

African Union



8TH ANNUAL CONTINENTAL FORUM OF ELECTION MANAGEMENT BODIES

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION:

**Building lasting relationships between
EMBs and stakeholders**

**1 - 2 November 2023
Golden Tulip Hotel
Cotonou - Benin**

**Opening Speech to the eighth
Annual Continental Forum
of Electoral Management Bodies
of the African Union**

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FABIO BARGIACCHI

Founder and Executive Director

European Centre for Electoral Support

Cotonou, 1 November 2023

- Mr Yvon Detchenou, Keeper of the Seals, Minister for Justice and Legislation of the Republic of Benin
- Member of the National Electoral Commission of Benin under the leadership of Chairperson Dr Sacca Lafia
- Rev Carlos Matsinhe, President of the General Assembly of the AAEA and Chairperson of the Mozambique Electoral Commission
- Vice Chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries, Hon Justice Priscilla Chigumba
- Director Governance and Conflict Prevention, African Union Commission, Ms Patience Chiradza
- Members of the Autonomos National Electoral Commission of Benin,
- Chairpersons, Commissioners, CEOs and Senior Representatives of the Electoral Management bodies in the African Union.
- The Executive Secretariat and esteemed teams of the African Union and Association of African Electoral Authorities
- Distinguished Guests;
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

I express my heartfelt gratitude for the warm invitation to the beautiful city of Cotonou from the last time I was here when in 2007 I was the Coordinator of the Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance of the UNDP and the EU and we contributed to the establishment of the LEPI via a UNDP project funded by the EU.

Standing here today as the Founder and Executive Director of ECES brings me immense joy. ECES is a not-for-profit private Foundation that I had the privilege to establish 13 years ago alongside esteemed electoral practitioners and colleagues, including Jose Manual Pinto Teixeira, our Vice President and who is also with us today and late Abbot Apollinaire Malu Malu our first President and former President of the Independent Electoral Commission of DRC and of the SADC ECF.

Since our establishment, we have had the honour of supporting Electoral Management Bodies and other electoral stakeholders in over 50 countries, predominantly in Africa and the Middle East. This has been achieved with the funding from the European Union and its member states, guided by our strategy called, "A European Response to Electoral Cycle Support - EURECS".

This is an innovative delivery mechanism to implement electoral and democracy assistance activities that are consistent primarily with European values and EU policies targeting the facilitation of cooperation on electoral matters between the EU, the EU member states and their partner countries.

The significance of this conference cannot be overstated. We are honoured to contribute to the eighth Annual Continental Forum of Electoral Management Bodies of the AU, exploring ways to strengthen the relationship between Election Management Bodies and stakeholders through impactful strategic communication.

Our collaboration with the African Union Commission, solidified by the memorandum of understanding signed in May 2020 with Commissioner Bankole, aims to bolster our collective commitment to electoral integrity, prevention of conflicts, human rights, and the political empowerment of women.

Stemming from this MoU, we've launched the Pro Electoral Integrity in Africa project, generously supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation for the trust placed in ECES and the African Union regarding this pivotal initiative by Italy that happens to be also my country and, therefore, I am twice proud for the funding of this project that we are implementing since 2020. The project aims at contributing to peace and security through the development of a common culture of resilience and shared values around integrity in electoral processes, by strengthening the capacities of African EMBs in conducting their own credible and inclusive elections.

The project has the overall objective to contribute to the work of the AU to strengthen the resilience of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) and networks of EMBs to contribute to the challenges of their electoral contexts to effectively organize their elections in accordance with national and international norms and standards of democratic elections.

Thanks to our partnership with the AU, we have established strong ties with the AAEA, a vital platform connecting 48 EMB heads in Africa for mutual learning and sharing of best practices. This year, we were honoured to contribute to the draft of the AAEA Guidelines on Communication and Social Media, in collaboration with the AU and the Electoral Commission of South Africa.

Moreover, we were privileged to support solidarity missions of the AAEA to the National Electoral Commission of Liberia in their recent October 10th elections, and the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) of Kenya earlier last year for elections on 9th August 2022.

The Missions were undertaken by representatives of EMBs across the continent to demonstrate solidarity with their counterpart. Strategically these missions served as a useful resource to its peers, offering constructive advice and feedback from unique perspectives chairpersons and commissioners from their own elections.

ECES promotes democracy strengthening via the provision of advisory services, operational support and management of electoral projects. We are as well mainstreaming in all our activities leadership development via peer exchanges and comparative experiences, political dialogue and prevention and mitigation of electoral conflicts.

This conference's theme resonates deeply with ECES's vision. In our collaboration with the different EMBs worldwide, but also particularly in Africa, we aim to enhance public trust and bolster stakeholder relationships in electoral processes. Effective communication from EMBs is pivotal in cultivating trust and fostering a peaceful climate among all stakeholders.

The role of communication and media in shaping public confidence in electoral processes and EMBs is undeniably vital. Across the globe, we are seeing trends where democracy is placed increasingly under duress. With growing distrust in institutions, including EMBs and media alike, ensuring a well-informed citizenry is paramount.

This is why communication is a central aspect in all our work. Communication and media can be aided and amplified by tools and professionals. But it can also come down to structured, personal exchange – in the most basic way.

For instance, ECES had the privilege to support the Election Commission of South Africa to contribute to prevent, mitigate and manage election related conflict around the 2019 national and provincial elections.

A key mechanism for diffusing tensions were the Political Party Liaison Committees, at national, provincial and local level. These gatherings, moderated by the Election Commission with all political parties present, allowed for issues to be tabled immediately, or for phone calls to be placed in follow up. This, too, was a very powerful tool.

In an interconnected world, while information is more readily available and instantaneous, we are simultaneously grappling with information saturation and the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation. Strategic communication planning, when combined with partnerships with civil society and stakeholders in the electoral process, emerges as a crucial approach to address these obstacles.

At the same time, modern challenges also present opportunities. Enhanced media reach and technological advancements, like Artificial Intelligence, can be harnessed by EMBs to augment their efforts.

ECES ardently believes in the power of strategic communication planning, knowledge dissemination, media monitoring, and early warnings to address these emerging challenges. Our goal remains steadfast: to fortify public confidence in Electoral Management Bodies, the electoral processes, and their outcomes.

In this context, ECES has worked to develop a number of tools and applications that can be tailored and adapted further to each specific EMB and its own needs. Our Unified Social Media Monitoring and Early Warning System (USMEW) exemplifies this. Tailored to each specific case, this system uses technology to efficiently monitor incidents of violence and hate speech,

aiding institutions in collecting the right information to make informed decisions that allow for the mitigation and prevention of conflict around an extremely sensitive and often volatile electoral context.

In addition to that, ECES, with our long standing partner Democracy Essentials, has developed the Global Election Management System (GEMS), which assists in achieving the ultimate goal of making informed decisions in electoral management. This platform focuses on three key areas:

- planning,
- effective risk management, and
- efficient communication with field personnel and external electoral stakeholders to build up the appropriate institutional communication to the outside world and electoral stakeholders in a country.

It integrates various applications to organise and analyse data that will be available to EMBs via computer, tablets or phones. The GEMS platform includes features like:

- the Dashboard for data visualisation,
- Warehouse Management System (WMS) for warehouse operations,
- RFID Electoral Material traceability and tracking,
- Geo location for Polling Station Allocation that helps voters identify and change their polling station prior to election day,
- Secure document management to store data and communicate securely and privately,
- the Poll Workers Management System (PWMS) for staff scheduling and assignment,
- Candidate registration system, which leads to automatic ballot paper creation,
- PVT and results management, and the election observers accreditation system.

All these modules aim to enhance decision-making and optimise election operations also to be able to communicate at best the activities being carried out by any EMBs to electoral stakeholders via its communication channels.

In conclusion, our dedication to collaborating with the AU, the AAEA, and all African EMBs is unwavering. Our aim is to contribute to their successful, credible, and peaceful conduct of elections – the pinnacle events in any democracy, by bringing our comparative experiences and fostering peers' exchanges for EMBs to organize their own elections.

I anticipate fruitful discussions during this conference and look forward to continued collaboration in the future. Thank you for your attention.



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