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## International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) Submission to the International Development Committee (IDC) Inquiry on the Impact of Coronavirus

[Covid-19: A Survival Guide for Democracies](#) | Contact: [cbarnes@ifes.org](mailto:cbarnes@ifes.org) / 13 May 2020

1. [The International Foundation for Electoral Systems \(IFES\)](#)<sup>1</sup> respectfully urges the International Development Committee (IDC) to consider the implications of the pandemic on elections, democracy and the global order in a time when the rule of law and fundamental rights are already under attack.
2. Without continued Department for International Development (DFID) and United Kingdom (UK) support for elections, democracy and governance, nations will struggle to provide the political leadership and service delivery necessary to cope with current and future outbreaks, as well as the economic and socio-political follow-on impacts of coronavirus. This is especially true of countries exhibiting state fragility, conflict vulnerabilities and systemic weaknesses, as well as those with ongoing humanitarian emergencies and/or large populations of displaced people.
3. [Good governance underpins all DFID efforts to end extreme poverty and tackle the global challenges of our time](#); “matters for stability;” and is critical to “preventing the emergence or recurrence of violent conflict.” Robust elections, democracy and governance support will also maintain openings for quick and effective health, humanitarian and economic interventions (particularly amidst [heightened risks of fraud and abuse by public officials](#)).

### Coronavirus is impacting elections and democracy worldwide

4. IFES [tracks](#) how the pandemic affects democracies worldwide: coronavirus has already led to the [disruption of electoral processes and activities in over 50 countries and the expansion and abuse of emergency powers](#), and threatens to further marginalise women, persons with disabilities and youth. These disturbances and uncertainties undermine consolidated democracies and threaten countries striving to consolidate democratic gains.
5. Elections usually involve large, nationwide gatherings, not only on election day (if there are no remote voting options) but also, for example, during political rallies and voter registration drives. Holding such events amid a disease outbreak threatens public health, but not holding

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<sup>1</sup> The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) collaborates with civil society, public institutions and the private sector to build resilient democracies that deliver for everyone. As the global leader in the promotion and protection of democracy and electoral integrity, 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. Our vision is “Democracy for a better future” and our mission is “Together we build democracies that deliver for all.” DFID and IFES partner to deliver good governance for growth, sustainability and inclusive development.

them risks democratic stability; undermines civil and political rights; and erodes government accountability.

6. Public officials might struggle to decide whether to move forward with elections and, if so, to how to balance credible electoral procedures with stakeholder safety. Potential challenges include implementing new and improved procedures that reduce person-to-person contact; securing funds for and procuring new and unexpectedly needed materials (ranging from PPE to technology to facilitate remote and online operations); and developing protocols to integrate health measures into poll worker training and voting processes.
7. Even if election management bodies (EMBs) can ensure the safety of elections, pandemic-related viral misinformation; disinformation campaigns directed by antidemocratic actors; and the amplification and weaponization of hate speech might still disrupt democratic processes. Changes to voting procedures due to COVID-19 will provide fertile ground for information manipulation to disenfranchise or endanger voters. Authoritarian actors looking to capitalize on the confusion will continue to push narratives designed to undermine faith in democratic processes and institutions.
8. The vast majority of countries that decided to move forward with elections during March 2020 [did not have smooth experiences](#). Several EMBs that took some risk-mitigating measures still largely failed to address their public's concerns about their health and democratic rights. This led to low voter turnouts, poll worker dropouts and even the [infection of some electoral officials](#).
9. [Public sector corruption during crisis heightens risks to democratic norms and institutions that are already under siege](#). The urgent need for goods and services to confront the spread of COVID-19, to carry forward with governance and adapt elections may necessitate suspension or adaptation of normal compliance, due diligence, review and transparency measures. Loss of such safeguards can open the door to price gouging and misuse of public funds – challenges that are sometimes compounded by an influx of international assistance.
10. Despite the undeniable urgency and immediate benefits of increased spending on global health and economic stimulus, the diversion of funds away from elections, democracy and governance will not only have significant long-term consequences, but – as [good governance is critical to ensuring aid quickly and effectively reaches the people who need it](#) – it will reduce the impact of short-term health and humanitarian assistance.

*Recommendations for IDC consideration:*

11. Funding for development sectors outside of global health and economic support should not be diverted to coronavirus. This short-sighted approach will exacerbate the “long-tail” impacts of coronavirus, including worsening poverty; violent extremism (as tensions are exploited and government resources are diverted); a lack of confidence in governments and democracy, including citizen protests and unrest; and widespread corruption.

12. DFID should not assume that election, democracy and governance programming will sit idle or “naturally” scale down – active and planned programming should continue without interruption.

Despite challenges and postponements, elections will continue to be held under difficult conditions, with unexpected and pressing needs constantly emerging. [EMBs are finding themselves with insufficient time, resources, networks and information](#) to hold elections safely, and are also preoccupied with [the legal quagmires of modified elections](#). Even if elections are

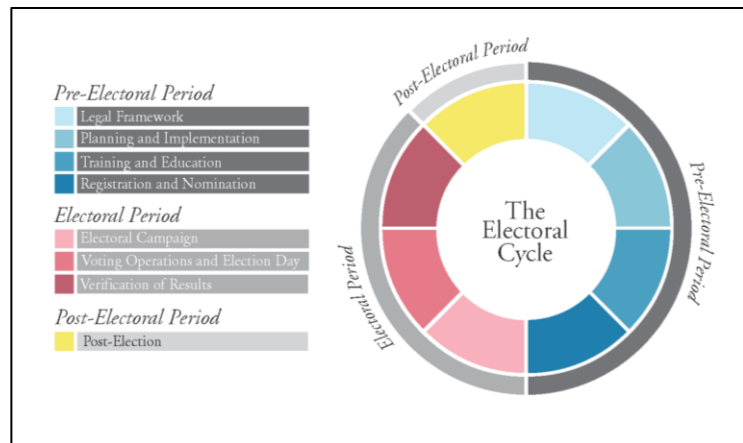


Figure 1 The Electoral Cycle

postponed, electoral planning (see figure 1) must proceed. Elections are time-sensitive and even a temporary reduction in focus and funding can result in a permanent loss of staff, time, resources and valuable materials.

13. Public institutions are struggling to meet the needs of their populations and uphold their democratic systems. DFID and UK resources should be dedicated to new tools and training, and prioritized to support:

- EMBs to adapt electoral processes to the coronavirus context, to maintain democratic integrity, protect human rights and safeguard all voters, including communicating effectively with the public about the crisis and adaptations;
- Judicial bodies, which are tasked with adjudicating complaints on rights violations stemming from [the abuse of emergency powers](#) and the postponement of elections;
- Independent oversight bodies responsible for monitoring and exposing government corruption, fraudulent procurement and corrupted service delivery stemming from coronavirus responses (i.e., the abuse of food aid by incumbents during campaigns); and
- Civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly to safeguard the franchise and empower the political participation of at-risk groups.

14. IFES recommends that DFID leverage its global leadership by developing a democracy-specific coronavirus policy, to include potential responses to long-term governance challenges.

### The pandemic threatens the political and electoral rights of traditionally marginalized populations

15. Traditionally marginalized populations are more likely to be negatively impacted by coronavirus: persons with disabilities are often categorized as high-risk; the burden on women for unpaid work and domestic abuse is increasing; social distancing further excludes young people from decision-making processes; and virus narratives instigate fear of or hatred against minority groups, resulting in increased hate speech and discrimination.

## People with disabilities

16. One billion people in the world have a disability. IFES fosters partnerships among disabled person's organizations (DPOs), civil society and governments to remove barriers that prohibit full participation of persons with disabilities in political life.
17. Some temporary, alternative voting measures – such as postal ballots, curbside voting and advance voting – have the potential to increase the participation of people with disabilities. If implemented long-term, many people with disabilities will benefit from these measures.
18. However, coronavirus has the potential to disenfranchise or otherwise harm voters with disabilities (as well as older voters): voter education about postponed elections is not being developed in accessible formats; EMB offices responsible for disability inclusion are experiencing closures; challenges to both procuring assistive devices (such as tactile ballot guides) and voting assistance is likely; public transport restrictions present an additional barrier to mobilizing politically; and in-person and mobile balloting – as well as serving as poll workers – present higher risks to people with disabilities.

### *Recommendations for IDC consideration:*

19. As outlined in the [DFID's Strategy for Disability Inclusive Development 2018-23](#), the UK “will not eradicate poverty, deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) without including people with disabilities in all our work.” Furthermore, DFID seeks to, “provide leadership on inclusive governance processes and inclusive elections.” In order to meet these goals in the time of coronavirus, the rights of people with disabilities must continue to be prioritized, particularly in elections and democracy.
20. DFID should consult with both INGOs and DPOs to ensure all coronavirus programming is accessible and inclusive. For example, DFID should support EMBs to develop disability inclusive policies and procedures.
21. DFID should prioritize programming that empowers DPOs to raise the profile disability rights issues; mobilizes advocacy networks and elevates marginalized voices; and supports voting rights, counters discrimination and creates pandemic responsive accommodations, policies and tools.

## Youth

22. Economic and social exclusion, and the accompanying increase in poverty and food insecurity, could result in high levels of disillusion especially amongst youth that could give rise to crime, violence and the prospect of extremism.
23. Young people tend to engage in political processes in more informal ways such as face-to-face rallies and gatherings. Due to social distancing, young activists are experiencing challenges to exercising their right to movement and expression of beliefs.
24. Young people who experience political apathy already could be further excluded from political processes, leading to increased feelings of mistrust in political leaders and government structures, thereby resulting in lower youth turnout in elections.
25. Formal school closures are causing a learning gap for children and youth. This barrier to education causes negative implications to democracy for children and youth who were building knowledge of democratic principles and values through formal school-based civic education programs.

*Recommendations for IDC consideration:*

26. DFID must consider the long-term effects of the learning gap and how this could negatively impact young people building lifelong habits of political participation. DFID should invest funds in developing civic education programs that consider learning through a diverse range of technological and offline tools.
27. DFID should prioritize opportunities to facilitate networking and relationship building between young people and decision-makers to mitigate increased mistrust and counter exclusion in democratic processes.
28. From a “demand-side” approach, DFID should consider programming that supports young people’s advocacy skills, particularly online. From the “supply-side,” DFID should work with local governments to develop youth interfaces to aid development planning and service delivery.
29. DFID should prioritize supporting EMBs to develop targeted outreach and voter education strategies for young voters, particularly those who are voting for the first time during the pandemic. It is crucial that young voters understand electoral processes around voter registration and voting, as well as the changes being made to electoral processes in light of the pandemic.
30. DFID should consider partnering with educators involved with formal and non-formal civic education initiatives to ensure learning materials can be adapted to e-learning mechanisms and offline learning materials.

**Women**

31. DFID’s [2018 Strategic Vision for Gender Equality](#) emphasizes “the importance of increasing the meaningful and representative participation and leadership of women.”
32. The pandemic is gendered in its impact. While there are a number of high-profile women receiving global recognition for their leadership during this crisis, women – in most contexts – continue to be largely left out of decision-making processes.
33. Many countries have highlighted sharp increases in domestic violence after quarantine measures were put into place. Women who now have increased child care responsibilities after school closures may be less able to continue working. And women who face compounding discrimination due to race or class are often the most negatively impacted.
34. EMBs, decision-makers and legislators must be aware of how these heightened inequalities impact the integrity and inclusiveness of an electoral process. During a crisis, it is even more critical to ensure that gender equality considerations are reflected in legislation; decision-making; operational and security planning; campaigning; observation; training programs for election officials; and support to civil society throughout the electoral cycle.

*Recommendations for IDC consideration:*

35. Any mitigation measures designed by EMBs must take gender considerations into account to ensure the equal and meaningful participation of women in elections. IFES has developed [key recommendations](#) for election officials to ensure elections are gender inclusive during the pandemic.
36. DFID should continue to empower women’s local CSOs who often have the trust of and access to strong networks of women. Women’s CSO groups can support the implementation of information campaigns around coronavirus and help political and electoral stakeholders best understand the unique challenges women face during the pandemic.

37. Long-term, DFID should consider the role that unequal gender relations played in exacerbating the effects of the coronavirus crisis. Engaging men and boys in gender equality – like IFES does in its [Male Allies for Leadership Equality program](#) – can help break down some of these societal barriers and stereotypes.

#### Balancing technological solutions with cybersecurity, integrity and the digital divide

38. Given the increased amount of online and virtual activity, EMBs and other governance institutions are at an increased risk of [cyber and malign foreign interference](#).
39. Although the pandemic has increased interest in and demand for moving services online – including [virtual parliaments](#) and online voting – the introduction of technology into elections and democracy must not undermine public trust or compromise security. Due to the planning, preparation and testing needed, internet voting may be inappropriate as an immediate response to the crisis.
40. IFES is adapting existing tools and [innovating new ways to work in digital spaces](#). However, it is not always possible to move activities online, particularly when programming relies on community-based advocacy and leadership. Furthermore, when moving into online spaces, access is not always considered. For example, in many operating contexts, [women are far less likely than men](#) to have access to phones, digital services and the internet.

#### *Recommendations for IDC consideration:*

41. [IFES assists election stakeholders in determining whether internet voting would improve electoral integrity](#) and active democracy, and recommends that internet voting be evaluated according to cost, participation, efficiency, trust and security.
42. Accessibility in online spaces must be prioritized. [IFES has published guidance on holding accessible and inclusive virtual meetings](#).
43. DFID should prioritize programming that provides global analysis and local guidance on remote voting, counting and results tabulation; champions web-based initiatives for election dispute resolution; advises partners on virtual communications and [cyber-hygiene](#); and supports EMB procurement to facilitate remote and online operations.

#### Coronavirus responses must consider the follow-on impacts on local partners

44. IFES works with local actors across the globe. If funding for democracy and governance projects is diverted to immediate coronavirus health and economic responses, it will not only be detrimental to the capacity to deliver impact for international organisations like IFES, but also could wipe out the local partners we support and empower.
45. Building local partner resilience to internal and external shocks – whether they stem from pandemics, extremism, climate change, etc. – is at the heart of IFES' work. According to IFES' field leadership, “partners are suffering,” and want to be part of the solution. Redirecting funds will impede timely adaptation and innovation in partner approaches.
46. Even temporary gaps in programming with local partners will create a sense of abandonment and resentment, and result in valuable relationships and trust being irrevocably lost. We risk losing our partners in civil society – including NGOs; DPOs; schools and universities; and media organizations – not only because of the immediate impacts of the pandemic, but due to a loss of sustainable funding.
47. Without sustained support, implementers and local partners cannot supply the political and risk analysis so essential to thinking and working politically.

*Recommendation for IDC consideration:*

48. As countries emerge (prematurely, at times) from lockdown, implementer and local partner safety will continue to be of the utmost concern. Careful consideration must be given to safeguarding, including social distancing and adapting new mechanisms of operation (for example, concerning travel or events) to ensure programs don't contribute to spread of virus.

## Lessons learned: Liberian Elections During the Ebola Crisis

49. At the height of the Ebola epidemic in Liberia, IFES worked with the National Elections Commission and medical experts to integrate a range of practical health measures, such as social distancing and revised processing, to ensure the safe exchange of ballot papers, ID cards, pens and other common voting materials. During poll worker training, we incorporated an unprecedented focus on the role of queue controllers and testing the temperatures of voters. And we supported an aggressive voter education effort — built upon an extensive public health campaign — which proved critical to changing citizens' behaviour. As a result of these measures, the election proceeded without disruption or significant public health consequences. Liberia's democracy, at a critical stage in its evolution, was able to take a step forward rather than be beaten back by the threats presented by Ebola.

*Recommendations for IDC consideration:*

50. DFID should support cross-sectoral programming and information sharing (e.g., between the health and democracy sectors).
51. As learned from Liberia, effective and timely communication is critical. The crisis communications capacity of EMBs should be strengthened of EMBs and key agencies to strengthen outreach; engage civilian stakeholders, health authorities and media; and ensure transparency and accountability.
52. Voter education can be pivoted to public health messaging to counter mis/disinformation; build social cohesion and resilience; and explain new voting procedures to enable participation and mitigate risk.
53. For more information, please see ["IFES Solutions: Achieving Credible Elections and Safeguarding Democracy During the COVID-19 Crisis."](#)