

Electoral Sustainability and the Costs of Development

By
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The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the secretariat's policy.

Introduction¹

The cost of holding elections in a multiparty democracy is high and continues to rise. A random check on the cost per elector at a general election in 22 Commonwealth countries a few years ago revealed an average cost of US\$4.24. There is however a growing awareness that the cost of not having elections often leads to conflict which is even more costly than elections. It is necessary that ways and means be found to ensure the long-term fiscal sustainability of democratic elections. The key to achieving this goal is to develop cost-effective measures in election preparation and conduct. It is well known that many of the southern African states find election budgets beyond their capacity at the present time and are willing to accept funding assistance from friendly foreign governments and organisations. Free and fair elections are considered essential to the growth of a healthy democratic state and so a long-term strategy needs to be formulated to ensure that electoral services are seen and funded as an essential service.

Sustainability

The sustainability of electoral development in southern Africa needs to be built around two pillars; reform in the funding structure of election planning and conduct, and cost-effective management.

Funding Structure

It is understandable that, presently, considerable reliance is placed on outside help to fund elections in some southern African countries. Nevertheless, in the longer term, election organisation may have to be funded from national resources. The importance of properly organised elections to the stability of the state, places the maintenance of the electoral system in a category similar to that of self-defence of the realm. Thus, it is the view of some election commentators that the cost of elections should be a direct charge on the state's treasury funds, and such appropriation should be voted for the purpose directly by Parliament. This conceptual approach obtains, with variation, in Australia, Canada, India, Barbados and other Commonwealth countries. It avoids the prospect of a ministry of the government of the day starving the election management body (EMB) of funds, or disbursing funds in an untimely manner. It also enables EMBs to enjoy a measure of priority treatment in its demands for extra

1 Afari-Gyan, 'Overview of Electoral Reform in Africa', p5, *Commonwealth Electoral Management Training Course*, Mauritius, May 2000

funds in an election year. In other words, this procedure helps to bring about some financial discipline in allocating the national resources. Certain constitutional amendments may need to be made in order to introduce these procedural changes in some countries.

The accountability of EMBs is a factor that should be given a high priority in the quest for the development and sustainability of the electoral system. An EMB should be accountable to Parliament for its budget expenditures and for the general conduct of electoral matters. This should include periodic reports and a report on each election.

Strategy for Cost-Effective Management

Cost-effective methods of planning and executing election tasks need to be tailored to meet the specific needs in each particular country. Given this basic rule, only the general principles, which will shape a culture of cost-conscious electoral planning, will be explored. Experience has shown that each major election process, that is to say, delimitation of electoral districts, registration of voters, preparation for polling and counting the votes, has considerable potential for cost reduction. Some of these processes, such as registration of voters and polling preparation, may merit individual treatment because of their considerable potential for simplification of documentation and improved productivity of employees.

The framework of some (EMBs) takes account of cost-saving devices, even if such devices are not necessarily consistent with good practice in delivering free and fair elections. Thus, there are temporary EMBs, whose staff members are likewise temporary. The funding of EMBs is often inadequate and untimely. The essential consideration is to ensure that a framework is in place at all times that can deliver a free and fair election when the political directorate wishes to call one. The funding mechanism should be such that approval and disbursement of funds would enable the EMB to meet its election commitments in good time.

Consistent with the goal of formulating a viable strategy to sustain the delivery of free and fair elections, urgent steps should be taken to examine the possibility of reducing the number of paid personnel used in election administration. This is not going to be easy, but, where practicable and acceptable to the political parties and the electorate, the maintenance of only a small core of permanent staff, backed by well-trained temporary field staff, can reduce costs while maintaining efficiency. In a similar vein, where public servants can be co-opted to serve with the EMB during an election period (as in India), significant budgetary savings can be achieved. In given situations, it may help if the EMB was to undertake tasks profiling to determine the minimum number of persons who can perform a given function. The EMB would then be required to justify the employment of persons above that number on grounds of efficiency or transparency.

Cost Options — Voter Registration

Voter registration is an expensive process. The average cost of compiling the register in the Commonwealth is more than US\$2.50 per person, and Australia spends A\$50 million (US\$30 million) annually to maintain its register of 12 million voters. These costs are likely to increase before they begin to stabilise and come down. This in part is due to the present state of the use of technology in registration of voters. However, many EMBs employ a variety of checks and balances in the registration process and these frequently result in significant cost increases. In some jurisdictions, voter registration is conditional on possession of a national identification card (ID), which increases the costs (although the national ID card may be issued by an authority other than the EMB).

The cost of compiling and maintaining the voters' register reflects the inclusion of elements such as thumb-printing, photographs, scanning data and the issuing of voters' card. The unit cost of each of these items will vary according to specification and quality. The technology in biometrics relating to thumb printing and photographing of certain body parts is constantly improving. Such technological developments are likely to increase the reliability of voter identity and reduce costs. Election managers should guard against the use of untried technology, as experience elsewhere in the Commonwealth reveals that such use technology can result in disaster. The registration process attracts considerable manipulative practices and this is one reason why so many expensive checks and balances have to be built into the system. The EMBs should be encouraged to take strong measures to keep malpractices in the registration process to the minimum, so that the process can be kept simple and efficient.

The forms of registration may hold the clue to efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Voters' registers suffer rapid decline in accuracy if they are not properly maintained. Many EMBs revise the register annually, with a sharp cut-off date. The result is that young people who attain the qualifying age after the cut-off date are usually disfranchised, if an election is held after that date and before the next revision. In some jurisdictions, a new register of voters is prepared before each general election. This approach can be expensive. The trend in the Commonwealth is to move to continuous or rolling registration. This approach is believed to be cost-effective and may be a deterrent to 'phantom' or 'ghost' voters appearing on the register. It is difficult to offer reliable guidance to comparative costs of compiling a voters' register, since there are so many elements to factor in, depending on the level of checks and balances built into the process.

The maintenance of the register is neither easy nor cheap. It was mentioned above that it costs Australia the equivalent of approximately US\$30 million annually to maintain its register. In order to retain its accuracy, the voters' register has to be purged of the deceased, those voters who have changed their address and their names, and those who have been struck off for crime or mental illness. Those who become qualified by achieving the stipulated age or by residence should be entered in register. The purging of deceased persons present a problem for many developing countries, because there is often no reliable record of deaths. The EMBs would be greatly assisted if the record keeping in the departments responsible for registering births and deaths in these countries was computerised, so that death records could be produced on a timely basis.

New and creative ways need to be explored to reduce registration costs in the SADC region as a whole. Consideration could be given to the formulation of a procedure for regional tendering contracts to undertake specific registration tasks on behalf of EMBs. At present, some of these tasks are awarded to firms from outside the region. The private sector could be given incentives to explore the possibility of developing less complex designs for registration forms and other electoral documentation.

The Polling Process

The preparation for and conduct of polling at a general election in any country is a national event of magnitude and significance. Considerable sums of money, including foreign exchange in some cases, have to be found to enable this event to take place smoothly. Perhaps, this process offers a greater scope than others to cut costs. In order to achieve meaningful competitive acquisition of goods and services, clear procedures are necessary for the guidance of the EMBs' staff. These procedures will also serve to safeguard against unhealthy patronage practices developing in an EMB.

The key element in a strategy to manage an electoral system in a manner that would facilitate its sustainable development is the quality of the election staff. Today's election officials should embrace unreservedly the culture of impartiality and neutrality. All election officials need to undergo rigorous training and be assisted by an appropriate set of guidelines. Those officials whose task it is to acquire election materials and equipment may need specialised training in cost-saving techniques, which preserve the EMBs quality and security requirements. The training programmes for every category of staff should revolve around impartiality, efficiency and cost-effective measures to be adopted in implementing specific tasks. Cost-effectiveness should not be taken to mean resorting to short cuts, which would lead to compromising the principles on which free and fair multiparty elections are founded. Well-trained election officials should be given encouragement and incentives to continue to serve in the electoral system. Each EMB may find it useful to create a profile for each election job and keep a reliable database on each official, so that, even where he or she is employed only periodically, the data is available for use when needed.

Factors Favouring Sustainability

It is believed that there is considerable scope for the use of local goods and services in the planning and conduct of elections in many countries of the region. This strategy would reduce the amount of foreign exchange spent on elections and generate additional employment locally. Locally produced wood or cardboard, for example, could be used to make ballot boxes. Quality control mechanisms and adequate security measures would need to be taken into account. Ballot papers are printed on the premises of some EMBs and so are voters' registers. These activities, when undertaken locally, can prove to be significantly less expensive than when they are done abroad. At present, there is a belief amongst many opposition political parties that the ruling parties are capable of influencing EMBs and so they are not comfortable with certain goods and services being procured locally. The EMBs should make an urgent, conscious effort to eliminate any underlying doubts, even if they are groundless.

The number of polling stations in a country can influence costs considerably, but here careful assessment is required, since the quality of election services may depend on how far voters have to travel and how long they have to wait to vote. Polling sites are currently under scrutiny in some countries to ensure that adequate provisions are made for disabled voters and this may mean a marginal increase in costs. Mobile ballot boxes are being used more frequently, but their use is not so extensive as to contribute to significant savings. Polling sites made from inexpensive materials, such as cardboard, have reduced costs by as much as third.

It may be too early to list the various automated devices that are coming on stream to improve voting methods and reduce costs, but nevertheless their existence should be mentioned. There are now many voting and counting electronic devices that enable election staff numbers to be reduced significantly. Some of the machines offer a high degree of reliability and are resistant to electoral malpractice. Many are now capable of providing audit trail facilities. Mention should also be made of the general interest the wider electoral community is showing in voting via the Internet and in posting voters' registers on the World Wide Web.

Experience has shown that post election preservation of election materials and equipment (including motor vehicles and computers) is often neglected and equipment misappropriated. Considerable losses to EMBs are incurred in this manner. These occurrences have not gone unnoticed by donor agencies, which have been reluctant to supply such equipment. This emphasises the need for tight controls and proper monitoring of election materials and supplies.

The Counting Process

This process, along with voting, is a prime target in many countries for automation and cost reduction. However, for most EMBs manual counting will continue for some time. Dr Afari-Gyan, chair of the Ghana EMB, recently expressed the view that savings can be made, where party agents are paid by an EMB, by allowing them to serve as counting agents, after the close of the poll, to monitor the accuracy of the count by the presiding officer. According to Dr Afari-Gyan, this would avoid the need to appoint another group of paid persons to serve as counting agents. The counting process is considered to be a vulnerable event in election organisation, and should therefore be conducted in a transparent manner. This requirement of openness at all stages of the counting of ballots may limit the cost-saving measures that can be effected in relation to a manual count. Two recent events during the tallying phase of the count in a couple of Commonwealth countries have underlined the importance of transparency in the counting process. Both cases involved changes by unknown persons to some of the counting results subsequent to the statement of the figures issued by the presiding officers. This interference was intended to influence the results of the polls and in both situations the opposition parties believed that the outcome of the election was affected.

An Assessment

The immediate task of EMBs of the region is the creation of a sound foundation, which can deliver free and fair multiparty elections. For this purpose, all the financial help that can be had from friendly governments and international organisations should be encouraged. However, in anticipation of times when outside assistance is reduced, the respective national treasuries should be encouraged to meet an increased share of election costs. Where EMBs can demonstrate a track record of cost-effective management, it will put them in a strong position to win their budget approvals from Parliament or the government, as the case may be. Changes to the procedures governing the approval of and accounting for election budget expenditures may be necessary in order to make electoral development sustainable.