



Finding a Voice

IFES programs promote the political participation of underrepresented communities in every region of the world.



The Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees all individuals the freedom to take part in their nation's government and political processes, including elections.

However, in almost every nation, economic, ethnic and social inequalities prevent some citizens from participating fully in public life.

IFES empowers the underrepresented to participate in political life by promoting equal rights, justice and inclusion for women, youth, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups. We educate and encourage all individuals to add their voice to the democratic process as voters, candidates, election officials and civil society leaders.

From the Dalits and Khamaiyas of Nepal, and Muslims and Tribals in India; to the American Indians in the United States, and indigenous and minority populations of Latin America – vulnerable and marginalized groups face obstacles when registering to vote, learning about the political process or making their voice heard in government.

IFES programming reaches underrepresented populations through engagement with broader society. Our initiatives include projects in voter registration, public awareness campaigns, capacity-building for local organizations and motivating all sections of the population to be actively involved in their society.

IFES believes that strong democratic institutions empower all citizens to have a voice in the way they are governed.



Nepal

In Nepal, the number of Dalits – the lowest members of the centuries-old Hindu caste system – is estimated to be between 13 and 20 percent of the total population. Although Nepal has passed laws prohibiting caste-based discrimination, Dalits continue to face economic, social and political marginalization and exploitation.

In 2010, the Election Commission of Nepal (ECN) launched an initiative to replace its voter register with a new voter registration and identification process that digitally collects voters' personal information, signatures, photographs and fingerprints. Since the process is new, knowledge of voter registration and inclusion of marginalized groups, such as Dalits, in the voter register is very important.

IFES has been working with the ECN and local civil society organizations in 21 districts to increase awareness of the voter registration process within Dalit communities. These voter education programs are built on the premise that it is essential for Dalits, like all Nepalis, to understand their democratic rights and participate in their country's electoral process. Through community-

“My dream came true to get both citizenship certificates and register in the voter roll because of the voter education program and ECN's new voter registration process.”

— **Prem Bahadur Damai**
19 year-old Dalit resident of Kalimati

based public awareness and voter education activities – including household, school and workplace visits; community meetings; street theaters; and local radio public service announcements – IFES and local Dalit partner organizations are working to tailor these campaigns to the specific needs of communities. So far, this initiative has reached 779,228 Dalits, of which 364,673 are women.

The success of the program has demonstrated the benefits of partnering with local organizations that understand the needs of target populations and working with individuals who are known and trusted within their communities.



Yemen

Traditionally-marginalized groups often lack access to basic information about civic participation and responsibilities, including information about electoral participation, and are thus underrepresented in government.

Leading up to the 2006 local council and presidential elections in Yemen, IFES worked with the United Nations Development Programme to develop a national voter registration and information campaign for many of Yemen's traditionally marginalized populations, including women, youth and persons with disabilities, reaching 23,360 citizens in the process.

This also included outreach to ethnic minorities like the Akhdam, a disenfranchised segment of the Yemeni population with roots in Africa. The campaign developed by IFES prioritized outreach to members of these groups living in rural communities, which often lack access to traditional sources of voter education information, such as radio or television. In addition, high illiteracy rates contribute to widespread unfamiliarity with the processes of registration, voting and elections.

To ensure greater electoral participation from these rural populations, IFES trained local civil society organizations (CSOs) to conduct voter education for the registration process through face-to-face campaigning. The aim was to enable citizens to make informed decisions about the registration process and provide them with accurate, culturally sensitive and timely electoral information on the voter registration process. This gave citizens in rural locations an opportunity to obtain electoral information in a simple format and receive immediate answers to their questions.

Through these training sessions, IFES helped CSOs expand their capacity for outreach to marginalized communities, and empowered minorities through increased access to information on the electoral process.



India

Muslims make up more than 13 percent of the population in India. However, their representation in political life lags behind. Historical conflicts, political polarization, negative stereotyping and social and economic stagnation challenge the full engagement of Muslims in Indian democracy.

IFES supported local organizations in the Indian states of Karnataka and Rajasthan to implement a Muslim women's empowerment program. The aim of the Muslim Women's Initiative (MWI) was to engage women, men and youth using grassroots activities to help them move closer to the democratic mainstream. The keystone of IFES' program was information dissemination workshops for women and men on the rights of women as described in both the Qur'an and in Indian law. Religious and community leaders; academics; activists; and lawyers engaged in discussion on the rights and responsibilities of women from both of these religious and political perspectives.

MWI also included outreach to youth through classes on women's rights in secondary schools and madrasas.

Over seven years (2004-2011), MWI directly reached over 30,000 women and men. One of the most significant outcomes was the emergence of Muslim women and youth as leaders in their communities. Women who previously never left their homes ran for office and were successful in doing so. Once elected, they became leaders and advocates for the basic rights of women. High school-aged youth became outspoken rights advocates.

Empowerment of marginalized communities cannot be successful in isolation. Mainstreaming requires engagement with the broader society. Critical to this were links established by MWI partners within state structures and services, and engagement in regular political governance structures at the local (*panchayat*), district, state and national levels.



Ecuador

Historically located in Esmeralda and the Chota Valley, the indigenous and Afro-descendent communities of Ecuador make up between 14 to 28 percent of the population. Despite representing a significant number of people in the country, these communities remain underrepresented in the political system.

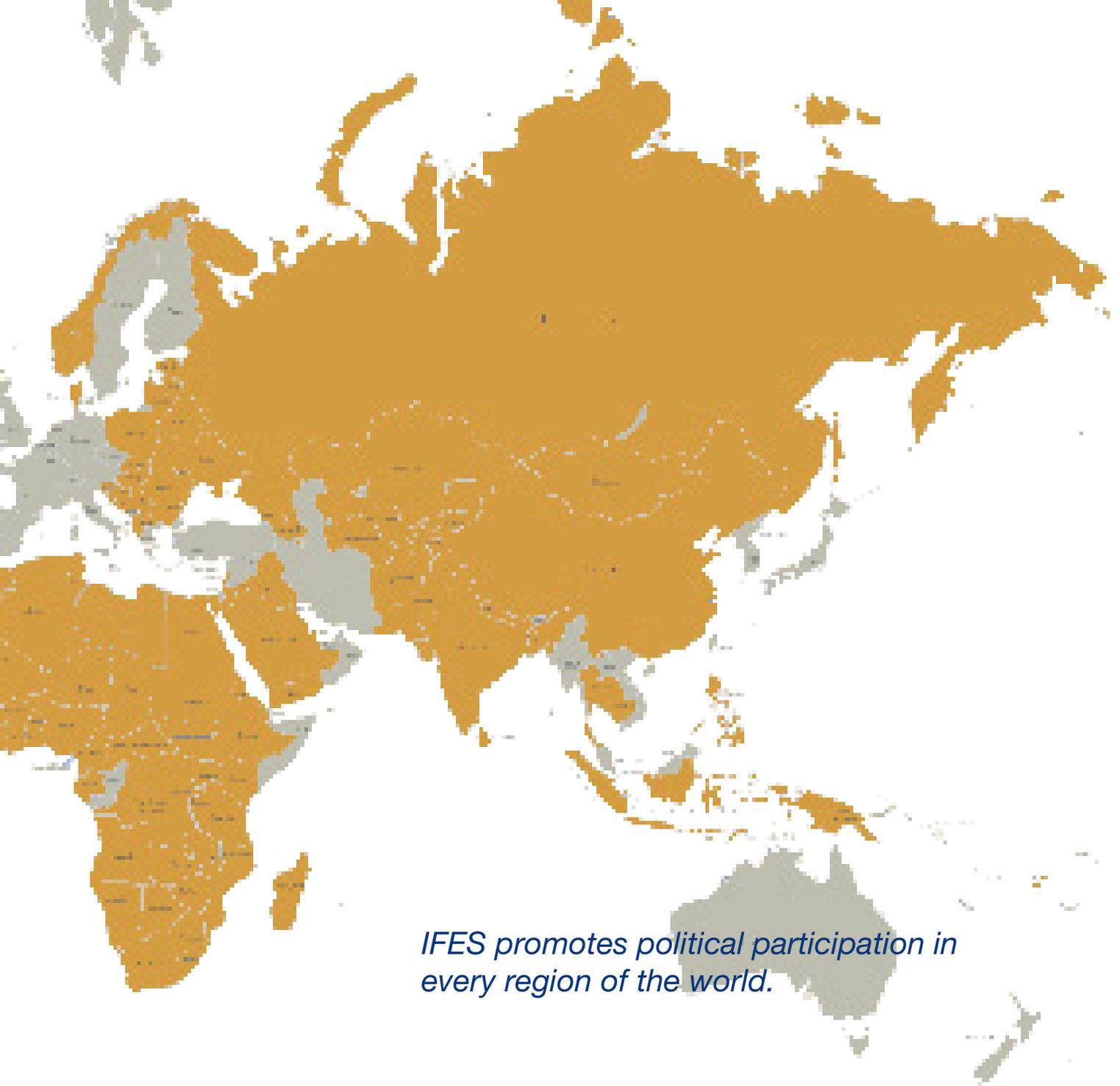
IFES has worked with Ecuadorian civil society to promote the inclusion of these marginalized individuals. To this end, IFES partnered with local organizations that promoted the rights of minority indigenous and Afro-descendent populations throughout Ecuador. The joint effort increased awareness of traditionally underrepresented populations and strengthened the capacity of local organizations.

Ecuador has seen increased political participation of afro-Ecuadorians. Today, a number Afro-Ecuadorians have been elected to leadership positions nationwide, including Ernesto Estupiñán Quintero, mayor of Esmeraldas; Lucía Sosa, elected office in Esmeraldas; Rafael Erazo, Provincial Council of Esmeraldas; Lenin Hurtado and Alexandra Ocles, members of the Constituent Assembly representing Guayas and Pichincha,

respectively; and Alexandra Ocles, member of the National Assembly. However, despite this increase, there is much that needs to be done for the indigenous and Afro-descendent populations to achieve equality.

To that end, IFES held youth leadership training programs to educate minority youth about their local governments and empower them to be politically active citizens, representing the needs of their community. Once graduated, IFES placed students in internships with local government offices to pair their newfound knowledge with real world experience. IFES also held capacity building workshops for indigenous populations and afro-Ecuadorians to learn about their political rights under the new constitution.





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About IFES

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) supports citizens' right to participate in free and fair elections. Our independent expertise strengthens electoral systems and builds local capacity to deliver sustainable solutions.

As the global leader in democracy promotion, we advance good governance and democratic rights by:

- Providing technical assistance to election officials
- Empowering the underrepresented to participate in the political process
- Applying field-based research to improve the electoral cycle

Since 1987, IFES has worked in over 135 countries – from developing democracies, to mature democracies.

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