



Introduction to Operational Planning

A Guide for Election
Management Bodies

WHITE PAPER | AUGUST 2022

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Joanne McCallum



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**International Foundation
for Electoral Systems**



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Introduction to Operational Planning: A Guide for Election Management Bodies

Operational planning is a key element of electoral management that is critical for the implementation of sustainable and credible elections.

This introductory guide is intended to support election management bodies (EMBs) to conduct effective operational planning across the electoral cycle by providing a resource for electoral practitioners.

The guide presents operational planning concepts and methodologies and practical information on how to develop key operational planning outputs, as well as

monitoring, communicating and adjusting operational planning in response to changing circumstances. This planning guide is supplemented with an operational planning curriculum enabling EMBs and other stakeholders to appreciate the critical components of operational planning and its importance to delivering credible elections.

Introduction to Operational Planning: A Guide for Election Management Bodies

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International Foundation for Electoral Systems

2011 Crystal Drive, Floor 10

Arlington, VA, U.S.A. 22202

Email: media@ifes.org

Phone: 202.350.6700

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About IFES

IFES advances democracy for a better future. We collaborate with civil society, public institutions and the private sector to build resilient democracies that deliver for everyone. As a global leader in the promotion and protection of democracy, our technical assistance and applied research develops trusted electoral bodies capable of conducting credible elections; effective and accountable governing institutions; civic and political processes in which all people can safely and equally participate; and innovative ways in which technology and data can positively serve elections and democracy. Since 1987, IFES has worked in more than 145 countries, from developing to mature democracies. IFES is a global, nonpartisan organization based in Arlington, Virginia, USA, and registered as a non-profit organization [501(c)(3)] under the United States tax code.

IFES By The Numbers



Reached 25M+
people with
civic and voter
education in 2021



Supported 30
elections in 2021,
training 300K+
election officials



Worked across 58
countries in 2021

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Acronyms

BRIDGE	Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EDR	Electoral Dispute Resolution
EMB	Election Management Body
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer

Foreword

Dear colleagues:

A state can be considered democratic when the political will of its citizens is fairly reflected in the institutions of state power. The delegation of sovereign power from citizens to its elected representatives occurs through elections. The organization and conduct of free and fair elections is a very complex and difficult exercise. Election management bodies in most countries are permanent and independent public institutions equipped with specialized staff and unique resource demands. The work of professional election management bodies has become systematic, based on clearly defined objectives, plans and budgets.

Citizens in the modern world have wide-ranging access to information and are aware of their rights, creating high demand for the professional conduct of elections. Under these conditions, citizens will not trust or accept chaotic management of electoral events and demand that election management bodies operate professionally and transparently.

This Introduction to Operational Planning was designed to help election management bodies conduct effective planning processes. It provides operational planning guidelines for processes focused on specific electoral events. The beneficiaries of these guidelines are not just the senior management representatives of election management bodies, but also every individual electoral official who plans his or her own daily activities and contributes to the development of an operational plan for the entire institution. The actions described in the guide are presented in order of implementation based on operational best practices accumulated by IFES, which works closely with election management bodies around the world.

This introductory guide will help election management bodies structure their objectives and determine the resources necessary to achieve them. It is important to mention that the guide not only shows what should be done, but describes in step-by-step detail each phase of operational planning. An important element is that this guide, through its instructions, helps those who organize elections to standardize procedures, develop the long-term capacity of staff responsible for operational planning and hence help increase the quality of services delivered to all stakeholders — voters, political parties, civil society organizations, state institutions and many others.

Introduction to Operational Planning – A Guide for Election Management Bodies is a complex, multi-dimensional roadmap that approaches practically the entire range of actions and responsibilities that election management bodies need to carefully plan, budget, implement, verify and evaluate to organize and conduct elections. The guide is recommended to all election management bodies as well as civil society institutions monitoring the activities of election bodies.

Iurie Ciocan, Ph.D. (Political Science)

Former Chairperson of the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova

Preface

About This Guide

Operational planning is a key element of electoral management that is critical for the implementation of sustainable and credible elections. This introductory guide is intended to support election management bodies (EMBs) to conduct operational planning across the electoral cycle by providing a general tool for electoral practitioners with responsibility for operational planning.

This guide is intended to complement an excellent training module on operational planning across the electoral cycle developed by the Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) consortium, of which IFES is a founding member.¹ This publication is also intended as a companion to the IFES *Strategic Planning for Effective Electoral Management Guide*, as operational planning should aim to go hand-in-hand with an EMB's strategic plan.

Operational planning is a dynamic and complex endeavor that involves planning all core and supporting electoral processes throughout the electoral cycle. This introductory guide articulates the concepts and methodologies of operational planning. It also provides guidance for EMBs on developing key operational planning outputs (concept of operations, operational plan, operational plan schedule) and monitoring, communicating and adjusting operational planning in response to changing circumstances. IFES is developing further resources, tools, templates and relevant examples to support operational planning exercises to support these efforts.

Operational planning involves all parts of an EMB. In practical terms, however, one part of an EMB will have responsibility for managing the operational planning process and for producing the key operational planning outputs, while other EMB work units will manage specific core and supporting electoral processes. This guide is intended to inform a whole-of-organization understanding of operational planning and provide specific guidance for those responsible for managing operational planning and producing key outputs. [Annex E](#) discusses considerations for the next tier of operational planning for the supporting electoral processes of procurement, logistics, public outreach, recruitment and staffing, procedures and training and security.

The guide is intended to be used by election management practitioners to support implementing an operational planning process. As operational planning takes place over time, the guide is structured to facilitate reading in full, as well as reading chapters individually at the time of starting each part of the operational planning process.

Content Overview

[Chapter 1: Introduction to Operational Planning](#). Chapter 1 introduces operational planning for all core and supporting electoral processes. It describes why operational planning is important; details the risks of failing to conduct comprehensive operational planning; explains the relationship between strategic planning and operational planning; and describes when operational planning should take place. Chapter 1 concludes with a

¹ See more about BRIDGE at <https://bridge-project.org/implementing-bridge/bridge-curriculum/>

discussion of how core and supporting electoral processes can provide a framework for structuring operational planning.

Chapter 2: Considerations for Effective Operational Planning. This chapter introduces the dynamic and ongoing nature of operational planning, emphasizing that this activity requires ongoing monitoring and updating. It discusses the important role of senior leadership in operational planning and collaboration with internal EMB stakeholders at headquarters and in the field. Chapter 2 also introduces the different categories of external stakeholders with which the EMB should engage during operational planning via a two-way exchange of information and highlights the importance of balancing the triple constraints of quality, time and cost. It then provides guidance on applying a gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) lens to operational planning.

Chapter 2 also introduces three key operational planning outputs: the concept of operations, the operational plan (including a revised budget) and the operational plan schedule. Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion of potential challenges due to the complex nature of electoral management and the need for planning flexibility within the confines of the legal framework.

Chapter 3: Implementing Operational Planning. Chapter 3, the core section of the guide, introduces the operational planning cycle and describes a proposed methodology and steps in the operational planning process to produce the key operational planning outputs. The methodology consists of seven sequential steps shown in [Figure 1](#). Chapter 3 also presents suggested structures and content for the key operational planning outputs.

FIGURE 1: Operational Planning Cycle



Annexes. The guide concludes with seven annexes:

- [Annex A](#) presents operational planning considerations for scheduled, unscheduled and post-conflict elections.

- [Annex B](#) provides a list of resources and operational planning tools to assist EMBs to apply a GESI lens to operational planning.
- [Annex C](#) presents two graphics depicting elements of GESI within the context of the electoral cycle.
- [Annex D](#) provides further information on environmental considerations for election operational planning
- [Annex E](#) presents a summary of operational planning considerations in relation to the supporting electoral processes of procurement, logistics, public outreach, recruitment and staffing, procedures and training and security.
- [Annex F](#) presents samples of tools used to communicate operational planning to internal and external stakeholders.
- [Annex G](#) is a list of references, including the works cited in footnotes throughout this guide.