

Impact of electoral systems and representation on sustainability

***Joint EC-UNDP Thematic Workshop on
Sustainability in Electoral Administration***

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Elections, credibility and sustainability

- Elections: about credibility and trust
- Sustainability refers to capacity of electoral system to create, and maintain through time, enough confidence from the various stakeholders on the electoral institutions and practices.
- *Choice of basic electoral modalities is key to achieving, and maintaining, credibility: **electoral system, electoral authorities, eligibility criteria.***

Electoral systems: introduction

- Large sense – the ensemble of principles, regulations, mechanisms, procedures and institutions that make up the framework of elections
- Focused approach: the essential components of an electoral system are defined in term of **representation**:
form and basis of representation
 - what or who is represented: “*basis of representation*”
 - how are votes translated into seats: “*form of representation*”

Electoral systems: basic components vs. features

- **Basic components**: essential elements that **define** the system, related to the core issue of *representation – (basis and form)*
- **Features** – complementary components that will affect how the system operates - but all by themselves, DO NOT define the electoral system: ballot structure (individual candidates or lists of candidates), district magnitude and district boundaries, etc...

Electoral systems and sustainability

- *Electoral systems*: as they refer to the core issue of **representation**, are a major factor in achieving, and maintaining overtime, the credibility of electoral institutions and practices.
- Choice of electoral systems – one of the most important decisions for a country; not so much a technical, but an eminently **political** one.
- Impact of the choice of electoral systems on the sustainability of an electoral system is enormous: on political sustainability first and foremost, but also on institutional, operational and financial sustainability.

Impact of electoral systems in political sustainability (1)

- *Ensuring “fair” representation* is a key principle when designing the most suitable (and sustainable) electoral system. ***What is “fair representation”?***
- Choice of the electoral system has a clear impact on how results are translated into seats (***who is elected***) and how representation is achieved (closely linked to the **electoral districting** issues).
- Impact of choice of electoral systems will be different in different contexts. Need to specify objectives.

Impact of electoral systems in political sustainability (2)

- Long term goal of the electoral system refer to its political sustainability: to *promote the development of strong, stable political institutions that are able to respond to changing realities.*
- Nevertheless, short-term objectives of immediate political advantage need also to be taken into account.

[Strategic choice, harmonizing short and long-term objectives, and allowing flexibility to adapt]

Impact of electoral systems in political sustainability (3)

- Choice of electoral systems is not made in a vacuum: thus the importance of the *process of choosing an electoral system*. In order for the choice to be sustainable, it needs to be widely negotiated with all political stakeholders and address all stakeholders' concerns.
- Agreement on objectives to be achieved by the system is crucial, but they can vary for different stakeholders and vary through time. Issue of political advantage becomes critical.

Impact of electoral systems in political sustainability (4)

- If the electoral system does not address all stakeholders' concerns regarding representation, sustainability will be difficult. *Inclusiveness!*
- Issue of representation of different population groups, women for example, or minorities. Special measures will vary and will have different effects according to the system chosen, so the objective of ensuring substantial representation of various groups needs to be explicit and an integral part of the process.

Impact of electoral system in other forms of sustainability

- Choice of electoral systems (not just the core components but also its features) has important *administrative and operational repercussions* which can impact the system's sustainability.
- Essential issues such as boundary delimitation, voter registration, OCV, EDR, polling and counting modalities, will be influenced by choice electoral systems, all of which will help define the system's institutional, operational and financial sustainability.