

"Overcoming Stereotypes and Empowering Traditionally-Marginalized Populations through Outreach and Awareness: the Role of the Election Management Body."

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to thank the Central Election Commission of Georgia and its Chair Madame Zhvania personally for the opportunity to speak on the important topic of inclusion and access to the election process. Events such as this provide an unparalleled opportunity to compare experiences and best practices as election administrators and practitioners in promoting an election process that is both welcoming and enabling of persons who historically have been marginalized from the election experience. These persons include any who have, by no fault of their own, been overlooked (intentionally or otherwise), disregarded, or under-served and under-empowered to exercise their equal rights as citizens.

I posit that in addition to the legislative guarantees and systemic framework that can be considered and adopted to accommodate traditionally-marginalized persons - and we have been discussing the merits of electoral quotas, creating special voting districts, imposing mandatory ordering on party lists and other measures - there exists a responsibility, an *obligation*, on the part of election management bodies concurrent to those laws and systemic changes to proactively promote integration and encouragement of minority and traditionally-marginalized voters. This concerns operationalization of legislative guarantees on equal participation in the election process through real actions designed first and foremost to educate minority voters and, of course to make further hands-on efforts encourage their maximum inclusivity in the election process.

We first need to appreciate the legal guarantees set out in international treaties and agreements that many countries have signed or ratified supporting equal rights of voters irrespective of

their ethnicity, gender, disability, age, religion, or orientation. For example we understand the importance of such international agreements and declarations, some mentioned yesterday, as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities; and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in supporting women's empowerment. Acceptance and ratification is the first hurdle, the second is implementation of measures to enforce them. Here is where the election management bodies can set an example and take concrete steps to engage persons both among these *at risk* groups and the general voting population to first provide them information on the equal rights of all voters and to underscore the role of all citizens, irrespective of background, orientation or disability, in building democracy and civic/political culture.

Election management bodies must establish and regularize partnerships with local civil society organizations, and together "humanize" the inclusion of marginalized populations not only for the simple, though vital, act of exercising one's voting rights, and not merely to encourage their broader interest in politics and government, but to embrace what it means to be a citizen living in a democracy, with the equal right to choose one's elected leaders, with they themselves having the possibility to become elected leaders in government or in their communities, and become fully integrated citizens whose interests are addressed and defended with equal fervor and respect comparable to all members of society.

The integration and inclusion of members of traditionally marginalized populations begins not on election day but from a much earlier age. This begins with civics classes for primary age school students continuing through secondary schools and into universities, where the notion of citizenship and political and electoral culture can be established, and the demands for one's equal rights as members of society can be nurtured. I noted with great satisfaction yesterday learning about the efforts many of our colleagues are undertaking in this regard. Comprehensive, integrated civic education, of

which the study of elections, political processes and governance is an irrevocable part, should be given equal priority in my humble opinion with staple subjects such as math, science, and reading.

While nominally in the domain of the ministry of education, the election management body has a role to play in this as well, promoting through the official education system study of electoral processes and civic responsibility to elect and be elected, as well as through extracurricular activities via election resource centers in partnership with community organizations. As electoral rights are part of human rights, a curriculum which promotes tolerance, acceptance of different groups, integration, and empowerment of persons with disabilities, equal girls' participation, and ethnic minority involvement, among other groups, should be an essential part of mandatory study for all students.

As I am aware, here in Georgia the Central Election Commission supports youth civic education through the Center for Electoral Systems Development, through a civic education program with 19 universities, implementing curriculum for students through theoretical and practical courses of electoral law including simulations of electoral disputes and the voting process. I know Madame Chair and her Training Center colleagues can speak more about this, and I don't wish to preempt her own forthcoming remarks, but quite impressively this program of direct outreach by the CEC to university students also includes an internship component for participating students in the Training Center and other divisions of the CEC, as well as Grant Competitions encouraging the involvement of the NGO sector in promoting voting culture and increasing activity among young voters, voters with disabilities, ethnic minorities and women. I mention this as a current success story and best practice.

The acceptance of equality and tolerance becomes more ingrained when delivered at an early age; as integration came to the American south in the 1960s, and women's equal rights became more realized in that same decade - both through trials of fire I might add. Persons with disabilities are being integrated on a wider scale and while there has been success, there remains much work to be done. One of the new frontiers is fuller acceptance and recognition of persons with alternative lifestyles.

At the university level specialized courses on citizenship and democracy can be created and made mandatory for first-year students, or for upperclassmen, to provide specialized training in elections and inclusion. One such course supported by IFES exists here in Georgia in 22 universities, and success stories abound. Let me share one of these with you. I would like to mention the case of Mr. Romini Macharashvili, a 3rd year law student at Shota Rustaveli State University here in Batumi, just down the street, himself a person with physical disabilities. Through a civic education course Romini began to realize his rights and understood that while there are difficult barriers and social attitudes to overcome, there was no one preventing him from exercising his rights. He first connected with the Georgian NGO Coalition for Independent Living, a leading organization supporting disabled rights in Georgia, through the IFES/CEC disability access event in 2013 in Tbilisi. Romini began a student union for persons with disabilities like himself, and later founded his own youth NGO to support the rights of disabled persons. Now, at the tender age of 24, Romini is a speaker, presenter and representative of Georgia at international conferences in Indonesia, the U.S., promoting the rights of youth and persons with disabilities, and is an inspiration to his peers. There are no limitations on what this young person can achieve. I saw him two days ago and he is now guest lecturing in civics classes at the university. This would not have been possible without the support of the CEC and civil society here in Georgia.

We need to be proactive and not only reactive in supporting the rights of marginalized voters; (persons with disabilities were and remain in many countries ostracized and considered a burden, deeply misunderstood). A key proactive action election management bodies can take is to form working groups with representatives of special interests in society to work jointly with civil society to address the problems inhibiting the full participation of traditionally-marginalized groups, be it in the area of procedural reform, physical accessibility, education, training, or other opportunities created for their greater integration. We have a successful example of this here in Georgia, where the Central Election Commission meets at regular intervals with a gender working group, ethnic minorities working group,

and persons with disabilities working group. This opportunity affords direct access to election professionals and decision-makers at the highest levels by representatives of these special interest groups, who can share the concerns of their constituents and work to find common solutions through support from the election bodies and the energies of the local CSOs. This may include more specific educational opportunities in local languages, training for women in electoral leadership, developing mapping software to chart and track the domiciles of persons with disabilities (in order to document their locations for prioritization of improvements to enable physical access to polling stations).

In addition, outreach can be done by the EMBs to introduce new voting technology to historically under-served voters, such as new equipment introduced in my home region in Virginia in November 2014 for the congressional elections, for which the election commission took new voting technology including a specific, interactive system for persons with disabilities to community centers and retirement homes to familiarize residents as well as provide them with on-the-spot temporary voter identification cards.

A strategy can be created to encourage and enable representatives of marginalized groups to apprentice with election commissions at the district and central levels to gain experience in election administration and also create a pipeline of leaders, potentially at the highest level itself, of qualified election practitioners representing groups with special needs or who are disadvantaged vis-à-vis the majority. Representation not only in national or local legislatures is an unfailing goal of these groups, but so should be there greater representation in the work of the election management bodies.

For several specific strategies to support inclusive electoral and political processes for persons with disabilities I would like to highlight this manual contained on a card/flash drive titled “Equal Access: How to Include Persons with Disabilities in Elections and Political Processes.” I have several copies if anyone is interested to take one, which offer guidelines and recommendations for Election Management Bodies, Civil Society Organizations, Political Parties and others.

In conclusion, let me state that providing tools for the advancement of traditionally marginalized populations beginning with education and continuing through legal measures, physical means and access, use of technology and establishment of ongoing dialogue is very much in the purview of election management bodies, who can and should be proactive in promoting inclusion of all voters – which again is not merely an exercise during election time but represents a long-term commitment to change public attitudes and perceptions and provide the knowledge and material resources for marginalized groups of voters to fulfill their inherent potential, achieve and utilize their equal rights, and enrich the democratic experience of our countries.

Thank you very much for your time and attention!