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Elections Assistance: A Case Study from Nigeria's 2015 Elections

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USAID Support for Nigeria's 2015 Elections

BACKGROUND

On Saturday, March 28 and Saturday, April 11, 2015, Nigeria held elections for president and vice president, state governors, and bicameral national and state legislatures. The elections were Nigeria's crowning political achievement of 2015, and culminated in the first successful democratic challenge of an incumbent president in the country's history. Over many months, millions of citizens voted, observed, and worked the polls, engaged in meaningful debate, pledged nonviolence, and fulfilled that pledge. President Goodluck Jonathan's concession to President-elect Muhammadu Buhari, prior to the official announcement of the result, will be remembered as a signature moment in the consolidation of Nigeria's democracy.

With over 800 election-related deaths and over 65,000 people displaced by electoral violence in 2011, Nigerian citizens, U.S. Embassy personnel and other international observers were concerned about high levels of violence during the 2015 election period.¹ Yet in 2015, Nigeria experienced historically low violence before, during, and after the elections. USAID partner opinion surveys show Nigerians felt the process overall was credible, despite its flaws, and the results reflected the will of the voters.

Two years before the elections, the USAID/Nigeria Office of Peace and Democratic Governance (PDG) re-designed its electoral and political processes portfolio to adapt it to the changing political climate. The previous mechanism, a Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) cooperative agreement, had been in place for nearly a decade and had funded the work of three main implementing partners. Rather than renew this mechanism, USAID/Nigeria sought to put in place a new elections portfolio that would address the evolving needs of the electoral system. In coordination with the conflict mitigation team, democracy, rights and governance (DRG) officers incorporated conflict mitigation into the new elections program design for the first time.

USAID developed a complex program that would support: (1) the Nigerian Independent National Electoral Commission to conduct credible elections; (2) Nigeria's largest civil society domestic election monitoring organization to monitor and report out on the elections using parallel vote tabulation (PVT) methodology; and (3) political party development. While the Request for Applications (RFA) did not specifically require programs to address violence as a primary objective, it did request that all applications include proposed strategies for ensuring all project activities were conflict sensitive. Rather than identifying "non-violence" or "election-related violence mitigation" as primary objectives, all three implementing partners promoted peaceful participation in electoral and political processes across all of their activities.

¹ Data on 2011 election-related violence from Human Rights Watch. See <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800>.

USAID/Nigeria designed, competed and awarded three cooperative agreements in the amount of \$50.5 million over five years, including co-funding of \$20 million from the UK Department for International Development (DFID):²

- 1) Support to electoral reforms and the Independent National Electoral Commission (\$21.5 million, including \$11 million from DFID, implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES])
- 2) Domestic election monitoring through a parallel vote tabulation (\$24 million, including \$9 million from DFID, implemented by the National Democratic Institute [NDI])
- 3) Support to political parties (\$5 million, implemented by CEPPS/IRI [International Republican Institute])

The three projects were awarded one year prior to the elections.

At this time, USAID/Nigeria began coordinating elections and conflict mitigation development partner and non-governmental organization (NGO) programs, including special elections conflict mitigation programming and peace messaging. USAID led other development partners in discussing the need for unified diplomatic peace messaging condemning violence. In coordination with the U.S. Embassy Political and Public Affairs Sections, the development partner community, and other diplomatic missions, USAID developed peace messaging, with an accompanying policy of visa sanctions for advocates and perpetrators of violence.³ As part of U.S. efforts to promote a peaceful outcome, through his speeches, media interviews, and meetings with Nigerian officials, the ambassador called for all political participants to take a pledge of non-violence. Other like-minded ambassadors also pushed for non-violent conduct.

IFES provided large-scale technical support to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), assisting INEC with the introduction of new technologies, such as permanent voter cards and electronic card readers, and the management of traditional elections activities such as voter education. The multi-media “Vote Not Fight” campaign, led by Nigerian musician 2face Idibia in partnership with NDI, is estimated based on independent listenership surveys to have reached over 62 million Nigerians via radio and social media. IRI facilitated the Abuja Peace Accord, a commitment by candidates to refrain from instigating violence regardless of the outcome of the poll, signed by then President Goodluck Jonathan and current President Muhammadu Buhari. These efforts and U.S. long-term diplomatic engagement and outreach to stakeholders at all levels contributed to the largely calm, tolerant, and peaceful manner in which the elections were conducted.

Domestic monitors found the Election Day accreditation,⁴ voting, and counting processes credible and peaceful. The performance of INEC was fundamental to this successful

² For more details, see Annex 1.

³ U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry reinforced both the peace messaging and the visa sanctions in his public remarks in Lagos on January 25, 2015: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/01/236287.htm>.

⁴ As used in Nigeria and this report, the term “accreditation” refers to the first step of a two-step process on Election Day for voters to be able to exercise their right to vote: first their identity must be checked against

outcome. In turn, USAID's long-term assistance to INEC through IFES, including technical assistance on poll worker training, electoral operations, voter education, strategic communications and outreach, and security coordination, was critical to INEC's success.

Through NDI and Nigerian civil society partner The Monitoring Group (TMG), USAID supported the training and deployment of over 3,000 citizen monitors in all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory for the presidential election. In addition, the U.S. Embassy sent staff to 18 states plus the FCT to observe the elections. TMG and other domestic monitors and international observers found that across the country the polling process, despite delays and challenges, afforded Nigerians a credible opportunity to exercise their right to vote. Late arrival of materials and INEC officials in some parts of the country, a slow accreditation process, and the inability of newly introduced voter card readers to consistently validate voters' fingerprints posed challenges, but these issues did not systematically disadvantage any candidate or party. Nigerian voters waited patiently and with determination for long hours to cast their votes.

TMG leveraged its 3,000 monitors to conduct a PVT ("quick count"), using a statistically valid sample of polling stations across the country to independently confirm the results of the 2015 presidential contest. Suspicion of fraud and fear of widespread rigging have been regular features of past Nigerian elections. It is a testament to the soundness of the quick count methodology, the competence of the monitors and analysts trained to execute it, and the quality of communications and public outreach, that it was widely viewed as a high quality source of independent information and verification throughout the electoral cycle. Perhaps even more significantly, the PVT identified specific states in the South-South region where the turnout was likely inflated and logistical flaws delayed polling in certain locations. This information about fraud and inefficiency will be useful to INEC as it addresses these shortcomings to improve future elections.

Long-term diplomatic engagement from the U.S. ambassador, USAID, and other elements of the U.S. Embassy was critical to U.S. support for the 2015 Nigerian elections. Due to this engagement, internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the three northeastern states were able to participate in the elections. A key concern of the United States and other stakeholders was to ensure that Nigerians displaced due to the Boko Haram insurgency would have the opportunity to exercise their right to vote. Through USAID's support to IFES, in December 2014 INEC established an IDP Task Force. The Task Force was instrumental in advising INEC to set up special voting centers in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States to facilitate distribution of permanent voter cards and voting for IDPs living in the camps and surrounding host communities. Most observer reports about the process were positive, and news media highlighted the voting centers as sites of tearful reunions of families and friends separated by the conflict.

Buttressing the elections program, USAID/Nigeria's conflict mitigation program, TOLERANCE (Training of Leaders for Religious and National Co-existence), carried out a number of activities aimed at preventing violence before, during and after the 2015

the voter register using their permanent voter card (PVC) and a card reader (this is the step referred to in Nigeria as "accreditation"), and then they can vote.

elections.⁵ This included interfaith dialogues, media programs, and capacity building training on conflict prevention and management to various stakeholders such as religious and community leaders, women, youth and people living with disabilities (PLWD).

In addition, the program's community-based Early Warning System (EWS) network received specialized training on election violence in the areas of monitoring, reporting, and quick interventions. Building on the EWS, TOLERANCE set up a situation room specifically for the elections. Conflict prevention experts went to flash point states in the North. They worked with key stakeholders to monitor, identify, and respond to violence.

The U.S. Government (USG) has worked to nurture Nigeria's democratic development since 1999. The USAID/Nigeria budget across all technical sectors is approximately \$475 million annually, although PDG programs are only about 2.5 percent of this. Given this investment and the potential lessons emerging from the Nigeria experience for USAID support elsewhere for elections and conflict mitigation, the Mission authored this case study.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are a few key factors that can explain why the USAID/Nigeria Mission was successful in its efforts in assisting the Nigerian people in their pursuit of credible and peaceful elections in 2015. The first factor is that the USG expressed a clear, unified vision across all relevant agencies. Second, Nigerians and Nigerian civil society took the lead, particularly in calling for violence-free, clean elections. Third, the USG along with other diplomatic missions placed immense pressure on political parties and their leaders as well as government officials, to condemn any sort of electoral or political violence. This summary reviews the lessons learned from the U.S. Mission's support of the 2015 Nigeria elections, which included presidential, gubernatorial and legislative contests. Despite the concerns within much of the diplomatic community regarding the potential for violence, Nigerians successfully managed the process in a manner that resulted in significant reductions in election-related violence compared to previous election cycles and the first-ever peaceful transition of power from a governing party to an opposition party. In 2011 there were 800 election-related deaths and over 65,000 people internally displaced by electoral violence. In 2015 there were 149 reported deaths, an 81 percent decrease in election-related violence.⁶ This case study documents the Mission's vision and offers lessons learned for other USAID missions and U.S. embassies pursuing the promotion of credible and peaceful elections.

The Nigeria experience recommends that USAID Missions consider the following in the run-up to an election:

⁵ For additional information on how existing programming was made conflict sensitive, see Annex 2.

⁶ There are no comprehensive official data on election-related violence. The figure cited here is a compilation of two reports, one from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and one from the Rivers State Commission of Inquiry (which was led by the NHRC chairman). See <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/176802-58-nigerians-killed-2015-pre-election-violence-far-rights-commission.html> and <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/183463-19-people-killed-monthly-in-rivers-election-violence.html>.

Planning and Coordination

1. ***Plan in advance.*** An election is not a single event but rather a process. Long-term design should be considered as opposed to quick fixes to address immediate problems. Ideally, planning should start at least two years in advance of the election date, with buy in from a range of stakeholders across the USG interagency, the development partner community and the host country. Funding for electoral support should be provided in the bilateral budget at least two years in advance, with funding levels anticipated to increase as the elections approach. Moreover, deployment of additional staff, whether contracted or on temporary duty (TDY), should be planned in the run-up to an election. USAID/Nigeria was fortunate to have continuous TDY support from both pillar and regional bureaus.
2. ***Have a clear Mission vision regarding the elections.*** In Nigeria's case, the Mission was clear that Nigerians should own the process and the USG should reinforce peace messaging.
3. ***Conduct intensive coordination within the Embassy, USAID/Washington, other interagency actors, and development partners.*** Coordinate elections support with the USG interagency supporting elections, other diplomatic missions, other development partner agencies, all USAID implementing partners from all sectors (not just DRG partners), USAID/Washington, and the State Department. In Nigeria, USAID had regular biweekly meetings with the U.S. Embassy interagency team, the Canadian High Commission, DFID, the United Nations Development Programme, the European Union, NDI, IRI, IFES, other development agencies' implementing partners, the Open Society Institute for West Africa, and the Macarthur Foundation. Issues discussed included permanent voter card (PVC) readers and voter accreditation, PVC distribution, electoral security coordination, electoral violence, and voter education to ensure everyone had the same information and was coordinating and not duplicating efforts.

In addition, many of these same stakeholders created an Election Scenario Planning Working Group. USAID/Nigeria hosted other members of the Peace and Security Working Group (PSWG), a multi-development partner group comprised of conflict specialists, to develop election scenario plans. At this meeting, working group members together with USAID election implementing partners and other key stakeholders such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the U.S. Consulate in Lagos, and the State Department Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (S/CSO) developed six scenarios for planning and collaboration on election conflict prevention. The scenarios were used by implementing partners, embassies and development agencies as a tool to expand and guide planning for a range of possible electoral outcomes and contingencies.

4. ***Ensure effective coordination on peace messaging with actors and counterparts in the international community.*** USAID worked with the Political and Public Affairs Sections of the U.S. Embassy to ensure that the U.S. ambassador's and many of the

like-minded ambassadors' messaging aligned. It was particularly crucial to engage political parties and candidates in this outreach effort, and USAID and the USG used strategic messaging to inspire confidence and condemn inflammatory rhetoric through the ambassador's non-violence pledge, the Vote Not Fight Campaign, and support of the Abuja Peace Accord.

Program Implementation

5. ***Be flexible.*** In Nigeria elections were postponed by six weeks. USAID and implementing partners used this as an opportunity to address gaps and adjust if necessary.
6. ***Establish trust with the host country electoral commission well in advance.*** USAID had a long-standing relationship with INEC. If the host country has a plan in place, then the Mission should choose wisely which issues to raise with the election management body. In the case of Nigeria, it was not in the USG's interest to publicly promote manual accreditation as an alternative if the PVC readers did not work. If it had advocated for manual accreditation in advance of the elections, the USG could have inadvertently aligned itself with a particular political party that stood to gain from this position.
7. ***Conduct an electoral preparedness workshop for all USAID implementing partners.*** Six months prior to the elections, the USAID PDG office invited all USAID implementing partners from all technical sectors to discuss the safety and security of their staff during operations in times of adversity such as elections. USAID made sure all implementing partner staff members were aware of what to expect, and to put in place contingency plans to minimize impact on program implementation. The workshop was an opportunity to ask and answer questions, dispel myths and begin creating plans to mitigate any potential interruptions or disturbances brought about by pre-election concerns or post-election conflict. USAID and its election implementing partners provided information and tips on how to adjust programming and administration to adapt to security concerns and any anticipated disruptions from elections such as political rallies, potential road and institution closures, crowded areas, etc.
8. ***Deploy U.S. Embassy observation teams.*** Nearly 100 U.S. Embassy personnel joined a myriad of international observation missions and domestic monitoring organizations in reporting that the elections were, on balance, credible and peaceful, with significant improvements in 2015 over the previous presidential election in 2011.

Technical Recommendations/Issue Advocacy

9. ***Emphasize peace messaging and conflict prevention.*** The 2015 Nigerian elections demonstrate that activities should instill confidence in the electorate, provide support to election management bodies and be conflict sensitive. USAID/Nigeria developed a robust portfolio that supported not only credible elections but also

peace messaging and conflict prevention efforts, particularly through civic engagement. USAID worked with the Vote Not Fight Campaign led by Nigerian singer and celebrity 2face Idibia to promote peaceful elections. The campaign targeted youth and politicians across the country through music and an on-line pledge for non-violence. The U.S. ambassador's call for peaceful elections and public pledges for non-violence played a significant role in shaping the Vote Not Fight Campaign. Civil society and this Nigerian hip hop star also collaborated with INEC to promote violence-free elections. For example, in October 2014 the USAID Mission Director, INEC Chairman Attahiru Jega, and 2face Idibia discussed non-violence and voting at a public demonstration at INEC of the newly-procured permanent voter card readers.

10. ***Advocate for interventions that enfranchise as many legitimate voters as possible.*** For example, USAID and the State Department strongly advocated for IDP voting and was able to convince INEC despite it not being a commission priority. By having chosen which issues to raise, the Mission was able to get significant buy-in from the commission to allow for IDP voting. In addition, PDG partners coordinated with Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) partners to share knowledge, develop a strategy and manage expectations regarding IDP voting.
11. ***Address electoral security.*** USAID and the State Department both brought electoral security experts to work alongside IFES to assess electoral security preparations. IFES hired a full time security consultant to assist INEC in its security coordination across agencies and levels of the Nigerian government. Security experts worked on: pre-election security, election day security, and post-election security (i.e., likely flashpoints for all three stages); allocation of security personnel (identification and filling of gaps); status of training for electoral security providers and any outstanding gaps; mechanisms for early warning and early response to incidents of violence; and transparency and efficiency in security sector governance.
12. ***Understand technology's benefits and limits.*** Technology is a tool, not a panacea. As learned from Kenya and other African elections, if the host country is supporting the use of new technology, USAID should work with stakeholders to understand any adverse impact of that technology if it fails. For example in the case of Nigeria, the card readers were very new to INEC and their staff. USAID took advantage of the six-week postponement to have implementing partners test the new system and train staff. INEC had a backup plan in the event the card readers did not work.
13. ***Structure support for the period after the elections to ensure continuity of operations.*** Often the USG, the Washington policy community, and others declare an election a success and conclude that election partners have completed their work. Because election processes must be institutionalized within a country, election support should not be dropped as soon as one successful election is completed. In Nigeria, USAID is supporting INEC to develop a road map for 2019 based on the lessons learned from the 2015 elections.

CONCLUSION

Elections are complex processes; Nigeria's experience in 2015 was no different. Of course, many of the factors that made Nigeria's 2015 elections successful were exogenous to the U.S. Government, and above all the Nigerian people deserve the most credit for this success. What was within USG and USAID control was the planning, coordination, implementation and content of our programs. This case study has summarized the lessons USAID/Nigeria learned from that experience. In designing and implementing these programs, the Mission had learned from the information amassed over decades on USAID electoral assistance, and in turn wishes to contribute to that body of knowledge. Although each country's political context and climate will vary, the 2015 Nigerian elections can serve as one of many reference points for USAID missions in the future, particularly where concerns exist about the credibility of elections, the potential for violence, and the political rights of the internally displaced.

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Annex 1

Nigeria's 2015 Elections: USAID-Supported Activities⁷

IFES – support to INEC; \$21.5 million over five years (including \$11 million from DFID):

- INEC's election management system (EMS), which manages and tracks:
 - election day support
 - election day logistics
 - election staff management
- Voter education
- Training of trainers for approximately 750,000 ad-hoc staff
- Electoral security support (recruitment of an embedded consultant)
- Communications support (recruitment of an embedded consultant)
- Support to INEC's implementation of Election Operation Support Centers (EOSCs) in all 36 states and the FCT
- IDP voting
- Support to the development of INEC's graphic design center
- Training for State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) on conducting local government elections
- Support to INEC on political finance monitoring
- Support to INEC's election observer briefings and de-briefings

NDI – support to civil society; \$24 million over five years (including \$9 million from DFID):

- Domestic election monitoring
- Parallel vote tabulations (PVTs), otherwise known in Nigeria as “quick counts”
- Capacity building of Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), a nonpartisan civil society domestic election monitoring organization
- Media training on understanding and reporting on PVTs
- Early Warning System reports (A conflict early warning system to leverage domestic election monitoring efforts. Deployed observers reported on rumors, violent incidents, security force actions, and civilian-led mitigation efforts. These reports fed into a long-term reporting system.)
- Vote Not Fight Campaign, which reached an estimated 62 million Nigerians via radio, BBC and social media (estimate based on independent listenership surveys)
- Voter education outreach to marginalized groups, including IDPs

⁷ The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) co-funds both “Support for Electoral Reforms” and “Electoral Empowerment of Civil Society” activities implemented by IFES and NDI, respectively.

IRI – support to political party reform; \$5 million over three years (all USAID funding):

- Candidate debate preparation
- Training on fielding and management of party poll agents
- Women and youth candidate training
- Inclusion of people living with disabilities (PLWDs) into political processes
- Promotion of campaign finance reform
- Political party conflict assessments
- Seminars on political advertising, perception building and voter education
- Manifesto Hour discussion series broadcast on radio, to promote issue-based campaigns
- Constituency outreach to small and medium-sized business owners
- Workshop on party primaries

Annex 2

Nigeria's 2015 Elections: Steps Taken to Integrate Conflict Mitigation

1. **June 2013:** Drafting of elections concept paper and Project Appraisal Document (PAD) for the new elections project.
2. **September 2013:** Conflict mitigation team reviews the elections PAD. Research conducted to identify best practices in conflict mitigation and elections. USAID/Nigeria evaluations and assessments reviewed. Key findings from evaluations highlight the need to focus on mitigating violence particularly around elections, which were noted as conflict flashpoints.
3. **September 2013:** In preparation for the new U.S. ambassador's arrival, the conflict team put peace messages on the list of urgent items to discuss. The Peace and Security Working Group (a monthly conflict meeting attended by development partners and NGOs) came to consensus on key messages, which were discussed with the U.S. Embassy's Political and Public Affairs Sections. There was further discussion on possible reinforcement of the messages, specifically imposing visa sanctions on those who instigate and commit violence. When the ambassador arrived, he quickly adopted both suggestions, and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry later reinforced both the peace messaging and the visa sanctions in his public remarks in January 2015.
4. **Commenced in October 2013:** USAID/Nigeria's conflict mitigation program TOLERANCE (Training of Leaders for Religious and National Co-existence), carries out a number of activities aimed at preventing violence before, during and after the 2015 elections. This includes interfaith dialogues, media programs, and capacity building training on conflict management and prevention to various stakeholders such as religious and community leaders, women, youth and people living with disabilities (PLWD).
5. **December 2013:** Elections officer arrives at post, and meets with conflict team.
6. **Commenced in January 2014:** Development partners and NGOs from the Peace and Security Working Group coordinate and plan elections-related programming, undertaking a continuous review of gaps in conflict mitigation programming. Based on information about the previous and current elections, conflict scenarios developed for key state hot spots and the federal elections, including recommendations to help all stakeholders augment programming. Joint messages developed so all key development partners could speak with a united voice.
7. **March 2014:** Do No Harm training provided to USAID staff and all implementing partners. Elections scenarios shared with implementing partners to help them prepare for potential election-related disruption to programming and operations.

8. **April 2014:** New elections program cooperative agreements signed.
9. **May 2014:** Elections implementing partners and the conflict team meet to discuss how to operationally integrate conflict mitigation in programming.
10. **October 2014:** Elections and conflict mitigation workshop for all USAID implementing partners on election contingency planning. In conjunction with the USAID Program Office, a workshop is also held for humanitarian assistance partners on IDP voting.
11. **During the 2015 Presidential and Gubernatorial Elections:** TOLERANCE program's community-based Early Warning System (EWS) network received specialized training on election violence in the areas of monitoring, reporting, and quick interventions. Building on the EWS, TOLERANCE set up a situation room specifically for the elections. Conflict prevention experts went to flash point states in the North. They worked with key stakeholders to monitor, identify, and respond to violence.