduled elections with no major reforms to be undertaken (the most common type that EMBs administer), it is recommended that operational planning start around 18 to 24 months prior to the election. More information on factors influencing when operational planning may start for the different types of elections appears in [Annex A](#).

## Core and Supporting Electoral Processes

Operational planning is the process of planning all core and supporting electoral processes in an integrated manner.

**Core electoral processes** are the primary thematic areas of activity required to deliver a credible election. Core electoral processes generally include or focus on voter registration, boundary delimitation,<sup>9</sup> observers (international and domestic),<sup>10</sup> candidates, polling, counting, results management and EDR. Depending on the EMB's mandate there may be additional core electoral processes, such as political party registration.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Omit boundary delimitation when working in countries where the EMB does not have responsibility for this.

<sup>10</sup> Omit observers from operational planning processes when working in countries where observers are not normally present.

<sup>11</sup> EMBs may choose to combine polling and counting into a single category, particularly when counting is performed at the polling station by the polling team. However, in contexts where counting occurs at dedicated counting centers and is conducted by different personnel, EMBs may choose to treat polling and counting separately. This guide presents this second approach. Alternatively,

**Supporting electoral processes** enable the delivery of core electoral processes. Often, each supporting electoral process will intersect with all of the core electoral processes. While called *supporting* electoral processes, this does not mean they are of lesser importance; core electoral processes cannot be performed without them. Supporting electoral processes generally include recruitment and staffing; procurement; logistics; procedures and training; security, including physical and information and communications technology (ICT) or cyber-security; and public outreach, including voter education, public communications and media).

Operational planning works best when it seeks to identify the supporting electoral processes and relates them to core electoral processes.

While it is necessary to develop a logical sequence of activities as part of operational planning, it is also important to highlight interdependencies. To provide structure and coherence to operational planning, and to support collaboration across different work units, EMBs may wish to structure their operational planning by core electoral processes and relating each supporting electoral process to these (as shown in [Figure 4](#)). Structuring operational planning in this way provides a framework to show the relationships and interdependencies between processes and work units and helps avoid disconnected planning. This framework is utilized throughout this guide.

**FIGURE 4: Core and Supporting Electoral Processes**




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EMBs may wish to combine counting and results into a single category. For special voting (e.g., out-of-country voting, out-of-constituency voting, advance voting or postal voting), some EMBs may wish to identify special voting as a separate core electoral process while others may include it as a sub-topic under other core electoral processes. This guide presents this second approach.