

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

Outcome Document

I. INTRODUCTION

The 8th Annual Continental Forum of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) aimed to advance principles of good governance and participatory democracy in Africa. It achieved this by fostering mutual learning and leveraging of insights in election management. The annual forum tackled a range of topics relevant to the constitutional responsibilities of electoral commissions. The chosen theme for the Forum was "Strategic Communication: Establishing Sustainable Relationships between EMBs and Stakeholders."

The theme was selected based on observations from election observer missions which underscored gaps in communication between electoral commissions and election stakeholders. Key objectives included gaining a comprehensive understanding of the risks associated with inadequate communication across the electoral cycle, creating networks to effectively combat disinformation, developing essential messages to respond to and counter disinformation, and implementing mechanisms to assess the impact of communication strategies.

Discussions focussed on the experiences and challenges of election managers in relation to communication with electoral stakeholders and citizens, developing strategic communication, avoiding pitfalls in communication with stakeholders, and exploring opportunities for cost-effective EMBs communication strategies.

II. LESSONS LEARNT

1. That EMBs often possess communication departments, but the absence of dedicated strategic communication units and technical competencies in communication and public relations has resulted in suboptimal communication leading to negative perceptions from stakeholders about their quality of engagement.
2. That EMBs have managed to successfully expand their reach to stakeholders by forging strategic partnerships with local influencers and content creators, thus accessing a broader audience.
3. That policy and legislative uncertainty arising from pre-election litigation has an adverse effect of assertive communication by EMB's affecting how they communicate especially around the election calendar.
4. That it is important to know and understand the difference between a strategy and a policy. A communication strategy outlines objectives and targets, while a communication policy provides principles and guidelines to inform implementation.
5. That EMBs should proactively interact with stakeholders to manage expectations and perceptions.
6. That it is imperative to formulate dedicated strategies targeted at engaging special interest stakeholders, such as those with hearing impairment, the visually impaired, and individuals with low literacy levels. Within this framework of inclusion, setting clear and measurable objectives is crucial, especially in establishing and maintaining trust with the public.
7. That the African political landscape has shifted from multipolar elections to more competitive elections driven by high stakes which has correspondingly made them more litigious. Ultimately, the growing emphasis on securing peace in electoral processes

sometimes at the expense of democratic principles has lead to decisions that have, at times, compromised electoral integrity.

8. That the cost of elections is increasing, posing challenges for governments with contracting economies. A developmental approach grounded in value for money by EMB is needed to ensure quality work despite limited resources. Electoral commissions should consider the opportunity cost of elections and allocate and use resources effectively.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. EMBs' communication units should be run by experts in communication and electoral processes for successful implementation of a communication strategy.
2. Transparency in the electoral process should be maintained, including timely communication about delays and alterations, to foster stakeholder trust in the election administration. Instead of consistently being in a perpetual reactive "firefighting" mode, EMBs are advised to proactively interact with stakeholders."
3. EMBs should assume a leading role in shaping the narrative of African elections. They should proactively communicate their achievements to reshape the prevailing negative perception on them. Engaging in strategic communication is essential to taking control of the election narrative and diminishing the influence of misinformation.
4. EMBs should adapt to the evolving political landscape and develop strategies to handle the increased competitiveness of elections. While peace is important, electoral management bodies should prioritize electoral integrity and democratic principles.
5. Strategies should be developed to address the challenges posed by disinformation, misinformation, and cyberbullying in the digital era which may include the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to identify and mitigate risk.

6. EMB's should create a highly organized and technically competent communication teams with distinct roles to prevent redundancy and conflicting messaging. Team members should possess not only strong communication skills but also a deep understanding of electoral processes and legal intricacies to effectively convey accurate, relevant and timely information. It's imperative to define the specific functions of the Chairperson or Commissioner and that of spokesperson to prevent any overlaps or inconsistencies in messaging.
7. EMB's should maintain consistent interaction with stakeholders to foster inclusivity and mitigate the risk of process disruptions arising from perceptions of exclusion. An effective engagement approach involves conducting monthly stakeholder meetings and establishing enduring platforms for the exchange of information.
8. EMBs should collaborate with the operators and owners of digital platforms and tools to proactively develop social media safeguards for election related protection of both users and consumers.
9. In preparation for upcoming elections, EMB's should establish strategic partnerships with mobile telecommunication operators to address cost and resource challenges, which, if left unaddressed, can compromise the quality and credibility of the electoral process.
10. EMBs should establish partnerships with tertiary institutions, think tanks, and knowledge generators to stay updated on election communication demands and opportunities within the continuously changing political and electoral environment.
11. EMBs should prioritize staff retention or effective human resource management, wherever feasible, to retain institutional memory and ensure the uninterrupted execution of strategic plans.
12. EMBs should create a well-functioning feedback mechanism for stakeholder communication, both with identified local stakeholders and external partners, to enhance responsiveness to their election priorities and needs.



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