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Counting the Cost of Elections

How much is too much to pay for elections?

New report says effective budgeting is essential to avoid political expense.

United Nations, 18 May 2006 - In an era of political-party finance reform and multi-million-dollar campaigns, understanding what elections cost, and why, is crucial to development, especially for fragile states facing competing demands for scarce resources. The first comprehensive analysis of the cost of elections, launched in New York today, illustrates how to make the voting process more affordable, transparent and legitimate.

CORE: A Global Survey on the Cost of Registration and Elections, produced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and IFES, is a step-by-step guide to election processes around the world. It explains what measures need to be in place, from voter registration to ballot-box security, and at what price, before the first ballot is cast.

The report is a valuable tool for policy makers and election administrators who, faced with tight time-frames and high political stakes, need to clearly understand the relationship between their budgets and the election outcomes.

“We often talk about the need for ‘free and fair’ elections, but not enough about how much they cost,” said Pippa Norris, the head of UNDP’s Democratic Governance Group. “Whether an election works depends on the money available and how it is spent.”

CORE emphasizes that in states with a history of multi-party democratic experience, elections are consistently cheaper than in countries where such elections are a new undertaking. However, in emerging democracies, if reconciliation fares well, dramatic declines in the cost of elections can be expected. For example, the 1993 Cambodian election cost US\$45.50 per capita, compared with US\$2 per capita for the 2003 election.

Integrity costs, those associated with ensuring the security and transparency of an election, are reduced by investment in disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and infrastructure development, say the authors, while other electoral costs, related to personnel or the introduction of new technology, may remain constant or even increase.

CORE compares elections in different democratic environments: stable political conditions as in India and Sweden, transitional democracies such as Mexico, and conflict

and post-conflict countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and Haiti. Ten detailed case studies in all are described.

Iraq and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

One of the most recent is that of Iraq, where the 30 January 2005 election took place after over a year and a half of temporary administrations following the fall of former President Saddam Hussein. CORE shows that total polling costs in the country were \$180 million. This included delivering and retrieving 3.3 million kilograms of election material, such as polling kits, ballot boxes and voter lists, to and from more than 5,000 polling centres in the midst of severe ongoing conflict.

“Accurately measuring the cost of elections can be a difficult endeavor,” said Jeff Fischer, co-author of the report and Senior Director of the IFES Center for Transitional and Post-Conflict Governance. “Although election budgets are set by public appropriation, the total cost of elections is affected by additional factors, such as the political and security environments, that create a more complex cost structure than is considered by public accountancy alone.”

The insight provided by the report’s case studies, along with CORE’s template for assessing election costs, will benefit other fragile states preparing their budgets for upcoming elections, such as the DRC, which faces its first democratic elections in almost a half a century of independence.

“Establishing a democracy is an expensive business - especially when you consider that DRC is a country the size of Western Europe with no roads - but it is vital in the process of reconstituting a nation,” said Ross Mountain, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and UNDP Resident Representative for the DRC. “Unfortunately, elections require substantial investment up front, and as CORE highlights, we need to get that investment right.”

Preparations for the DRC’s vote in July already constitute the largest and most complex UN electoral-assistance mission ever undertaken, a US\$422.9 million joint initiative of UNDP and the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC).

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About UNDP: UNDP is the UN's global network to help people meet their development needs and build a better life. We are on the ground in more than 166 countries, working as a trusted partner with governments, civil society and the private sector to help them build their own solutions to global and national development challenges. UNDP supports an election somewhere around the globe every two weeks. www.undp.org/governance

About IFES: IFES is an international, nonprofit organization that supports the building of democratic societies. IFES offers technical assistance to strengthen civil society, elections, governance and rule of law in more than 20 countries. Since our founding in 1987, IFES has worked with election assistance and democratic development in more than 100 countries. www.ifes.org