



(5th GEO Conference in Gaborone, Botswana on 7-9 March)

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Engaging stakeholders

GEO 2011

PM Graham (Executive Director of the Institute for Democracy in Africa – Idasa)

This presentation will focus on two issues – the purposes for which election management bodies might engage stakeholders and ways of achieving this.

While everyone should have a stake in an election, it is our intention to engage those citizens who have organised themselves into one or other formation. Amongst these are non-governmental organisations (NGOs) but there are many other such formations in the private sector and in civil society, appropriately defined. In addition there are the stakeholders within political society, individual and party contestants, parties that have formed but may not be contesting the election, and individuals who are retiring from public office. All can be encouraged to have a stake in the success of the election as well as in the success of a particular party, faction or contestant.

Many election management bodies make use of contractors to deliver their services efficiently and cost effectively. Sometimes they privilege not for profit organisations in providing these services. This is a laudable approach, and requires thought and attention if it is to meet the public policy prerogatives of sustaining a not for profit sector and encouraging voluntary public work in favour of the elections. But it is a contractual relationship, and not necessarily the same as engaging stakeholders.

There are four purposes for wide spread engagement with people who could have a stake in an election. Firstly it can broaden support for the election, especially ensuring that support extends into those groups that are most marginal in society. Secondly engagement with a broad range of stakeholders ensures better and more trustworthy communication about the election and confidence in it. Thirdly, the more stakeholder groups become engaged, the larger the number of citizens who connect and come to own the election. Of course, this is not the same as employing citizens to staff the election and in particular voting stations; although finding such people may well be facilitated by a better engagement with key groups. Finally, it can reduce the workload and budget of the election management body.

I consider the definition of stakeholder to be very broad – all organised formations in society whether organised for profit, power or public good. In today's world – as it ever was - most organisations do not fit very comfortably into one or other of these boxes; but for purposes of categorisation we tend to refer to the private sector, political society or civil society. Most of us are comfortable assuming that the primary stakeholder in an election is civil society narrowly defined as the NGO community.

However, this obscures a whole set of possible stakeholders - churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and the institutions and organisations linked to or created by these bodies and their members, trade unions and professional associations, development and welfare cooperatives, social movements and membership based organisations at local level, sporting bodies and fan clubs and so on. Some of these may choose to engage in purely private activity, but under certain conditions, and elections may be one of these, many, if not all civil society organisations have a public goal. The only constraint is that they do not seek political power directly, although by definition they have different interests and their individual members have political preferences which on occasion may be transmitted into organisational political preferences.

However one must look beyond even this broad definition of civil society as the primary stakeholder. We want every organised formation which has an interest in the public good, even if they have a primary interest in making and distributing profit – the private sector; and in aggregating citizen aspirations and concerns into political power – political society (which during an election translates largely into a group of individual and party contestants) to co-operate to ensure that the election is a success.

If we want to broaden support for elections, improve communications about the elections, involve citizens in the elections and reduce the workload and budget of election authorities, then we must learn to engage these stakeholders and mobilise them in support of the elections. But how does one herd cats? How can a by definition atomised and individualistic self interested mob, competitive, adversarial, critical, noisy and sweaty be turned into an election asset.

It is not surprising that many election management bodies have resorted to a contracting approach, putting out money and soliciting support through predetermined and carefully defined work – which then goes to those who can prove that they can do it, and which can be monitored, managed, audited and evaluated. It is understandable, but disappointingly limited when an effective stakeholder management process can achieve so much more.

Picture if you can a paper page containing iron filings. It is almost impossible to organise them on the page; but place a magnet near the page as is demonstrated in science classes all over and the filings align themselves virtually of their own accord. It is this alignment that we seek when engaging stakeholders, allowing each of them to act autonomously or in collaborative forums of their own creation, but each working in a complementary way towards a set of clear goals.

In order to achieve this, election management bodies have to focus their efforts on a visible communication of clearly stated goals, on providing good and reliable information about the election to stakeholders and groups of stakeholders and to widening the number of stakeholders with whom they have a relationship of trust, legitimacy and ownership. In order to achieve this, different EMBs in different contexts will use different strategies, but will make use of pre-election orientation and briefing forums, scheduling sometimes punishing speaking diaries with stakeholders and groups of stakeholders, offering good simple and timely voter information materials for redistribution and incorporation in the media generated by stakeholders themselves, and constantly finding ways of shaping the activities of stakeholders without trying to control and co-ordinate these activities too closely. This unleashes tremendous agency, in ways which a contracting approach does not.

Of course there are some risks. Some organisations may choose to act in ways which undermine the election. There is a good chance that this would have happened anyway, and indeed it might be reduced in impact by the actions of other stakeholders. Some commercial organisations do try to make use of the election for financial advantage – but EMBs would have to consider whether a pre-election day 'rally' at the local shebeen or an election themed competition on a community radio station actually does more harm than good. No doubts there are horror stories and I am sure that people are infinitely imaginative in finding ways to co-opt an election to their own ends. But an affective engagement strategy places resources to combat bad behaviour into the community at large rather than leaving it to the EMB to police each and every problem.

The advantage of this type of broad strategy is that it provides a way of gaining access to communities that are shut off for one or other reason. Those involved with stakeholder engagement do not have to enter such communities themselves. They merely have to identify groups that do enter and align them through providing them with good information, contact with the EMB and an understanding of the goals and key values of the particular election. Finding such entry points means ensuring that EMB staff understand they can and should look to civil society broadly defined, to the private sector and to political society. It might be that a hawkers association or immigrant self help club has access; it might be a local group of clergy; or it might be a development agency. Which is best placed, and which is willing to take on the responsibility of acting in the public good?

Developing this widespread public support for elections, building public confidence and spreading information rapidly to and from a range of niche groups by using already existing and trusted associations and networks will not be possible at election time, especially if elections are called at short notice, unless EMBs have cultivated contacts with potential stakeholders and developed a culture of openness and participation between elections. Unfortunately, with the exception of party liaison committees established by some EMBs, there are very few ongoing contacts outside the election period itself. These need to be created and maintained possibly through 'off season' training courses, conferences, advisory groups on key quality concerns and through attention to remedial action noted by previous election observation missions. The intention is to create regular and broad interaction between the EMB and potential stakeholders.

This presentation must perforce be brief. There are two last points to be made as rejoinders to possible questions. The first relates to the numbers of potential stakeholders and the difficulty of reaching them on a regular basis. Apart from the potential which now exists through social media for establishing communication and for distributing messages and materials, EMBs will want to create incentives for stakeholders to group themselves in various platforms. It is highly unlikely that a single platform can be created, but interlocking platforms can be encouraged through the provision of small grants – not to be confused with contracts – and through the convening power of the EMB itself. As a statutory body it can convene clergy in an area when no individual clergy person can do so, as it can convene the broad business community when there are competing chambers serving different class and commercial interests. This convening power is under used in my opinion.

The second relates to fair service. EMBs have to provide a service equitably to all citizens and to contestants. This means that they have to understand what service they can and should offer, and ensure that it is provided universally. For this reason they may confine themselves to particular forms of voter information. Civil and political societies speak to more targeted constituencies, and they can and do provide more complex messages. Rather than shy away from such groups, EMBs will want to encourage these as ways of heightening interest in an election, and increasing trust in the electoral system. We are not seeking to brand every intervention with the election or EMB brand, but rather to draw in a broad group of stakeholders who, by being encouraged to think of themselves as participants in ensuring a good, fair, free and credible election unleash their own creativity and energy infused with the messages of the EMB and shaped by the stakeholder engagement process that the EMB has undertaken throughout the election cycle.