

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

**Adequate Resourcing for
Credible Elections**

**Voter registration methodologies and
political sustainability throughout the
electoral cycle**

**Teresa Polara, European Commission,
EuropeAid**

Political sustainability

What is the political sustainability in an electoral process and how can we measure it?

Sustainability has several aspects, including:

- Institutional sustainability = the EMB's preparedness to use a given methodology
- Socio-economical sustainability = the extent to which a country can afford and sustain the introduction of a given methodology
- Political sustainability = EMB's capacity to create and sustain trust and confidence of key stakeholders

One way to measure political sustainability is through the level of acceptance. If a process and its outcomes are accepted through time by the main stakeholders including political parties, civil society and the wider public, we could say that the process is politically sustainable.

Political sustainability of VR

- The aspect of political sustainability is particularly important for that segment of an electoral process which is VR
- VR is probably the most complex, time-consuming and expensive of all electoral operations – and potentially among the most contentious
- VR can catalyze the utmost interest and stir the national debate, being regarded as one of the keys to credibility and integrity of the whole electoral process
- Both the process and the outcome of VR need to be accurate, sustainable and politically accepted.

VR methodologies and political sustainability of the process

- The question then becomes: is there a VR methodology that can increase political sustainability? Is there a particular technology that, applied to VR, guarantees the most accurate and complete outcome, leading to the highest possible level of acceptance?
- Quite often, the most sophisticated technologies available are considered the answer, perceived as a guarantee of accuracy of the voter register.
- According to EISA's publication "Voter registration in Africa: a comparative analysis" a common perception is also that, the greater the initial and running costs of a system, the more the system is likely to deliver.

Can a methodology guarantee a result?

- Regrettably, a technology is just a methodology, a tool to be used to try achieve a result.
- A VR methodology is not a guarantee in itself
- Several factors concur to determine a successful registration, regardless of the methodology used:
 - Credibility of the EMB and other institutions involved
 - Technical skills, adequate timeframe, proper planning
 - Inclusiveness of the process every step of the way
 - Transparency, correct and widespread information
 - A comprehensive, broad and consultative feasibility study, to examine the appropriate options for the given context

Can a methodology build trust?

- Often, a methodology is adopted because it is trusted by the key stakeholders, particularly political parties and CSOs
- Experience shows that trust in a methodology, rather than in the process and its players, is likely to be deceived
- No matter the level of sophistication, the political parties can happen to question the way VR was carried out and its results
- Lack of trust in the voter register, possibly resulting in request of its reform in the next electoral cycle, shows that political sustainability is not achieved yet
- While it is important to fully take into account perception and orientations of the political players, it is crucial to conduct a thorough technical assessment, for them to evaluate.

Inclusiveness, integrity and accuracy

- A voter register should be inclusive: all eligible citizens should have the opportunity to register.
- Integrity principle: a voter register should contain data of all eligible voters in the country, while not allowing ineligible persons.
- If correctly and timely used, biometric VR contributes to accuracy of the voter registry by giving the possibility to detect and eliminate multiple registrations.
- On the other hand, a VR methodology can only partly contribute to address the principles of inclusiveness, integrity and accuracy of the register.
- In the case of a stand-alone VR not linked to a civil registry, no VR technology can, for instance, enhance enfranchisement, prevent registration of the underage or effectively deal with the deceased.

Other stages of an electoral process where political sustainability plays a major role

- Constituency boundary delimitation
- Electoral system
- Electoral dispute resolution mechanisms
- Polling and counting modalities
- Transmission of results

Conclusions

- Several stages of an electoral process concur to determine overall political sustainability.
- Inclusiveness and integrity of a voter list can partially be achieved via voter registration. Even high-tech methodologies, can only address the issue of multiple registration.
- The use of high-tech VR systems or methodologies does not guarantee credibility of the process or protect from possible political challenges to elections.
- For political sustainability to be achieved, trust needs to be placed in the process and the players, rather than in a methodology → transparency, inclusiveness, communication.

Conclusions

- No VR methodology is silver-bullet: what works in a country may not work in another one.
- Comprehensive, consultative and broad feasibility studies should always be conducted prior to the introduction of a new VR methodology.
- If a methodology is adopted which involves high-tech and expensive equipments: important to look to further use and build bridges between electoral administration and other branches of the State administration.