

Chapter 2: Considerations for Effective Operational Planning

Operational planning is an ongoing process that involves regular review of progress and ongoing risk management. While it may produce specific operational planning outputs (e.g., concept of operations, operational plan, operational plan schedule and sub-plans), operational planning should not be seen as an activity that is performed once and then given no further attention.

Leadership and Ownership

Operational planning involves all parts of an EMB, across headquarters and the field,¹² so it is important that senior executives fully support and promote this activity.¹³ Operational planning can benefit from an EMB appointing a senior person with overall responsibility for the process (this may be, for example, the head of an EMB division, such the director of operations or a deputy chief electoral officer) who in turn assigns specific staff to develop and maintain the EMB's operational plan and other supporting tools, such as the operational plan schedule. EMBs should determine which senior officer will lead the operational planning process. Selection should be based on who is best positioned to perform the role, which requires connecting strategy with operations as well as close and regular oversight. Information gathering and sharing, working across internal and external institutional boundaries, communicating, solving problems creatively and developing the capacities of EMB staff. These elements of electoral leadership will contribute positively to operational planning.¹⁴

It is also important that the EMB take ownership of the process and outputs. It should always lead the process, although it may benefit from the support of external electoral assistance providers at different stages. Operational planning without EMB ownership is unlikely to lead to sustainability and may not garner the ongoing buy-in that is necessary.

Internal Collaboration

Internal stakeholders from all EMB work units and senior field staff should not only be consulted but also actively involved in operational planning to share their expertise and provide inputs. This is important because stakeholder

¹² Not all EMBs have permanent field structures, and this should be taken into consideration during operational planning. For example, there may be no field staff with whom to engage at the start of operational planning; however, the work unit that will have operational oversight of field staff should be consulted to provide input from a field perspective and, as field structures are established, field staff should be brought into the operational planning process.

¹³ There are, broadly, three models of electoral management: independent, governmental and mixed. Under the independent model, "elections are organized and managed by an EMB that is institutionally independent and autonomous from the executive branch of government; its members are outside the executive." EMBs in this model report to an electoral commissioner and/or a board. Under the government model, "elections are organized and managed by the executive branch through a ministry (such as the Ministry of the Interior) and/or through local authorities. Where EMBs under this model exist at the national level, they are led by a minister or civil servant and are answerable to a cabinet minister." The mixed model incorporates elements of both models. (ACE Project, 2020, *Who Organizes Elections?*, accessed August 3, 2020. <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/em/ema/ema01>). The majority of EMBs adhere to the independent model. This guide is broadly applicable to EMBs operating under all models, noting that consultation and decision-making processes will vary depending on the model involved (e.g., reporting to a board versus reporting to a cabinet minister).

¹⁴ Electoral leadership involves planning for and addressing external and internal challenges, beyond the technical, operational and logistical aspects of an election. For information on electoral leadership and electoral leadership skills development, see IFES' Executive Curriculum in Electoral Leadership. <https://www.ifes.org/iEXCEL>

engagement helps to engender a shared sense of ownership in the operational planning process and its outputs, and each work unit is best placed to advise on the activities, priorities and dependencies for which they are responsible.

Work units and senior field staff can draw on their expertise to anticipate the amount of effort and lead times required to complete activities. For example, the EMB staff responsible for securing materials for an election are best placed to consider the effort and lead times required to identify material and transportation requirements in consultation with the relevant EMB work units; develop procurement documentation; approach the market; assess bids; issue contracts; have materials produced and delivered to the EMB; and make payments.

Staff responsible for the operational planning process are well-placed to identify interdependencies and facilitate greater information sharing across work units and field offices. This type of engagement will help prevent disconnected planning in which activities do not link together efficiently and ultimately cause delays. While internal stakeholder engagement can take time, it is always the most efficient way to engage in realistic and comprehensive operational planning.

Involve Key External Stakeholders

Engaging with external stakeholders is an important element of operational planning, and two-way exchanges should be encouraged. External stakeholders can be grouped into different categories, and EMBs can engage with them for operational planning in many ways. The appropriate strategies will depend on existing mechanisms and relationships. [Figure 5](#) lists engagement strategies for various types of stakeholders.

FIGURE 5: External Stakeholders and Engagement Strategies

Stakeholder Category		Engagement Strategies
Voters	Eligible voters	Consultative forums, information sessions, public communications, voter awareness
State/official	Security forces; registrar of political parties; ministries of: foreign affairs, finance, justice/attorney-general, community government, women, health, and education; the judiciary; and national councils: disability, youth, human rights	EMB chaired coordination meetings. Direct meetings between EMB and specific official/state stakeholder
Political Participation	Candidates, political parties, candidate agents	Workshops, consultative meetings and/or information sessions
Civil society	Women's civil society organizations (CSOs), disabled people's organizations (DPOs), youth-led organizations, religious, tribal, and traditional leaders, and domestic observers	Workshops, consultative meetings and/or information sessions
For profit	Vendors and suppliers	Information/briefing sessions
Media	Local and international news, radio and television agencies, and social media	Information/briefing sessions
International	Donors, international election observers, and international/regional organizations	Donor coordination mechanisms or bilateral meetings

It is important for stakeholders to have opportunities to provide input and feedback. This benefits the operational planning process to ensure different perspectives are incorporated and can have the additional benefit of building trust that will be helpful during the electoral period.

Balancing Quality, Time and Cost

Operational planning is always bound by certain constraints, which fall broadly into three categories: quality (standards), time (schedule) and cost (budget). Effective operational planning continually seeks to balance these interrelated constraints (depicted in [Figure 6](#)) because they affect the success of operational planning and administering elections. A change to one constraint will have an effect on the others; and if one or more constraint is fixed, then the ability to achieve another will vary.

FIGURE 6: The Project Triangle

Quality considerations for electoral operations can include a range of values and indicators including, for example, adherence to the legal framework, voter enfranchisement, level of participation, consistency,

transparency, fairness, peaceful elections and acceptance of results. Operational planning can have greater influence over some quality indicators than others.

Time considerations include adherence to the timeframes in the legal framework and implementation in accordance with the public schedule. The more time allocated for operational planning and implementation, the more likely that higher quality processes and outputs will be delivered.

Cost considerations include fixed and constrained budgets (common), timeliness of disbursements, accountability for the use of public and donor funds and value for money. With sufficient funds (which must be estimated accurately as part of budgeting), EMBs can recruit more staff, provide stable staff payments, deliver higher-quality procedures and training, procure higher-quality materials and equipment, engage higher-quality and more reliable vendors and faster and more reliable transportation services, provide additional security measures and offer broader and more frequent public outreach activities.

Elections can be considered a highly constrained type of project. Time and cost are often greatly restricted (if not entirely fixed), and quality is also constrained as part of the delivery of credible elections to ensure important principles and standards are met. A proper balance of quality, time and cost requires close attention from the start of operational planning. An operational plan that is not informed by a balance of these three considerations cannot be implemented successfully, as it will describe activities that cannot be delivered within the constraints. Continually monitoring for changes to quality, time or cost is essential, as a change to one or more of these in one area of operations will likely result in a change to another area. One leg of the triangle cannot be changed without affecting at least one other leg.

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

The full participation of women; men; young people; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people; people with disabilities; older people; internally displaced people; Indigenous populations; ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities; and other marginalized groups as voters, candidates, elected officials and electoral workers is crucial. It is important to apply a GESI lens to operational planning to support full and equal access to voting, candidate nomination and election administration.

EMBs should seek to mainstream GESI considerations into their operational planning for all core and supporting electoral processes. An EMB can draw on an established GESI plan, if it has one, to support this process. However, if there is no GESI plan, the EMB can still mainstream GESI considerations into operational planning to ensure an inclusive voting process that is accessible for all eligible voters. The questions below will serve as a starting point to incorporate GESI considerations into operational planning in the absence of a GESI plan.

- Has the EMB undertaken a GESI analysis? If not, will it? If it has, what priorities are identified?
- Does the EMB have a gender unit or directorate? Does this department have a budget allocated to it?
- Does the EMB have a GESI policy and/or a GESI action plan?
- What does the EMB know about different levels of access to different electoral activities (e.g., voter registration, candidacy, observation, voting, election administration) for different groups in society (men, women, youth, LGBTQ, people with disabilities, older people, other marginalized groups)?

- What strategies could the EMB implement to ensure inclusivity?¹⁵

Several resources that provide useful information on GESI in elections are listed in [Annex B](#). IFES has also produced Gender Inclusion and Disability Inclusion versions of the Electoral Cycle diagram to assist EMBs in mainstreaming GESI considerations into their operational planning (see [Annex C](#)).

Environmental Considerations in Operational Planning

As responsible public service institutions, it is important that EMBs consider the environmental footprint of routine functions as well as the environmental impact of election processes. This can also be called “greening elections” and EMBs should be at the forefront of this endeavor. EMBs should seek to mainstream environmental considerations throughout the electoral cycle and in their operational planning by considering whether their plans, policies, procurement and practices are environmentally sensitive. Such considerations may relate to the transport of people/materials, sustainable procurements, waste handling, information technology, printing and communication, office space and warehousing and life cycle of products and services.

EMBs should also consider the effect of the environment on elections. Environmental challenges such as fires, droughts, floods, hurricanes and rising sea levels intensified by climate change are affecting elections, displacing people, and hindering their ability to exercise their voting rights. Destruction of electoral property, curtailment of campaigns, postponement of elections and deaths of electoral participants are also ways in which environmental disasters can affect elections.

Examples of how EMBs may incorporate environmental considerations into their operational planning are provided throughout this introductory guide, with further information on “greening elections” provided in [Annex D](#). Some examples include:

- Establishing or improving mechanisms for displaced persons to vote and run as candidates.
- Establishing or reviewing public outreach mechanisms for people affected by disasters and/or internally displaced persons.
- Engaging with agencies responsible for disaster risk mapping and developing contingency plans to prevent disruption of electoral activities by disasters.
- Procuring materials made from recycled and/or biodegradable materials.
- Developing waste-management plans, particularly for well-known pollutants (heavy metals and plastics).
- Reviewing training plans and logistics plans to reduce transportation distances for personnel and election materials.

¹⁵ For example, activities relating to EMB recruitment and training policies; accessibility of venues; dedicated registration/polling locations and/or queues; times at which voter education sessions are scheduled; collecting and analyzing GESI-disaggregated data on electoral activities subject to assessment of potential risks; inclusive representation in voter education material; production of voter education material in minority languages and accessible formats such as sign language, braille and easy-to-read; specific engagement with stakeholders representing different groups; and design of materials in a manner that does not discriminate against voters with low or no literacy, or voters with disabilities.

Key Outputs of Operational Planning

Several key outputs should be produced throughout the operational planning process. These will provide progressively more detailed information on the operational pathway for delivering an election.

The Concept of Operations

An early output of operational planning is the *concept of operations*. It outlines, at a high level, the EMB's objectives and strategy for delivering the election; that is, it focuses on the "what" and the "why," with less focus on the "how." A concept of operations is a narrative document (usually 10 to 25 pages long) that summarizes the operational links to the EMB's strategic plan; key information on the electoral context; electoral timeline; key legal and policy requirements; and assumptions relating to the core and supporting electoral processes, key stakeholders, budget, resources and risks. A concept of operations essentially describes operational needs and expectations that will serve as the foundation for a shared vision of how the election will be delivered. See [Step 3: Developing the Concept of Operations](#) for further information on developing a concept of operations that will, in turn, inform the operational plan.

The Operational Plan

The operational plan is the primary output of operational planning. It provides a shared and detailed narrative plan of action for the entire electoral operation. The operational plan builds on the concept of operations but provides significantly more detail with respect to the "how." It details, among other things:

- **Context:** The electoral environment (e.g., electoral system, voting districts, size and composition of the electorate, participation rates); the institutional framework and composition of the EMB; the roles of key external stakeholders; the social, economic, security and political context; and GESI considerations.
- **Budget and resource management:** The budget and relevant issues related to financial management and constraints (such as budget autonomy).
- **Timeline:** The electoral timeline (key legal, operational and administrative dates).
- **Core and supporting electoral processes:** Information on how each core electoral process and its associated supporting electoral processes will be delivered, together with the GESI actions to be incorporated and any assumptions indicating where legal or policy decisions remain pending.
- **Post-electoral activities:** The activities that will be conducted and the outputs that will be produced after the election to evaluate lessons learned, and a plan for the return, storage or disposal of materials.
- **Preliminary risk assessment:** To identify electoral risks and proposed mitigation strategies.
- **Supporting resources:** A list of supporting documentation to be developed and the work units responsible for them.

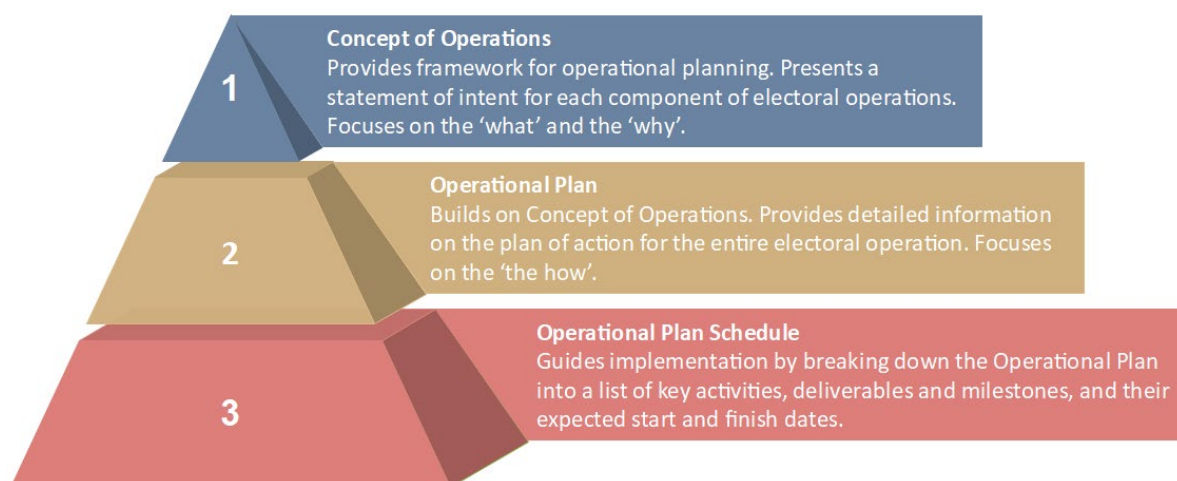
An operational plan can be structured in different ways to reflect the EMB's priorities; however, it can be useful to present broader contextual information first and then add information by each core electoral process and its associated supporting processes (see [Operational Plan Sample Structure](#)). Once the operational plan is well advanced, it is useful to refine the budget to alignment it with the operational plan.

The EMB should review and update the operational plan throughout the pre-election period as decisions are made or circumstances change; the budget should also be updated accordingly. Both are and should be treated as living documents.¹⁶ The amount of detail in the first iteration of the operational plan will be determined by the time and resources available, as well as the status of various legal, policy and operational decisions that will affect the delivery of the election.

The Operational Plan Schedule

The operational plan schedule guides implementation by breaking down activities and identifying milestones and deliverables with timeframes aligned to the operational plan. This may be referred to as an implementation plan, implementation schedule, project plan, operational work plan, timeline or another name. An officer should be assigned responsibility for developing and updating the schedule — preferably someone who has been significantly involved in the development of the operational plan. [Step 5: Developing the Operational Plan Schedule](#) in Chapter 3 provides information on how to develop an operational plan schedule. [Figure 7](#) depicts the relationships among the concept of operations, operational plan and operational plan schedule.

FIGURE 7: Hierarchy: Concept of Operations, Operational Plan, Operational Plan Schedule



Anticipating and Responding to Challenges throughout Operational Planning

Operational planning will encounter challenges arising from the dynamic and complex nature of election management. When EMBs accept this and the resultant need for flexibility within the confines of the legal framework – and anticipate the types of challenges that may arise, and their implications – they can navigate challenges in operational planning. Anticipating and responding effectively to challenges is an important part of risk management;¹⁷ however, unanticipated challenges may arise. An operational plan should be flexible, and monitored frequently, to accommodate the necessary changes that arise from both anticipated and unanticipated

¹⁶ Due to the need to continually balance quality, cost and time, budgets should be regularly reviewed and adjusted if required to align with operational planning, in accordance with the applicable financial management rules.

¹⁷ "Electoral risk management is a systematic effort undertaken to improve knowledge about and situational awareness of both internal and external risks to electoral processes, in order to initiate timely preventive and mitigating action." (International IDEA 2016, Policy Paper No. 14, p. 10).

challenges. An illustrative list of types of challenges appears below. Internal challenges generally relate to “legal, technical, operational, financial or other risks involved in implementing electoral activities.” External challenges may relate to “the environmental or social contexts in which elections take place.”¹⁸

Internal	External
Change to electoral system (e.g., from first-past-the-post to limited preferential voting)	Conflict
Changes to legal framework less than 12 months before an election	Internal displacement due to violence or disasters (sudden and slow onset disasters)
Insufficient funding and/or delayed disbursements	Gender-based discrimination and violence
Introduction of new technologies (e.g., biometric voter registration, electronic voting)	Health epidemics (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, Ebola)
Technological problems (e.g., with voter registration, electronic voting and/or results transmission systems)	Denial of access for electoral officials to specific populations (e.g., by non-state actors unsupportive of election)
Low turnout for voter registration	Politicized security sector actors
Inadequate coordination with, or action by, state institutional stakeholders	Arbitrary arrests and lack of due processes
Late demands to change employment terms or conditions	Sudden political developments (e.g., mass civil unrest targeting public sector offices, constitutional crises)
Demands to alter the number and/or locations of polling stations	
Problems with electoral materials (e.g., delays, inferior quality, insufficient quantity, inadequate storage)	Environmental (e.g., adverse weather and climate disasters including storm, flooding, wildfire)
Loss or destruction of election materials or facilities	Inaccurate or biased media reporting
Transport problems (e.g., inability of service providers to fulfil contracts, incorrect tasking of transport providers)	Disinformation campaigns
	Human rights violations
Large number of electoral disputes	Difficulty accessing materials (e.g., loss of access to international markets due to pandemic or trade barriers)
Unpaid service providers from previous elections	

Not all challenges will require changing the operational plan; monitoring and/or revising an EMB unit's work plan may be sufficient. However, deviating from a previously established operational plan, or revising a current one, will likely be necessary when the response to a challenge will significantly affect quality (standards), time (schedule) or cost (budget), or will have a significant effect on other activities.

How operational planning can respond flexibly will depend on the challenges encountered. Some challenges will have been identified earlier and mitigation strategies articulated via the risk management process. However, an identified mitigation strategy may become less effective when several challenges occur simultaneously, while in other cases a challenge may be unanticipated.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 10.

Operational planning considerations associated with two very different challenges appear below. The first, a global pandemic, is an immediate challenge to which EMBs must find and deploy immediate solutions. The second, introducing new technology, is a challenge that EMBs increasingly face. Both scenarios significantly affect quality, time and cost considerations and therefore would justify deviating from a previous operational plan or revising a current one.

COVID-19 Pandemic ¹⁹	Introducing New Technology ²⁰
Review legal framework regarding possible deferral; consider political and social risks; ensure decisions are transparent, consultative and inclusive. ²¹	Clearly articulate the problem that the technology is intended to solve.
Establish coordination mechanisms that include the health ministry. ²²	Assess the scope of legal amendments required to introduce the technology.
Review and assess the legal and operational feasibility of extending the availability of special voting services, such as absentee and advance voting.	Conduct a robust feasibility study that assesses opportunities and risks relating to cost, participation, efficiency, trust and security.
Review training delivery to meet social distancing requirement. Consider the viability of online training and of negotiation with stakeholders to facilitate free or low-cost data for polling and counting officials to access online training materials.	Consult with external stakeholders including parties, candidates, voters and CSOs.
Revise polling station layouts and polling and counting procedures to mitigate transmission risks by ensuring social distancing, use of personal protective equipment and cleaning protocols.	Assess potential effects of the new technology on transparency and observation.
Quantify additional materials required per polling team, polling station and counting location (e.g., masks, hand sanitizer, disinfectant, tissues, trash bins).	Assess foundational infrastructure that may be required for the successful introduction of a new technology, such as a long-established e-governance eco-system.
Identify materials that cannot be sourced from usual markets and identify alternative procurement via markets that remain accessible.	Assess levels of public trust in public institutions and technology.
Liaise with suppliers for guidance on appropriate mechanisms to sanitize or disinfect materials.	Identify EMB data and system ownership needs.
Identify cost implications and seek additional funding, reallocate existing funding and/or engage with stakeholders to access additional materials.	Assess technological literacy within a population and the training and voter education requirements associated with the introduction of the technology.
Conduct mock polling exercises, with health ministry observers providing feedback.	Consider the GESI implications of introducing the technology, such as potential adverse effects on particular groups of people.
Enhance monitoring of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech.	Articulate a development and implementation plan, including possible phased introduction to mitigate risks of rushing the introduction of a new technology.
Develop new voter information messages and information channels.	Develop robust integrity, security and audit mechanisms.
	Develop procedures and training materials.
	Test the technology on a small constituency before deploying to scale.

¹⁹ For information on electoral management in the context of COVID-19, see the IFES 2020 *COVID-19 Briefing Series: Safeguarding Health and Elections* available at <https://www.ifes.org/ifes-covid-19-briefing-series>

²⁰ For information on internet voting, see Applegate, M., Chanussot, T. and Basysty, V. (2020).

²¹ Ellena, K. (2020).

²² Buriel, F., Darnolf, S. and Aseresa, M. (2020).