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# USAID ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PROCESSES ADAPTATIONS DURING COVID-19

## FINAL REPORT

### JULY 2023

Prepared under Contract GS-10F-0033M / 7200AA18M00016, Tasking N077

# DRG LEARNING, EVALUATION, AND RESEARCH ACTIVITY II (DRG-LER II) USAID ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PROCESSES ADAPTATIONS DURING COVID-19

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## ACRONYMS

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| ANFREL  | The Asian Network for Free Elections                             |
| CEPPS   | The Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening |
| CeSID   | The Center for Free Elections and Democracy                      |
| CMEV    | The Center for Monitoring Election Violence                      |
| CRTA    | The Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability        |
| CSO     | Civil Society Organization                                       |
| ECC     | Election Coordination Committee                                  |
| ECSL    | Election Commission of Sri Lanka                                 |
| EMB     | Electoral Management Body  |
| EPP     | Elections and Political Processes                                |
| ICT     | Information and Communications Technology                        |
| IFES    | The International Foundation for Electoral Systems               |
| IP      | Implementing Partner   |
| IREDD   | The Institute for Research and Democratic Development            |
| IRI     | The International Republican Institute                           |
| ITLA    | Instituto Tecnológico de las Américas                            |
| KII     | Key Informant Interview  |
| LAC     | Latin America and the Caribbean                                  |
| NDI     | The National Democratic Institute                                |
| PAFFREL | People's Action for Free and Fair Elections                      |
| PPE     | Personal Protective Equipment                                    |
| SVA     | Special Voting Arrangement                                       |
| USAID   | The United States Agency for International Development           |

# I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## STUDY OVERVIEW

This report examines how USAID and its implementing partners (IPs) adapted elections and political processes (EPP) programs in response to the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> It documents the principal adaptations, factors that facilitated and hindered them, and lessons learned from the experience. The report's findings and recommendations are designed to inform preparedness within USAID and partner organizations for future crises that disrupt elections around the world.

The report draws on two data sources. First, the study team conducted a desk review of the existing literature on elections during COVID-19, particularly those held in 2020 and 2021. Second, the team conducted in-depth research based on key informant interviews (KIIs) with USAID and IPs in four focus countries (Liberia, the Dominican Republic, Serbia, and Sri Lanka) and with global experts and HQ staff. As described below, the team chose the four case study countries with USAID to ensure the inclusion of cases from different regions and at different levels of democratic development. Given the report's focus on USAID-supported activities, it does not offer a comprehensive account of all types of adaptations necessitated by COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the findings and recommendations should have broad relevance to the community of organizations and actors interested in supporting democratic elections around the world.

The challenge of holding elections during COVID-19 was immense. Government authorities in countries scheduled to hold electoral contests faced the difficult dilemma of whether to hold elections as planned or postpone them, particularly during 2020 when little guidance was available about the disease and prevention measures. Electoral management bodies (EMBs) and health officials had to devise safety protocols for election day and pre-election activities and procure personal protective equipment (PPE), often with limited prior experience or expertise upon which to draw. In many cases, EMBs had to develop or expand special voting arrangements (SVAs) to accommodate citizens in quarantine or self-isolation. EMBs and civil society organizations (CSOs) needed to revise voter education materials to include health and safety measures, in addition to more traditional themes, and shift toward online approaches in place of in-person gatherings. Nonpartisan citizen (domestic) and international election observers were often unable to rely on time-tested approaches, instead adopting remote or hybrid strategies for conducting pre-election assessments, recruiting and training observers, and monitoring polling stations and tally centers—all while minimizing the health risks for their own personnel and volunteers. More broadly, the pandemic also raised fears that anti-democratic incumbents would exploit COVID-19 to roll back democratic gains by extending their hold on power, clamping down on opposition and the media, and limiting scrutiny of electoral malfeasance. Thus, for USAID and IPs the

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<sup>1</sup> USAID commissioned this research through the DDI/DRG center in collaboration with the Bureau of Policy, Planning and Learning's Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research (PPL/LER), as part of a series of learning activities related to USAID's COVID-19 Learning Agenda.

<sup>2</sup> An extensive literature documents the challenges related to holding elections during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides recommendations for donor agencies, IPs, and government counterparts. Some notable contributions include: James, Toby S., Alistair Clark, and Erik Asplund, eds. 2023. "Elections During Emergencies and Crises: Lessons for Electoral Integrity from the Covid-19 Pandemic." Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA. Alihodžić, Sead et al. 2021. "Electoral Processes: Navigating and Emerging from Crisis." Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA Global State of Democracy Thematic Paper 2021. IFES. 2020. "Featured Elections Held and Mitigating Measures Taken During COVID-19." Arlington, VA: IFES. Zamfir, Ionel, and Tessa Fardel. 2020. "Impact of the Pandemic on Elections Around the World: From Safety Concerns to Political Crises." European Parliamentary Research Service.

challenge was to devise strategies for protecting the integrity of elections, supporting EMBs charged with implementing elections during COVID-19, and forestalling democratic erosion.

## KEY FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

- 1. USAID and IPs successfully adapted program activities in response to COVID-19.**

Despite the enormous challenges, USAID and implementing partners—including international agencies and local civil society groups—were remarkably successful in adapting project activities, budgets, and workplans. IPs developed novel strategies to keep activities on track, often muddling through without clear guidance or direct prior experience. Individuals at all levels redoubled their efforts, in many cases working long hours and putting themselves at risk to get the job done. Respondents consulted for this report uniformly noted that modified activities worked well in achieving key objectives. This is a testament to the dedication and devotion of the many individuals and organizations working to support democracy’s advance throughout the world.
- 2. The ability to adapt to COVID-19 was facilitated by strong relationships between USAID, IPs, CSOs, and government counterparts built on shared interests, a history of collaboration, and a high level of trust.**

The trust between USAID and IPs allowed USAID to have confidence that changes to workplans and budgets were made in good faith and with the intention of serving program goals effectively. It also meant that USAID could shift to virtual forms of communication and oversight in place of more direct, in-person monitoring. For IPs, close working relationships with USAID staff, particularly at the Mission level, made it possible to rapidly alter activity workplans and budgets as election timelines and conditions evolved due to COVID-19. The strong ties between USAID and its partners were generally more important for facilitating adaptations than other factors. Missions and IPs typically did not seek or obtain additional funding, and despite some exceptions, these actors generally did not have contingency plans in place prior to the onset of the pandemic. The experience during COVID-19 suggests that creating and maintaining close working relationships with core partners is the most important strategy for building resilience in elections and political processes programming.
- 3. COVID-19 accelerated ICT-based innovation.**

Health and safety restrictions that limited in-person gatherings and travel forced USAID and IPs to shift to online and virtual strategies, accelerating ICT-based innovations in several areas, including election observation, voter education, data collection, and others. International observers moved to remote and hybrid strategies for pre-election assessments and election-day monitoring. Citizen observation groups developed new web-based and remote methods of training election monitors and collecting election-day information. Local partners relied more heavily on telephone-based surveys in place of face-to-face polls and conducted focus groups virtually rather than in person. These innovations accelerated the development of tools that will continue to be used after the pandemic recedes. At the same time, the potential for ICT-based innovation was greater in more economically developed areas with higher internet and smartphone penetration. Thus, in Liberia, local partners had to rely on in-person training sessions for citizen observers during the pandemic because internet access in many areas was limited, while partners in Serbia and Sri Lanka were able to create novel, web-based platforms for observer training and data collection. While ICT-based tools are creating new opportunities for

election support activities, the adoption of these platforms also increases the digital divide within and between countries.

4. **In-person activities will remain a critical component of election assistance programming.** Despite the success in shifting to online and remote platforms, IPs noted that many key aspects of election assistance are best achieved through direct, in-person contact. For example, international observation missions will rely heavily on in-person travel when possible going forward. International partners noted that developing new partnerships with EMBs is difficult without in-country travel to establish relationships and directly observe capabilities and needs. In-country IPs also noted that in some cases in-person trainings will continue to be preferable to online methods. For example, in Serbia, training political party agents as poll watchers includes simulation of election-day procedures that is best done in person rather than online. Respondents also noted that relationship-building at all levels is more challenging through virtual interactions.
5. **Contextual factors hindered efforts to adapt programming to the needs of marginalized groups.** USAID and IPs sought to ensure that program adaptations responded to the needs of marginalized and at-risk groups, including those in quarantine or self-isolation, the immune-compromised, those with disabilities, and other historically marginalized communities. Despite successes in some countries, government counterparts in other cases were unable or unwilling to implement measures needed to accommodate such groups. For example, in Sri Lanka's August 2020 election, a rigid legal framework made it impossible for the EMB to expand special voting arrangements for target populations. In Serbia's June 2020 election, government actors did not consult marginalized groups prior to the election, and it appears that no special provisions were adopted on election day. Moreover, because government health and safety rules for the election were announced just six days before the poll in Serbia, USAID-funded IPs were unable to develop voter education materials tailored to specific communities, with the exception of the deaf and hearing-impaired viewers.<sup>3</sup>
6. **COVID-19 led to extensive managerial adaptations in day-to-day operations but minor changes to contracts and grants.** COVID-19 completely upended day-to-day operations, forcing USAID and IPs to shift to remote work, conduct meetings online rather than in person, and make many other personal and organizational changes. Individuals faced extraordinary challenges and rose to the occasion, finding new and creative ways to keep project activities moving forward. IPs revised workplans and budgets in response to election postponements and health and safety restrictions that limited in-person gatherings and travel. Yet, most Missions and IPs did not seek or obtain additional funds for election-related activities or require major contractual modifications beyond no-cost extensions. USAID's standard operating procedures proved sufficiently flexible to allow for the managerial adaptations necessitated by COVID-19.

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<sup>3</sup> In Serbia, IFES supported the EMB in producing a public safety video that included sign language and subtitles, increasing its reach to deaf and hearing-impaired viewers, though other voter education materials could not be produced in special formats (e.g., braille) due to time constraints.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USAID

The report offers five recommendations to USAID that were developed by the study team based on the key findings and conclusions outlined above, suggestions conveyed to the team during interviews with Mission personnel, IPs, and CSOs, and the extensive literature included in the desk review. The recommendations are tailored to USAID leadership but may have relevance to other donor agencies and IPs.

- 1. Continue to invest in building close relationships with key stakeholders.** The ability to adapt to crises that interrupt elections and related activities is facilitated by strong relationships between USAID, IPs, local CSOs, and government counterparts. USAID should appreciate that while relationship-building is important in and of itself, it is also critical for crisis mitigation and response.
- 2. Invest in promising ICT-based innovations that emerged from the COVID-19 response.** USAID should invest in strategies and tools that have the potential to be replicated and adopted in a contextually appropriate manner. For example, the online observer training platform developed in Serbia offers a flexible platform that could be adapted for use in other, similar contexts. USAID should collaborate with IPs to identify similar innovations and provide support for adapting and sharing them among partners and locations when contextually appropriate. This might entail, for example, convening a symposium (remotely or in person) on ICT-based innovations for election support and/or providing funding specifically for this purpose to international partner agencies. At the same time, it is important to recognize that ICT-based approaches should complement—not replace—more traditional in-person approaches that remain essential for building and maintaining strong relationships and conducting some types of training, education, and observation activities, particularly in less developed countries where internet and smartphone access is lower.
- 3. Maintain and expand the flexibility needed for crisis response.** Nearly all respondents noted that a critical aspect of their ability to adapt to the challenges posed by COVID-19 was the flexible nature of their awards with USAID, which allowed for shifting workplans and budgets as needed. Respondents also expressed a high degree of satisfaction with USAID staff, particularly at the Mission level, for helping to facilitate and support programmatic adaptations. The close working relationships, particularly between Mission staff and local IPs, helped smooth the process of making necessary changes. At the same time, some respondents did experience operational challenges related to funding. USAID could explore ways to mitigate against this risk if activities are put on hold due to unexpected shocks. This could include encouraging or requiring partners to budget for crisis contingencies in awards and/or building contingency expenses into Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreements (NICRAs).
- 4. Take advantage of the window of opportunity created by COVID-19 to encourage the adoption of legislative reforms and special voting arrangements.** Many countries expanded special voting arrangements during the pandemic, which proved to be valuable tools for facilitating election participation, particularly for marginal groups. USAID should expand support to document the experience with special voting arrangements, outline best practices, and support organizations working to introduce or make permanent such provisions. At the same time, COVID-19 revealed important legislative shortcomings; constitutions in some countries were too inflexible to allow for

justifiable postponements or provided insufficient guidelines for how decisions about postponement should be made. USAID should consider providing support for efforts to document these shortcomings, developing guidelines for legislative reform, and funding local partners working to assist legislatures in making reforms.

5. **Support reforms that address the needs of marginalized communities.** USAID should support efforts to identify potential electoral reforms and programs that benefit marginalized groups during national crises, based on lessons learned during COVID-19. This might include supporting advocacy for the adoption or expansion of SVAs that increase opportunities for electoral participation and that are particularly important for groups facing barriers on election day. USAID could enhance support for the development and dissemination of tailored voter education materials for marginalized groups. Additionally, during future crises, USAID should ask IPs how they are addressing the needs of marginalized groups in developing response plans. Relatedly, USAID and IPs should ensure that activity plans for addressing the needs of vulnerable and marginalized populations provide details about the specific groups targeted for inclusion, rather than relying on generic, boilerplate language.

## 2. STUDY PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to examine how USAID and implementing partners adapted elections and political processes programming in response to COVID-19. It aims to identify lessons learned and to support a shared understanding within USAID and between USAID and implementing partners of how to improve programmatic resilience to external shocks.

This study addresses the following inter-related research questions (RQs).

### Overview of the Impact of COVID-19 on Elections

- **RQ1.** In what ways were elections affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

### Programmatic Adaptations

- **RQ2.** How did USAID and implementing partners adapt elections and political processes programming during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- **RQ3.** To what extent did USAID's programming address the election-related effects of COVID-19 and COVID-19-related restrictions on the following:
  - election management: planning and health and safety measures;
  - election management: promoting the participation of marginalized /historically underrepresented populations;
  - citizen election observation;

- international election observation and electoral assessments;
- voter education; and
- political party assistance.

### **Management-related Adaptations**

- **RQ4.** How did USAID adapt its management of elections and political processes programming during the COVID-19 pandemic? What lessons can be drawn from this experience?
- **RQ5.** How did USAID’s implementing partners adapt their management of elections and political processes programming? What are the key lessons learned?

### **Lessons Learned; Hindering and Enabling Factors**

- **RQ6.** What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of USAID and implementing partners?
- **RQ7.** What factors enabled and hindered electoral and political processes programmatic adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## **3. STUDY DESIGN**

This study includes two components: a desk review and key informant interviews with USAID staff, IPs, and other relevant actors. To narrow the scope of the study, NORC worked with USAID to identify four focus countries: Liberia, the Dominican Republic, Serbia, and Sri Lanka. The findings in this report are drawn from these cases, complemented by insights from interviews with global experts and HQ-based staff and from the literature on elections held during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **CASE STUDY COUNTRY SELECTION**

NORC selected the four case study countries in coordination with USAID based on several criteria. First, we sought countries where USAID provided significant support for EPP programming. Second, we aimed to ensure that the cases would include countries at different levels of democratic development and from multiple regions. Third, we required Mission buy-in to be able to proceed since the study team needed Mission support for gathering relevant documents, conducting interviews with Mission staff, and making introductions to local implementing partners. Table I shows key features of the four selected cases. It is important to note that the selected cases varied with respect to internet penetration, which, as described below, affected the types of adaptations that were possible during the pandemic.

This report focuses on adaptations made by USAID Missions and IPs in elections held during 2020 in the four focus countries. These elections were among the first major polls to be held after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when there were few major examples upon which to draw and knowledge about the disease and prevention measures was still limited. All elections were held before vaccines became available. While election administrators—and democracy assistance organizations—

faced many similar challenges in the four cases, the elections differed in some notable ways. Elections in Serbia took place in the context of a stalled transition to democracy.<sup>4</sup> The election in Sri Lanka occurred during a period of political transition.<sup>5</sup> In the Dominican Republic, the election resulted in political turnover, with the longtime incumbent party (*Partido de la Liberación Dominicana*) losing to an opposition challenger. Liberia’s elections were more limited, including races for 15 of 30 Senate seats and a constitutional referendum focused mainly on term lengths for elected leaders and dual citizenship rules, which did not pass.

**Table 1. Key Features of Selected Case Study Countries**

| Country            | Region                 | Election type           | Democracy level        | Internet access | Postponed                             |
|--------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| Liberia            | Africa                 | Senate & referendum     | V-Dem .47<br>FH 60/100 | 26%             | Yes, from Oct. 13 to Dec. 8, 2020     |
| Dominican Republic | LAC                    | President & legislature | V-Dem .42<br>FH 67/100 | 77%             | Yes, from May 17 to July 5, 2020      |
| Serbia             | Eastern Europe/Eurasia | Parliament & local      | V-Dem .25<br>FH 66/100 | 81%             | Yes, from April 26 to June 21, 2020   |
| Sri Lanka          | Asia/Pacific           | Parliament              | V-Dem .36<br>FH 56/100 | 35%             | Yes, from April 25 to August 20, 2020 |

Notes: V-Dem scores are from the Liberal Democracy index in 2020, which ranges from 0.11 to 0.88 with a median of 0.36. Freedom House (FH) scores are from 2020. Data on internet access (% of population) is from the International Telecommunications Union (ITC) for 2020–2021, available through the World Bank (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS>).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study team started by reviewing the literature on elections held during COVID-19 for insights into how various stakeholders—including government agencies, civil society groups, donors, and political parties—adapted to the challenges posed by the pandemic. While the review was global in nature, we focused primarily on the Global South, both because this is where USAID programming is concentrated and because electoral processes are often more fragile in the Global South.<sup>6</sup> In total, the team reviewed

<sup>4</sup> Aaberg, Rebecca, et al. 2020. “Elections and COVID-19 Response Analysis: 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Serbia.” Arlington, VA: IFES.

<sup>5</sup> Wijesuriya, Krystle Reid et al. 2021. “Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka During Covid 19.” Case Study on Crisis Management in Elections. Arlington, VA: IFES.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of USAID’s strategy for addressing democratic backsliding during the COVID-19 pandemic, see: USAID. “Retrospective of USAID Response to Pandemic-Enabled Democratic Backsliding: Finding Report.” Washington DC: USAID.

more than 50 documents drawn from relevant academic studies and grey literature. USAID provided a resource list that served as a starting point for locating materials. We also obtained resources by searching academic databases and by contacting partner organizations and agencies. The literature informed the development of the team’s interview guide for the KIIs.

## KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIS)

NORC conducted interviews with a diverse set of stakeholders. Table 2 shows the target number in the Concept Note for this study along with the actual sample of participants. For each of the four focus countries, the team started by interviewing Mission staff to obtain an overview of the relevant program activities and to request assistance in gathering documents and making connections with local implementing partners. We then conducted interviews with local IPs, which typically included members of the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS)—the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)—and local civil society groups receiving support from USAID directly or through CEPPS partners. We found that the local IPs provided an invaluable source of information about challenges and adaptations, and we expanded the number of interviews conducted with this group to 17 from an initial target of eight. After completing the interviews for the four focus countries, we conducted interviews with headquarters staff from the CEPPS partners and other relevant international organizations (the Carter Center and International IDEA) to learn about how COVID-19 affected international dimensions of election programming and to gain insight into whether the findings from the four focus countries are consistent with broader global experiences.

**Table 2. KIIs by Stakeholder Type**

| Stakeholder type                            | Initial target | Actual sample |
|---|----------------|---------------|
| <i>Internal consultations</i>               |                |               |
| USAID DRG Staff in DC                       | 3              | 0             |
| USAID Mission Staff                         | 8              | 7             |
| <i>External consultations</i>               |                |               |
| Implementing Partners in Priority Countries | 8              | 17            |
| Implementing Partners at U.S. Headquarters  | 0              | 8             |
| U.S. DRG Experts (actively publishing)      | 2              | 0             |
| Other Donors Active in DRG                  | 2              | 0             |
| International DRG Experts                   | 2              | 1             |
| <b>Total</b>                                | <b>25</b>      | <b>33</b>     |

The study team conducted interviews remotely using the Microsoft Teams video-conferencing platform (in a few instances we used WhatsApp instead). The team informed respondents that all information and views would be treated as confidential. For this reason, we do not attribute any of the content in this report to specific individuals. The interviews were semi-structured, open-ended meetings that followed protocols tailored for each respondent type (see Appendix C).

## **LIMITATIONS**

The team encountered few significant limitations in collecting information for this study. Respondents were generally eager to meet with the team and readily shared information and perspectives. Support from USAID was critical in allowing the team to identify and connect with relevant local partners in the focus countries and at the headquarters level. The main limitations encountered (and mitigation strategies adopted) were as follows:

- First, connectivity issues limited our ability to conduct interviews with local partners in some countries, particularly the Dominican Republic and Liberia. In one instance, we were unable to complete an interview with a local partner and had to ask for written input by email. In other cases, the quality of the internet connection made it difficult to probe some topics as fully as intended.
- Second, the team was not able to obtain written documentation for some USAID-sponsored activities in the four focus countries. For this reason, we rely mainly on information conveyed through the KIIs, complemented by available documentation from other sources.
- Third, while recall was not an issue for most respondents, we did observe that in a few instances respondents struggled to remember specific details from the period under study.
- Finally, because the study is sponsored by USAID, beneficiaries have an incentive to obscure internal challenges they faced and to refrain from sharing critical comments about the Agency. Our sense, however, is that respondents overall were very forthright in sharing their perspectives and views.

## **4. BACKGROUND: ELECTIONS DURING COVID-19**

### **RQ1. IN WHAT WAYS WERE ELECTIONS AFFECTED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?**

This section offers a brief overview of the challenges COVID-19 posed for elections around the world. Given the extensive prior literature on this topic and this report's objective of drawing lessons from electoral assistance programming, RQ1 is not the focus of this report. Rather, this section provides background for subsequent sections that detail the major programmatic and managerial adaptations by USAID and IPs. The challenges were most acute for countries scheduled to hold elections in the months

immediately following the start of the pandemic in early 2020.<sup>7</sup> This section highlights seven distinct issue areas noted in prior studies.<sup>8</sup>

**Postponement:** Countries scheduled to hold elections after the onset of the pandemic in early 2020 faced an urgent question of whether to proceed as planned or to postpone the polls, particularly in the first few months of the pandemic when little was known about the spread of the disease and the effectiveness of prevention measures.<sup>9</sup> Some countries moved forward with elections as scheduled, including France, which held local elections in March 2020, and South Korea, which held national elections in April 2020.<sup>10</sup> However, by one estimate, 27 percent of national elections (42 of 152) and 63 percent of subnational elections (37 of 59) scheduled to take place between February 2020 and August 2021 were postponed.<sup>11</sup> Debates about postponement raised complicated issues about the balance between democratic obligations and public safety.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, observers worried that incumbents would use COVID-19 as an opportunity to extend their hold on power. In practice, postponements rarely lasted more than a few months.<sup>13</sup>

**Legislation:** Countries faced two challenges regarding the legislation that governs elections. First, constitutions often lacked clear guidelines for deciding whether and how to postpone elections during national crises. In some cases, legal provisions were unclear or inflexible. For example, France was compelled to hold local elections in March 2020 because the existing legal framework lacked sufficient flexibility to allow even a short postponement.<sup>14</sup> In other cases, constitutional provisions were absent, leaving national leaders free to reach ad hoc arrangements, raising fears that incumbents would manipulate election timing for their advantage. Second, countries faced a need to implement special voting arrangements, often including early voting, voting by mail, proxy voting, and mobile ballot boxes. Legislative frameworks in some cases—for example, in Sri Lanka—limited the ability to alter election administration procedures.<sup>15</sup>

**Election administration:** No set of actors faced more acute challenges due to COVID-19 than the election management bodies responsible for election administration. Uncertainty over whether elections would be held as scheduled left EMBs in many countries scrambling to develop implementation plans,

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<sup>7</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) reported the first COVID-19 cases in China on January 9, 2020, subsequently declaring COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. <https://www.ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-covid-19-developments-in-2020>

<sup>8</sup> The material in this section is based primarily on: Alihodžić, Sead, et al. 2021. “Electoral Processes: Navigating and Emerging from Crisis.” Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA Global State of Democracy Thematic Paper 2021.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the considerations related to postponement, see: Ellena, Katherine. 2020. “Legal Considerations When Delaying or Adapting Elections.” Arlington, VA: IFES.

<sup>10</sup> South Korea’s 2020 election is often cited as a model for responding effectively to the challenges posed by COVID-19. See: Ahn, Michael J. April 13, 2020. “Combating COVID-19: Lessons from South Korea.” Washington DC: Brookings, Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL). May 1, 2020. “COVID-19 and Elections: South Korea

Legislative Election as Case Study: Asian Network for Free Elections.” Spinelli, Antonio. April 21, 2020. “Managing Elections under the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Republic of Korea’s Crucial Test.” Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA.

<sup>11</sup> Ellena, Katherine. 2020. “Legal Considerations When Delaying or Adapting Elections.” Arlington, VA: IFES.

<sup>12</sup> James, Toby S., and Sead Alihodžić. 2020. “When Is It Democratic to Postpone an Election? Elections during Natural Disasters, COVID-19, and Emergency Situations.” *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 19: 344-362.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the challenges to democracy posed by COVID-19, see: Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS). n.d. “Mitigating the Impact of Covid-19 through Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Assistance.” USAID. 2020. “COVID-19: Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Issues and Potential USAID Responses.” Washington DC: USAID. Youngs, Richard, and Elene Panchulidze. n.d. “Global Democracy & Covid-19: Upgrading International Support.” European Endowment for Democracy and others.

<sup>14</sup> Rambaud, Romain. 2020. “Holding or Postponing Elections during a COVID-19 Outbreak: Constitutional, Legal and Political Challenges in France.” Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA.

<sup>15</sup> Aaberg, Rebecca et al. 2020. “Elections and COVID-19 Response Analysis: 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Serbia.” Arlington, VA: IFES.

often while confronting unpredictable and rapidly shifting political and epidemiological contexts. In all cases, the pandemic compelled EMBs to develop health and safety protocols, communicate these requirements to the public, coordinate with health officials, procure and distribute PPE, and develop new routines for monitoring and counting ballots—all while guarding against putting their own personnel at risk. Moreover, in some countries, government authorities downplayed the threat posed by COVID-19 and/or delayed issuing health and safety guidelines. For example, in Serbia, the government released official guidance just a week before the parliamentary elections that had been postponed from April 25 to June 21, 2020, creating a severe challenge for both national authorities and election assistance partners.

Several countries managed to hold major elections while minimizing health risks to voters early in the pandemic, including South Korea, which was often cited as a model case.<sup>16</sup> However, adherence to health and safety requirements was highly variable in other countries. Observers noted with alarm that voters failed to maintain safe distances during campaigns and on election day in countries, including Ghana, Liberia, Malawi, Burma, and others.<sup>17</sup> Studies that examine whether elections caused increased infection rates offer mixed findings. Research shows that elections did increase local transmission in the Czech Republic<sup>18</sup> and Italy,<sup>19</sup> while in other cases, including the 2020 U.S. primaries, no connection was observed.<sup>20</sup>

**Campaigns and voter education:** COVID-19 interrupted core activities during the pre-election period, including in-person campaign rallies and fundraisers, door-to-door canvassing, and grassroots voter education campaigns. This forced political parties to accelerate the move toward online campaigning, posing a challenge for parties seeking to reach voters in areas with lower internet and smartphone penetration rates—and for the civil society groups that monitor campaigns. In some cases, restrictions on campaigning were selectively applied in ways that favored incumbent candidates and parties. In Uganda, the government’s ban on public gatherings was seen as a pretext for clamping down on the opposition and the media.<sup>21</sup> For EMBs and their partners, restrictions on in-person activities also necessitated a shift to online approaches for voter education. As with party campaigns, the move to online platforms limited outreach to voters in rural areas and marginalized communities.

**Voter participation:** Research suggests that the pandemic reduced participation in many cases. Data compiled by International IDEA shows that turnout declined in 64 percent of countries that held elections between February 2020 and August 2021, relative to historic trends in each country.<sup>22</sup> Studies from individual countries, including Italy and France, show that areas with higher infection rates saw

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<sup>16</sup> Ahn, Michael J. April 13, 2020. “Combating COVID-19: Lessons from South Korea.” Washington DC: Brookings.

<sup>17</sup> Christian Science Monitor. “Protect the Vote, or the Voter? In African Elections, No Easy Choice.” <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2020/0623/Protect-the-vote-or-the-voter-In-African-elections-no-easy-choice>. Carter Center. November 10, 2020. “Election Observation Mission: Myanmar, General Election, November 8, 2020.”

<sup>18</sup> Palguta, Ján, René Levínský, and Samuel Škoda. 2022. “Do Elections Accelerate the COVID-19 Pandemic? Evidence from a Natural Experiment.” *Journal of Population Economics* 35: 197-240.

<sup>19</sup> Cipullo, Davide, and Marco Le Moglie. 2022. “To Vote, Or Not To Vote? Electoral Campaigns and the Spread of COVID-19.” *European Journal of Political Economy* 72: 102-118.

<sup>20</sup> Feltham Eric M., Forastiere Laura, Alexander Marcus, and Nicholas A. Christakis. 2020. “No Increase in COVID-19 Mortality after the 2020 Primary Elections in the USA.” Accessed May 2023. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2010.02896*.

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch. November 20, 2020. “Uganda: Authorities Weaponize Covid-19 for Repression.” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/20/uganda-authorities-weaponize-covid-19-repression>

<sup>22</sup> Alihodžić, Sead et al. 2021. “Electoral Processes: Navigating and Emerging from Crisis.” Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA Global State of Democracy Thematic Paper 2021.



greater reductions in turnout.<sup>23</sup> These effects are thought to have been larger for older people and those most vulnerable to COVID-19, though few studies have been able to disaggregate the effects for sub-populations.<sup>24</sup> In some cases, declines in turnout differed across partisan groups. In France's 2020 local elections, the decline appears to have been greater among far-right voters.<sup>25</sup> Such differential effects invited challenges to the legitimacy of electoral contests held during COVID-19, leading to claims that some parties and candidates were unfairly harmed by lower turnout among their core supporters.

**Information manipulation:** The pandemic raised concerns that malign actors would distort information about health threats to alter participation rates across partisan groups in ways that would advantage particular candidates or parties.<sup>26</sup> Misinformation might also undermine the legitimacy of election results by raising unfounded concerns that effects of health and safety regulations or the expansion of SVAs could benefit some groups over others. In addition, observers noted that incumbents in some cases used the pandemic as a pretext for imposing internet and media restrictions that limited opposition campaigning and broader freedom of expression during election periods. In Uganda, for example, the government banned social media platforms two days before its January 2021 election, limiting the spread of content related to the election campaign.<sup>27</sup>

**Election observation:** COVID-19 interrupted the work of both citizen (domestic) and international election observers. On the citizen observation side, health regulations often meant that pre-election training for observers had to be conducted online or in small groups, and social distancing rules meant that fewer people could directly observe the tallying process in polling stations and other centers. Citizen observer groups were also called upon to take on new roles, providing input to EMBs for developing health and safety rules and associated voter education materials, monitoring compliance with those roles in the campaign period and on election day, assessing decisions related to election postponement, and in some cases mobilizing to counter democratic backsliding. For international observers, travel and quarantine restrictions limited the ability to conduct pre-election assessments of the electoral environment and to send observation missions to some countries.<sup>28</sup>

**Opportunities:** Despite the many challenges related to COVID-19, the pandemic also created new opportunities for innovation. As noted above, many countries expanded special voting arrangements that made it easier to vote. COVID-19 prompted national authorities to revisit the legislation that governs election administration, clarifying ambiguous statutes or introducing greater flexibility. As described in the next section, democracy assistance groups at both the international and domestic level accelerated the use of online platforms and tools for poll worker training, data collection, pre-election assessments, observation, and other key tasks. COVID-19 also prompted the global democracy

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<sup>23</sup> Picchio, Matteo, and Raffaella Santolini. 2022. "The COVID-19 Pandemic's Effects on Voter Turnout." *European Journal of Political Economy* 73: 102-161. Leromain, Elsa, and Gonzague Vannoorenbergh. 2022. "Voting under Threat: Evidence from the 2020 French Local Elections." *European Journal of Political Economy* 75: 102-204.

<sup>24</sup> Scheller, Daniel S. 2021. "Pandemic Primary: The Interactive Effects of COVID-19 Prevalence and Age on Voter Turnout." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 31 (sup1): 180-190.

<sup>25</sup> Leromain, Elsa, and Gonzague Vannoorenbergh. 2022. "Voting under Threat: Evidence from the 2020 French Local Elections." *European Journal of Political Economy* 75: 102-204.

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of information challenges, see: Repell, Lisa, Beata Martin-Rozumitowicz, and Vasu Mohan. June 23, 2020. "Preserving Electoral Integrity During an Infodemic." Arlington, VA: IFES COVID-19 Briefing Series.

<sup>27</sup> Reuters. January 12, 2021. "Uganda Bans Social Media Ahead of Presidential Election." <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-uganda-election-idUKKBN29H171>

<sup>28</sup> Asplund, Erik, et al. March 17, 2021. "Elections and Covid-19: International Electoral Observation in 2020." International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/elections-and-covid-19-international-electoral-observation-2020>

assistance community to strengthen international networks for sharing information and boosted the capacity of all involved to respond to future shocks that interfere with elections, including natural disasters, violent conflicts, and disease outbreaks.

## **5. FINDINGS: USAID AND IMPLEMENTING PARTNER ADAPTATIONS TO COVID-19**

This section presents the report’s main findings, focusing first on programmatic adaptations and then on managerial aspects. As noted above, the findings are based on a desk review of technical publications and interviews with global experts, USAID personnel, IPs (including the members of the CEPPS consortium and other groups), and local CSOs.<sup>29</sup> While the findings integrate information from a comparative perspective, they draw most heavily on USAID-supported activities in the four focus countries: Liberia, the Dominican Republic, Serbia, and Sri Lanka. The section on international observation has a more global perspective.

The programmatic adaptation findings are organized around the main activity areas supported by USAID. Thus, the report focuses on some of the challenges noted in the prior section (e.g., observation and civic education) more so than others that were not principal areas of engagement among the set of actors consulted for this report (e.g., legislative reform and information manipulation). Each sub-section starts with a brief global overview of major adaptations before discussing the experience of USAID and IPs in the four focus countries.

### **PROGRAMMATIC ADAPTATIONS**

**RQ2. HOW DID USAID AND IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS ADAPT ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PROCESSES PROGRAMMING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?**

**RQ3. TO WHAT EXTENT DID USAID’S PROGRAMMING ADDRESS THE ELECTION-RELATED EFFECTS OF COVID-19 AND COVID-19-RELATED RESTRICTIONS ON THE FOLLOWING:**

- **election management: planning and health and safety measures;**
- **election management: promoting the participation of marginalized /historically underrepresented populations;**
- **citizen election observation;**
- **international election observation and electoral assessments;**
- **voter education; and**
- **political party assistance.**

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<sup>29</sup> For an overview of USAID’s strategic response, see: USAID. 2020. “COVID-19: Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Issues and Potential USAID Responses.” Washington DC: USAID.

## ELECTION MANAGEMENT: PLANNING AND HEALTH AND SAFETY MEASURES

In response to the acute challenges EMBs faced, USAID and IPs provided technical support to help these bodies:

- develop election administration plans;
- devise health and safety measures;
- adapt and create new voter education materials;
- assess the feasibility of special voting arrangements;
- procure personal protective equipment; and
- conduct other essential tasks.

Election planning often had to be accomplished in difficult environments, where EMBs and their partners faced tight deadlines and considerable uncertainty about whether elections would be held on schedule, the extent of disease transmission, and relevant government health and safety regulations. EMBs typically had little prior experience or relevant expertise upon which to draw in developing health protocols, since their usual remit is confined to election administration. Holding elections during the pandemic also entailed new costs for EMBs and their partners.<sup>30</sup>

At the international level, USAID partner IFES played a lead role in collaborating with medical experts to develop and periodically update guidelines for election administrators based on the evolving knowledge of COVID-19 and prevention measures.<sup>31</sup> Country offices worked with EMBs to develop plans for addressing the evolving effects of the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> IPs were able to draw on prior experience with other diseases, particularly Ebola, including in **Liberia** where the USAID Mission and partners had significant experience from outbreaks. IFES HQ staff also helped country offices in other regions develop mitigation strategies informed by lessons learned from Ebola.

USAID and IPs worked to encourage the adoption of special voting arrangements to accommodate immuno-compromised voters, those in quarantine or self-isolation, and other vulnerable populations. Data compiled by International IDEA shows that most countries—74 percent (65 of 88)—that held national elections or referendums in 2020 and 2021 made use of at least one SVA.<sup>33</sup> The most common SVAs were mobile ballot boxes (47 percent of countries), early voting (40 percent), and postal voting (27 percent), with fewer countries employing proxy voting (10 percent) or remote electronic voting (2 percent). In most instances, EMBs expanded the use of existing SVAs rather than introducing new voting modalities. The tight timelines EMBs faced often did not allow sufficient time for introducing new SVAs, and in some cases legal statutes made it impossible to do so. For example, in **Sri Lanka** the Election

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<sup>30</sup> One study that examined costs associated with elections in 17 countries in 2020 and 2021 found that election administration increased in 15 of 17 countries, with additional costs ranging from USD \$0.31 per capita (registered voters) to \$9.59 and a median of \$1.44. See Toby S. James, Allistair Clark, and Erik Asplund. Forthcoming. *Elections during Emergencies and Crises: Lessons for Electoral Integrity from the Covid-19 Pandemic*, chapter 8. Stockholm: International IDEA.

<sup>31</sup> Buril, Fernanda, Staffan Darnolf, and Muluken Aseresa. 2020. "Safeguarding Health and Elections." Arlington VA: IFES COVID-19 Briefing Series.

<sup>32</sup> For details on the health and safety measures adopted by EMBs during COVID-19 see: IFES. 2020. "Featured Elections Held and Mitigating Measures Taken During COVID-19." Arlington, VA: IFES. See also: Erik Asplund, et al. February 20, 2021. "Elections and Covid-19: Health and Safety in Polling Stations." Electoral Integrity Project Blog.

<sup>33</sup> Toby S. James, Allistair Clark, and Erik Asplund. Forthcoming. *Elections during Emergencies and Crises: Lessons for Electoral Integrity from the Covid-19 Pandemic*, chapter 5. Stockholm: International IDEA.

Commission was recommending to allow people in quarantine and self-isolation to vote before election day using a mobile voting system, a recommendation that was subsequently overturned after several factions objected that this provision would contradict constitutional requirements mandating in-person voting at polling stations.

In **Sri Lanka**, IFES' country office provided a range of support to the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) that included helping to create a roadmap that identified COVID-19 mitigation measures at all points in the elections process. The roadmap was a critical tool for identifying where assistance would be needed throughout the process. IFES also helped procure PPE, including masks, sanitizer, and other equipment for the ECSL, supplementing the Commission's own efforts. Generally, however, USAID and its local partners in the four focus countries did not provide support for PPE due to funding constraints and/or limited mandates that did not include such procurement.

In some cases, IPs experimented with remote strategies for providing support to EMBs. For example, in **Liberia**, IFES conducted a remote pre-election assessment in 2020 that examined the National Electoral Commission's (NEC) readiness to safely carry out Senatorial elections and a constitutional referendum during the pandemic.<sup>34</sup> The assessment team focused on a wide range of issues, including health and safety protocols, voter registration, voter education, strategic communications, inclusion of marginalized populations, independent and partisan observation, election-day procedures, results management, election dispute resolution, the legal framework, and ongoing preparations for the elections. The IFES assessment team conducted more than 40 interviews with the NEC, the Ministry of Health (MoH), National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL), political parties, civil society, and other stakeholders using Zoom and other platforms. The assessment identified pressing needs and provided a series of recommendations for NEC and other stakeholders, with a particular focus on mitigating COVID-19 health risks and recommendations for protecting the safety of voters, election staff, observers, and other stakeholders throughout the electoral process. Key health and safety recommendations are provided in the textbox below. The IFES team noted that conducting interviews remotely presented several challenges. Scheduling interviews was more complicated and time consuming, and it was more difficult to engage deeply with respondents—or assess body language and visual cues—on virtual platforms.

Respondents conveyed several key lessons related to their efforts to support EMBs. During health crises, it is critical for USAID and its partners to respond quickly to develop science-based protocols and guidelines for EMBs. At the local level, IPs can play an important role by helping EMBs widen the circle of government bodies and other key actors involved in election planning to include health officials and security personnel charged with enforcing safety protocols. Continuing to include this wider set of actors, even as COVID-19 recedes, was seen as a valuable strategy for keeping in place lines of communication that will enable coordination in response to future crises. At the same time, respondents cautioned that including external actors, particularly security personnel, can increase the risk of election interference, particularly in semi-authoritarian political contexts.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This paragraph draws on the FY20 Q4 Quarterly Report for the GEPT Liberia Rapid Response: Senatorial and Constitutional Referendum Pre-Election Needs Assessment activity.

<sup>35</sup> Birch, Sarah, et al. n.d. "How to Hold Elections Safely and Democratically during the Covid-19 Pandemic." The British Academy.

### **Key Health and Safety Recommendations from IFES's 2020 Pre-election Assessment in Liberia**

- Registration processes should take place in large, open, and well-ventilated spaces, with signs to remind registrants and NEC staff to follow social distancing requirements.
- NEC should conduct an intensive campaign (especially via radio and social media) to inform citizens of the measures they must follow to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during electoral activities.
- NEC should prioritize any PPE that may be available for voters for use by persons with disabilities, older voters, or others who request it for health reasons.
- NEC should ensure people with disabilities are represented in mainstream voter education materials and develop materials that specifically target people with disabilities.
- NEC should allocate the number of desks, chairs, and polling booths at each polling place based on how they fit the space while complying with the distancing requirements (currently three feet, but further if possible).

HQ-based staff reported that the shift to remote methods for providing technical support to EMBs came with considerable challenges but also opened up new opportunities. IPs noted that providing support to EMBs via Zoom and other remote platforms proved challenging, especially in newer countries where IPs did not have strong pre-existing relationships. This made it difficult to start new projects around the world, where it was hard to get a sense of the capabilities and needs of EMBs without being able to conduct site visits. IPs noted that COVID-19 forced them to explore the possibilities (and limitations) of conducting remote trainings for EMB counterparts. Partners noted that the learning curve was steep initially and that despite successes, some trainings are more effectively delivered in person.

On the positive side, IFES personnel noted that meeting virtually with in-country partners represents a less expensive and more efficient way of providing support that allows HQ staff to support more countries, a practice that continues to evolve and likely constitutes a permanent part of future technical assistance. Though virtual engagement cannot replace in-person collaboration, which is key for building deeper relationships, it serves as a valuable complement that works well for some tasks. Thus, for example, IFES noted that they are now doing more remote work in advance of overseas missions, recognizing that it can be more efficient to hold some meetings remotely prior to arriving in country.

### **ELECTION MANAGEMENT: PROMOTING THE PARTICIPATION OF MARGINALIZED / HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED POPULATIONS**

Marginalized communities face additional challenges in participating in elections during national crises, as they are often disproportionately impacted—directly and indirectly—by such crises. During COVID-19, a number of specific groups encountered added difficulties, including women, those in quarantine or self-isolation, immune-compromised individuals, older adults, those with disabilities, refugees/migrants, and voters residing in peripheral areas.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> For an overview of the unique challenges COVID-19 posed for marginalized groups and recommendations for addressing them, see: Atkinson, Virginia, Meredith Applegate, and Rebecca Aaberg. 2020. "Inclusion and Meaningful Political Participation." Arlington, VA: IFES COVID-19 Briefing Paper.

USAID and its partners responded to the needs of marginalized groups at the global and country level. For example, at the global level, IFES developed a guide, *Inclusion and Meaningful Political Participation*, as part of its COVID-19 Briefing Series, that articulated the distinct needs of groups and outlined recommendations for EMBs, government officials, and other stakeholders. IFES also published a guide for EMBs on how to create disability policies that ensure program reforms during crises do not overlook the needs of marginalized groups. IFES also produced guidelines for ensuring that online meetings are accessible to participants with disabilities and adopted new strategies for increasing participation among indigenous communities and women in virtual events.

At the country level, IPs fostered the inclusion of individuals from marginalized communities in election planning; encouraged and advised on the adoption of special voting arrangements; and supported the creation of tailored voter education materials and campaigns. For example, in **Liberia** the pre-election assessment conducted by IFES (described above) included an examination of the electoral commission's preparedness to address the needs of marginalized groups and developed recommendations encouraging Liberia's National Election Commission to prioritize allocating PPE to vulnerable voters, ensure that people with disabilities were represented in voter education materials, and develop materials that specifically target persons with disabilities.

In other countries, including **Ukraine** and **Burma**, IFES helped to ensure that election commissions engaged with marginalized populations in developing voter education materials and worked with local civil society groups to encourage electoral participation among disabled voters. IFES worked with the EMB to add QR codes to print voter education materials that contained links to sign language and audio versions for citizens with disabilities. IFES also worked with EMBs and CSOs to conduct in-person education campaigns for hard-to-reach voters, including in **Bougainville**, an autonomous republic of Papua New Guinea. In **Sri Lanka**, IFES collaborated with the ECSL to develop and implement in-person voter education trainings for marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities. In **Serbia**, IFES supported the EMB in producing a public safety video that included sign language and subtitles, increasing its reach to deaf and hearing-impaired viewers, though other voter education materials could not be produced in special formats (e.g., braille) due to time constraints. Some respondents also noted that the increased use of online platforms for voter education and outreach may have had the benefit of increasing outreach to younger voters.

In some cases, USAID and IPs were limited in their ability to support effective responses because EMBs were unable or unwilling to adopt necessary measures to accommodate marginalized groups. For example, in **Sri Lanka** the ECSL expanded postal voting facilities for health care workers (normally provided only for other types of public servants) and allowed several rounds of postal voting.<sup>37</sup> However, the ECSL was not able to provide alternative voting methods for voters in quarantine centers or health and security personnel that were unable to cast their vote at polling stations due to professional obligations. No special provisions were implemented for immune-compromised and disabled individuals or those who were hesitant to leave their place of employment on election day. Likewise, in **Serbia**, constitutional provisions stipulating that voting must be done in person limited the ability of USAID and local partners to aid the EMB in adopting special voting arrangements to

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<sup>37</sup> Wijesuriya, Krystle Reid, et al. 2021. "Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka During Covid 19." Case Study on Crisis Management in Elections. Arlington, VA: IFES. Page. 12.

accommodate marginalized groups.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, because the government released health and safety guidelines less than a week before the election, the EMB and USAID-funded partners had inadequate time to produce materials targeted for specific communities, including minority language speakers.

## CITIZEN ELECTION OBSERVATION

Globally, COVID-19 compelled citizen election observation groups to adapt long-standing approaches in multiple ways.<sup>39</sup> Some groups altered recruitment strategies to protect older volunteers most vulnerable to COVID-19, limiting their deployment or restricting them to headquarters operations. Many observer organizations modified training methods, shifting to online approaches where possible and conducting in-person trainings in smaller groups. For example, in **Ukraine** OPORA developed and launched an online training program for short-term observers, holding limited in-person trainings in small groups around the country. In several instances, organizations accelerated the use of online tools and applications for recording and transmitting election-day observations from the field to headquarters staff. In **Sri Lanka**, the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) introduced a new mobile app and data management system for observers that made data collection more efficient. Restrictions on public gatherings meant that groups in some countries had to disseminate findings through online forums rather than public events, including in **Liberia** where the Liberia Elections Observation Network (LEON) held most press conferences as online live-streaming events. Adapting to COVID-19 often entailed new costs, as groups had to provide PPE for their staff and volunteers, conduct a larger number of trainings, and accelerate the development of new ICT-based tools for training and monitoring.

Observer groups took on new roles and observed aspects of elections that they had not monitored previously. In some countries, groups assisted government bodies with developing public health measures (described below). Many groups dedicated additional effort to tracking online campaigning, reflecting the shift to websites and social media platforms by political actors, especially in countries with more restrictive guidelines on in-person gatherings. On election day, several groups monitored adherence to government health and safety protocols during voting and counting processes. For example, in **Liberia**, LEON modified their observation checklists to track compliance with health measures on election day. LEON also leveraged its prior experience with data collection to conduct a national survey in collaboration with public health officials that informed government messaging. The increased use of special voting arrangements led some groups to devote new effort to monitoring election-day activities outside of polling stations. In **Serbia**, the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA) recruited and trained observers to monitor mobile and in-home voting for the first time during the June 2020 elections.

In **Liberia's** December 2020 Senatorial elections and referendum, local observation groups responded to health and safety restrictions by reducing the number of monitors and conducting training sessions in smaller groups. Due to COVID-19, the Election Coordination Committee (ECC), which serves as an umbrella organization that coordinates the activities of seven partner CSOs, reduced the number of

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<sup>38</sup> Aaberg, Rebecca et al. 2020. "Elections and COVID-19 Response Analysis: 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Serbia." Arlington, VA: IFES. The one exception to this rule is a provision that allows for mobile voting, though it is not clear that voters in quarantine or isolation during the 2020 elections were able to use this mechanism to submit their ballots.

<sup>39</sup> This global overview of adaptations by citizen observer groups is based on meeting notes from a virtual panel discussion convened by USAID on December 9, 2020.

observers to about 1,000 from about 2,000 in the prior election in 2017. Training sessions for the network of observers were done in person (as in past years) because connectivity limitations made it impossible to shift to an online platform. Observer trainings had to be done in groups of no more than 20 people to comply with government guidelines on public gatherings, increasing the number of training sessions and the associated costs. The ECC and its constituent members streamlined the training content to allow for shorter sessions and added new materials to train monitors on documenting violations of health and safety protocols.

On election day, the main operational challenge for citizen observers in Liberia was that polling station observers had to operate at a distance, since government restrictions limited the number of people who could be in the same location, including inside polling stations and counting centers. Personnel from the Institute for Research and Democratic Development (IREDD), one of the seven ECC members, viewed the domestic observation mission as a success, noting few major challenges on election day. The task was made easier by declining infection rates prior to the election and relatively low turnout,<sup>40</sup> which eased the challenges associated with social distancing rules. Liberian partners anticipate returning to larger, in-person training sessions for citizen observers in the future, which are more efficient and cost effective.

In the **Dominican Republic**, USAID's local partner for citizen observation during the May 2020 national elections, Participación Ciudadana, adopted a hybrid approach for training observers. For most parts of the country, the group conducted trainings remotely (usually by Zoom) in two-hour blocks with sessions held over two or three days. However, because of connectivity issues, the CSO conducted trainings in person for some areas, working with smaller groups to allow for social distancing. Because some volunteers had limited access to the internet and technology, the group altered the training materials to make them more accessible, relying on educational videos and PowerPoint presentations with graphics, images, and messages. Materials were presented in a format that could reach observers through different media, including WhatsApp, Messenger, YouTube, and other online platforms. Participación Ciudadana noted that despite the success of its hybrid training process, the organization will conduct in-person trainings in the future because the organization, a network of more than 200 groups, prioritizes developing strong social ties among members and volunteers.

Participación Ciudadana also adapted by developing a new platform for collecting and transmitting election-day observations by volunteers. Participación Ciudadana worked with a local university, the Instituto Tecnológico de las Américas (ITLA), to develop an app for mobile phones, tablets, and computers. This allowed Participación Ciudadana to avoid the use of disposable materials and obviated the need to transfer paper forms during the pandemic, eliminating a potential opportunity for disease transmission.

In **Serbia**, USAID provided support for citizen observation during the June 2020 parliamentary elections through CEPPS/NDI's local partner, CRTA, adopted a new approach for training roughly 1,200 short-term observers. With support from CEPPS/NDI, CRTA created a web-based platform for observer training that allowed monitors to complete modules at their own pace and on their own schedules. The

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<sup>40</sup> The turnout rate was 33.3 percent, according to official results available from the National Elections Commission results portal: <https://necliberia.org/results/>



platform used custom videos, along with content streamlined for an online format, and included quizzes to track absorption of the material. The development of this innovative tool was made possible by the high level of tech capacity at CEPPS/NDI and CRTA and relatively high rates of internet penetration in Serbia. By all accounts, the training platform worked well. CRTA noted that they were able to support election observation without major disruption or deterioration in the quality of the observer team. The web-based approach offered some distinct advantages, allowing observers to complete their training without having to be present at specific times. The materials also served as a resource to which observers could refer if needed. The downside was that the lack of human contact made it harder to build relationships, monitor teams, and weed out potential intruders. Partner groups noted that the development of this platform was a clear instance in which COVID-19 accelerated the move to develop new ICT-based tools. CRTA subsequently used the platform during Serbia's 2022 referendum and elections (after making improvements to the content and technology). NDI has provided support for making the platform available to other countries.

IRI and a local civil society partner, the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), adopted an online training approach for political party poll watchers (distinct from the nonpartisan citizen observers mentioned above). CeSID conducted multiple training sessions virtually for both government and opposition parties in 2020 and 2021. While both IRI and CeSID viewed these sessions as successful, CeSID plans to return to in-person sessions when possible because they include simulations of election-day procedures that are best conducted in person.

During **Sri Lanka's** August 2020 election, USAID supported citizen election observation through NDI and IRI. For short-term observation, NDI provided technical and financial assistance to a local CSO, People's Action for Free and Fair Elections. For long-term observation, IRI provided support to the Center for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV). In addition, with funding from the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), IRI supported a regional organization, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), discussed below. Given the long history of citizen election observation in Sri Lanka, a robust network of citizen observers was in place prior to Sri Lanka's 2020 election, facilitating adaptations in response to COVID-19. For example, PAFREL has over 30 years of observation experience, and many of its volunteers have participated in several prior elections. Warm weather at election time meant that many election activities could be conducted outside. Thus, despite tight government restrictions on travel and gatherings, PAFREL was able to conduct polling station observer trainings in person, and the CMEV was able to conduct monitoring activities without major disruption.

In Sri Lanka, the main adaptation related to citizen observation—beyond moving meetings online and relying on private cars instead of public transport—was the creation of an electronic platform for collecting observer data from polling stations on election day, taking the place of a paper-based system. NDI provided technical support to develop a smartphone-based system for recording election day observations using KoboToolbox. NDI noted that while shifting to this platform was initially very challenging, it had several advantages, namely that very little paper had to change hands and information could be relayed and compiled quickly and efficiently. Observer groups anticipate using the system for future elections.

## INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION AND ELECTORAL ASSESSMENTS

Restrictions on travel compelled international observer and support groups to adapt core aspects of their work, including for pre-election assessments, recruitment and training of observers, election-day observation, and public dissemination of findings.<sup>41</sup> This section is based on interviews with headquarters staff and focuses on election observation and technical electoral assessments globally, not in the four focus countries for this report (in which USAID did not provide support for international election observation).

Travel restrictions and lengthy quarantine requirements in some cases meant that IPs were unable to send HQ staff and delegates overseas for technical pre-election needs assessments, as well as **pre-election assessment missions (as part of international election observation)** that take stock of the electoral environment and alert stakeholders to potential shortcomings in advance of election day. As a result, IPs had to conduct assessments remotely. Respondents noted several challenges in moving to a remote model, particularly the difficulty of obtaining reliable information, building connections with local officials and stakeholders, and garnering high-level attention for report findings. Thus, while NDI was able to complete remote pre-election assessment missions in several countries in 2020, including Georgia, Moldova, and Ethiopia, the ability to access information proved challenging (particularly in Ethiopia), and in all cases the impact of the assessments may have been reduced by not having high-level delegates in country to participate in public dissemination events.

Similarly, IFES noted that while it was able to complete a pre-election needs assessment focused on recommendations for Liberia's National Elections Commission (described above), the team struggled with logistics and access to information.<sup>42</sup> As travel restrictions have lifted, IPs are returning to in-person assessments where possible. However, virtual and hybrid models remain useful when international deployment is not possible, as with an NDI assessment conducted prior to Lebanon's 2022 election.<sup>43</sup>

Travel restrictions also meant that international teams were unable to travel for other aspects of **election observation missions, including long-term and short-term observation**, to several countries in 2020 and 2021 and were instead compelled to employ remote and hybrid strategies. HQ-based staff from NDI, IRI, and the Carter Center noted some key limitations. While all partners found new ways of conducting international observation, remote methods did not substitute well for in-person missions. Without teams on the ground, it can be difficult to access information, line up meetings, and bring necessary attention to pre-election issues. In addition, partners observed that remote conversations often felt more formal, that some respondents seemed less comfortable providing candid input, and that it could be a challenge to get respondents to show up for virtual meetings at the appointed time.

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<sup>41</sup> For an overview, see: James, Toby S., Alistair Clark, and Erik Asplund, eds. 2022. *Elections During Emergencies and Crises: Lessons for Electoral Integrity from the Covid-19 Pandemic*. Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA, Chapter 7.

<sup>42</sup> While this was not an international observation-oriented pre-election assessment, it has been included in this section due to the similar nature of the activity.

<sup>43</sup> National Democratic Institute (NDI). n.d. "Virtual Pre-Election Assessment Mission Statement Regarding Lebanon's 2022 National Elections." Washington DC: National Democratic Institute.

IPs developed novel strategies for on-the-ground aspects of international observation. For example, in Burma, the government's COVID-19 restrictions meant that the Carter Center was only able to deploy a small team prior to the July 2020 election.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the Carter Center made several changes to its standard operating procedures. First, prior to the election, staff conducted pre-election outreach with key stakeholders virtually. Second, the Carter Center recruited and accredited a team of observers already in-country, including 24 Burmese nationals, as part of its observation team.<sup>45</sup> Despite health and safety restrictions, the team was able to visit 234 polling stations on election day. Third, the Carter Center adopted a strategy for remote election observation, ultimately conducting more than 1,000 interviews with government officials, party agents, and other stakeholders throughout the country by telephone and other platforms rather than in-person visits.

## VOTER EDUCATION

In response to COVID-19, USAID and its implementing partners adapted voter education activities. Principal adaptations included: 1) conducting public opinion polls on voter knowledge and perceptions that informed public education campaigns; 2) working with government counterparts to develop and update voter education materials, including print materials and public service announcements for distribution via traditional (television and radio) and social media; 3) supporting the development of targeted materials for marginalized and vulnerable groups; 4) organizing in-person activities where possible; and 5) providing other related support specific to distinct contexts and needs within countries.<sup>46</sup> While interviewees viewed these adaptations as successful, they also noted several challenges. Some respondents indicated that because of the many issues EMBs faced during the pandemic, there was a tendency in some countries to deprioritize voter education. IPs reported that mobilizing adequate funding was also a challenge. In addition, the increased reliance on media and online platforms for voter education—due to restrictions on in-person gatherings—increased concerns about the digital divide, particularly in countries where substantial portions of the electorate do not have regular access to the internet or smartphones.

USAID and IPs sought to support efforts to tailor voter education campaigns to vulnerable citizens and marginalized groups, though contextual factors—tight timelines and insufficient budgets—limited these efforts in some cases. For example, IFES noted that reaching marginalized populations is often a point of emphasis and reported successes in several countries, including **Ukraine**, where they worked with the EMB to engage with marginalized populations on developing voter education materials, and **Burma**, where they worked with a local civil society group to improve engagement among voters with intellectual disabilities. In other instances, IPs helped EMBs develop voter education materials that are mobile phone friendly, organize voter education “roadshows” to engage hard-to-reach voters, and develop materials in sign language, braille, and minority languages. However, in **Serbia**, the short timeframe for producing new materials left insufficient time to translate materials into minority

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<sup>44</sup> Carter Center. November 10, 2020. “Election Observation Mission: Myanmar, General Election, November 8, 2020.”

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of recruiting local individuals for international observation missions, see Sarah Birch, et al. n.d. “How to Hold Elections Safely and Democratically during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” The British Academy, pages 22-23.

<sup>46</sup> The global overview of voter education adaptations is based on meeting notes from a virtual panel discussion convened by USAID on November 12, 2020.

languages. Likewise, in **Burma**, one IP reported that it was challenging to produce voter education materials in all local languages and to disseminate them in marginal areas.

In **Liberia**, USAID provided support to develop and disseminate health guidance and election-specific messaging via the radio and through in-person activities, working with Internews, the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC), and the Institute for Research and Democratic Development. IPs noted that voter education in Liberia is challenging due to limited access to the internet and a high illiteracy rate (about 50 percent). Internews therefore focused on supporting community radio stations to educate the population on COVID-19, public health measures, and the elections and referendum. Programming included talk shows featuring party representatives, election officials, health officials, and civil society. These shows used local vernacular to reach a wider audience. Internews and its partners also conducted several additional activities, including: 1) facilitating the production of plays to convey public health safety measures during the campaign period and on election day; 2) collaborating with the government's pandemic response team to disseminate messaging through radio programs; 3) working with media civil society organizations to organize citizen engagement forums—broadcast live on social media and on local radio stations—on referendum and elections education; and 4) training journalists on pandemic reporting.

To support voter education through local radio, the USAID Mission in Liberia accelerated an existing project that equipped community stations with solar panels in areas with intermittent electricity access. For in-person activities, including town hall meetings and debates, USAID also helped local partners procure speakers and projection screens, allowing audiences to view events outside, rather than in indoor venues. Respondents viewed these voter education efforts as successful, noting that voters were well informed about COVID-19 and prevention guidelines. A key lesson was that community radio networks are a useful medium for reaching the rural population. Repeated messaging on the pandemic and prevention measures through various channels—media, community radio stations, local print media—was seen as helping reduce the spread of COVID-19, as with Ebola. Likewise, in **Côte d'Ivoire**, NDI and its local partners found radio to be a useful substitute for in-person events related to the October 2020 election. Due to COVID-19, a USAID-funded program designed to increase youth participation in elected offices shifted a series of debates to radio in order to avoid large gatherings.<sup>47</sup>

In **Serbia** USAID provided technical assistance to help the EMB design and launch a voter education campaign that included public service announcements disseminated over radio and TV, and through Instagram. IFES conducted a pre-election survey—implemented as a telephone and online poll rather than a face-to-face survey—to assess knowledge and perception about COVID-19. The survey helped to identify key concerns related to the voting process, and findings were used by the EMB in developing risk-mitigation measures and voter information campaigns. USAID and IPs faced a unique challenge in Serbia because the government delayed the release of health and safety guidelines until less than a week before the election. The delay was a reflection of the limited knowledge about COVID-19 precautions available to policymakers at the time—and possibly also the hesitancy of the EMB to make decisions until senior government leaders had announced official policies. As a result, health education materials had to be finalized and distributed in just a few days. Overall, IFES viewed these adaptations as highly successful, noting that appropriate materials were produced and distributed despite the short timeline

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<sup>47</sup> USAID. 2021. "Côte d'Ivoire Political Transition and Inclusion Program Final Performance Evaluation." Washington, DC: USAID.

and logistical challenges, though as noted above, the timeline did not allow for translation into minority languages.

In **Sri Lanka** USAID provided support during the August 2020 election to the ECSL through IFES. In the past, IFES had worked with the ECSL to develop and produce printed voter education materials and to conduct activities in person. However, the countrywide lockdown that was in place until just before the elections prohibited large gatherings and door-to-door canvassing. The ECSL therefore adopted a voter education strategy that relied on media channels (radio and television) and online platforms, including the ECSL's social media sites.<sup>48</sup> IFES helped the ECSL develop this voter education strategy, as part of its effort to create a roadmap for the elections. IFES worked with the ECSL to develop updated materials, including e-posters and videos, that explained COVID-19 mitigation procedures and traditional topics (how to mark a ballot, employee leave policies for election day, and so forth). IFES and the EMB sought to target voter education to different populations of voters facing distinct challenges related to COVID-19. IFES conducted a survey to assess how different populations access information. Drawing on the findings, IFES and the ECSL emphasized a tailored approach to targeting voter education to different populations of voters, taking into account their respective COVID-19 challenges. In addition, IFES worked with several community-based organizations to ensure their input on developing voter education materials. This included consulting with civil society-based working groups on gender, youth, and persons with disabilities. IFES also supported the ECSL's efforts to reach marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities, through in-person outreach sessions.

IFES staff described the voter education adaptations in Sri Lanka as a massive effort, noting that they had to create all new materials showing COVID-19 mitigation measures and develop new types of online content and videos. IFES indicated that, given the success of these adaptations, they will continue to use online strategies and materials for voter education in future elections.

## POLITICAL PARTY ASSISTANCE

USAID's political party assistance aims to support the development and consolidation of multiparty systems by providing technical assistance on a range of issues, including campaigns and communication strategies, social media usage, voter engagement, internal party democracy, inclusion, transparency, and others.<sup>49</sup> IPs noted that during the initial phase of the pandemic a core task was to reach out to parties to assess their evolving needs and to encourage their continued engagement with voters and the policymaking process, at a time when many parties seemed to be disengaging from day-to-day politics.

During the pandemic, USAID and IPs adapted both the format and substance of the technical assistance provided to political parties. Regarding format, IPs generally moved training sessions to online platforms and shortened sessions to make them more suitable for the virtual/remote context. NDI reported that after some initial challenges, the online approach worked well, though "Zoom fatigue" set in over time. In some cases, IPs had to adopt new ways of engaging with parties. For example, due to concerns about the confidentiality of information shared in online meetings, IPs in some cases had to shift to holding

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<sup>48</sup> Wijesuriya, Krystle Reid, et al. 2021. "Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka During Covid 19." Case Study on Crisis Management in Elections. Arlington, VA: IFES.

<sup>49</sup> USAID's strategy is described in the "USAID Political Party Assistance Policy," updated in 2021: [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/PPAP-Update\\_2021-Formatted-for-Public-Release.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/PPAP-Update_2021-Formatted-for-Public-Release.pdf)

trainings with one party at a time instead of larger gatherings that included multiple parties in the same session.

Regarding substance, IPs provided new types of support and expanded existing training areas to help parties adjust core activities to the pandemic environment. For example, IPs provided input on how to shift to digital platforms for campaigning and voter outreach, town hall meetings, and party conferences. More broadly, IPs provide support for parties struggling to define their role during the pandemic. This was particularly relevant to opposition parties that faced a dilemma over whether to maintain an antagonistic stance toward incumbents or work in a more collaborative way to address the pandemic.

IPs also developed new resources. For example, NDI produced a 12-volume newsletter, *Politics & Pandemics*, that provided information about how parties around the world were adapting their strategies and responding to COVID-19, along with stand-alone guides on crisis communication, the role of parties during the pandemic, how to hold an online convention, and other topics. IPs sought to leverage the shift to online platforms to encourage parties to accelerate the development of social media and web-based campaigns. For example, IRI noted that it had already been working with parties around the world on expanding their online presence prior to the pandemic and leveraged the window of opportunity created by COVID-19 to encourage parties to increase their use of such tools.

At the country level, IPs adapted technical assistance in response to parties' evolving needs. For example, in **Burma**, IRI provided technical assistance to political parties in advance of the November 2020 elections. Pandemic restrictions limited candidate movement and in-person rallies, making it very hard for parties to reach voters directly, particularly in rural areas. These restrictions were seen as giving an advantage to the incumbent party, since the government was able to conduct COVID-19 relief activities, including distributing food and commodities, despite the restrictions. Government agents often dressed in party gear and leveraged aid distribution events for political purposes. IRI worked with parties on two main types of adaptations: 1) campaign management training emphasizing alternate approaches including more individualized direct voter contact (such as door-to-door canvassing) and creative approaches such as bicycle rallies; and 2) virtual strategies targeting areas with better access to technology, including Zoom meetings and social media campaigns. IPs frequently had to shift party training activities to virtual platforms. For example, in **Côte d'Ivoire** NDI and local partners shifted to virtual trainings for political parties as part of an effort to increase the number of youth and female candidates in the October 2020 election.<sup>50</sup>

Providing support to political parties was not a key activity for USAID and IPs in the four focus countries for this report, except in **Serbia**, where the main adaptation in response to COVID-19 was to shift trainings for party personnel to an online platform. IRI worked with a local CSO, CeSID, to develop a series of training sessions for party poll watchers. Trainings were conducted live (typically lasting three to four hours), with recordings made available afterward. These trainings were provided to both the ruling party and opposition parties. While substantial effort was required to develop training modules suitable for the online format, CeSID was able to cover more ground by avoiding the time and expense associated with traveling throughout the country for in-person trainings. While CeSID viewed the online trainings as successful, they have subsequently returned to an in-person format when possible. This is

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<sup>50</sup> USAID. 2021. "Côte d'Ivoire Political Transition and Inclusion Program Final Performance Evaluation." Washington, DC: USAID.

because the training involves simulations of election-day procedures that are better performed in person with hands-on interaction. Nonetheless, CeSID noted that in some cases it will continue to work in a hybrid mode and that the remote training approach has proven to be very important for including smaller parties, which often do not have the budget to participate in in-person trainings.

## USAID AND IMPLEMENTING PARTNER MANAGERIAL ADAPTATIONS

### RQ4. HOW DID USAID ADAPT ITS MANAGEMENT OF ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PROCESSES PROGRAMMING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

### RQ5. HOW DID USAID'S IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS ADAPT THEIR MANAGEMENT OF ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PROCESSES PROGRAMMING?

For USAID and IPs working on elections and political processes programming, COVID-19 caused an extraordinary disruption for day-to-day operations, as lockdowns and social distancing regulations closed offices, limited the ability to conduct in-person meetings, delayed project activities, and created unexpected costs. While these disruptions were enormous, existing acquisition and assistance mechanisms generally proved sufficiently flexible to allow partners to revise workplans and budgets without requiring formal contractual changes or modifications, aside from standard no-cost extensions that are commonplace when USAID-funded projects experience unforeseen delays. However, some partners did experience more serious budgetary issues due to delays in their ability to implement activities.

**New and unanticipated costs.** Adapting to COVID-19 entailed a range of new and unexpected costs for USAID and IPs.<sup>51</sup> USAID's IPs had to work with local stakeholders to develop new voter education materials to communicate health and safety guidelines, modify content and create new platforms for online training of party agents and election observers, develop new ICT-based tools for observation, support EMBs in developing health guidelines, and budget for many other unanticipated activities. IPs had to procure PPE for themselves and in some cases provide support to EMBs for the same. In countries where elections were postponed, budgets had to be stretched beyond expected timelines, posing a challenge for organizations needing to pay staff salaries and administrative costs. In some instances, these unexpected costs were offset by reductions, particularly reduced travel costs.

**Additional funding for adaptations.** Among the USAID missions in the four focus countries, only one—**Serbia**—sought and obtained additional funding to support adaptations related to election programming. This funding, which focused on providing voter education about election-day health precautions, was provided through the USAID DRG Center's Elections and Political Processes (EPP) Fund. In **Liberia**, the Mission reported that there was sufficient flexibility to shift funds as needed to cover some of the unanticipated costs: for example, allocating additional resources to procure solar panels for radio stations. The Mission in the **Dominican Republic** had obtained funds to support the 2020 election prior to COVID-19's onset, and these were adequate to support most activities, though

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<sup>51</sup> For an overview of the increased costs associated with elections, see: Asplund, Erik, Toby James, and Alistair Clark. July 27, 2020. "Electoral Officials Need More Money to Run Elections during Covid-19." Democratic Audit. <https://www.democraticaudit.com/2020/07/14/electoral-officials-need-more-money-to-run-elections-during-covid-19/>.

the Mission subsequently chose to cut support to the Attorney General’s office for a program on election crimes due to funding constraints. In **Sri Lanka**, the Mission was in a fortuitous position at the start of the pandemic because elections and political processes funding was in place through a new award that started in July 2020, shortly before the August 2020 elections. The Mission did not seek additional funding.

**Modifications to budgets and workplans.** IPs in the four focus countries typically did not receive additional funding from USAID for adaptations necessitated by COVID-19, with the exception of one partner in **Serbia** that received funding to increase voter education activities. More commonly, partners altered existing workplans and budgets to accommodate changes in programming. No-cost extensions to existing awards were commonplace due to the delays associated with postponed elections and temporary shutdowns as countries went into lockdown in 2020. While all IPs reported that they were able to complete core election-related activities, some faced major operational challenges. One local CSO in **Liberia** reported that it was forced to reduce staff and pause activities during the early period of the pandemic. International partners in some cases also faced acute challenges. One IP noted that because international travel was suspended, the organization was unable to bill USAID for planned activities, posing a major challenge for covering overhead costs. Yet, in most cases, partner organizations reported weathering the storm without funding crises. In some cases, IPs noted that they had unanticipated funds available because travel costs were lower than expected, and these monies could be shifted to cover new costs.

**USAID Regulations.** In-country partners uniformly reported that they were able to work closely with USAID Mission staff to adapt workplans and budgets, indicating that USAID regulations and procedures did not inhibit such changes. Several local IPs noted the importance of trust, borne from close working relationships with Mission staff, during this process. In Sri Lanka, the IFES country office observed that because budgets do not allow for contingencies, it is necessary to move around line items when unforeseen events necessitate change, which is made possible when all parties are perceived as acting in good faith. NDI’s country office in Sri Lanka noted that during crises, it may be necessary to relax standard rules and regulations—e.g., when oversight visits and face-to-face meetings are not possible—increasing the premium on trust between donors and partners.

## 6. LESSONS LEARNED

### RQ6. WHAT LESSONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF USAID AND IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS?

This section provides a summary of key lessons learned about adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic by USAID and implementing partners. The study team derived these observations from information provided from the KIs and the desk review.

#### ELECTION MANAGEMENT: PLANNING AND HEALTH AND SAFETY MEASURES

1. EMBs typically do not have the personnel or expertise needed to develop health and safety guidelines during health crises. Democracy assistance organizations, including USAID partners,



played an important role in helping to assist these bodies in coordinating with local health officials, drawing on information and expertise from the scientific community, and developing plans for each step in the election process. Given their comparative expertise drawing on their history of supporting EMBs during crises, international IPs are uniquely positioned to support EMBs during health crises.

2. During the COVID-19 crisis, USAID and IPs supported EMBs' efforts to coordinate with a wider circle of local agencies, particularly health officials and security agencies. Respondents noted that it would be useful to include this wider set of stakeholders in election planning going forward. At the same time, respondents cautioned that including security personnel in pre-election planning may increase the risk of election interference in some cases.

### **ELECTION MANAGEMENT: PROMOTING THE PARTICIPATION OF MARGINALIZED / HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS**

3. The needs of marginalized communities were often overlooked during COVID-19 as government policymakers and bureaucrats scrambled to address multiple competing priorities, often with limited resources and working under short timelines. USAID and IPs played a critical role in advocating for the inclusion of marginalized groups in election planning and ensuring that EMBs adopted measures needed to accommodate their needs. Building strong relationships with local CSO groups in country is critical for mobilizing appropriate responses during crises.

### **ELECTION OBSERVATION**

4. Citizen observation groups, often with technical assistance from USAID international IPs, were highly adept at modifying training approaches for domestic observers in the four focus countries. This experience provides a strong foundation for responding to future shocks that interfere with in-person trainings.
5. Remote and web-based training tools for election observers proved a valuable addition to standard in-person methods, where contextually appropriate. While the ability to shift to online platforms varied across countries based on the level of internet and smartphone penetration, valuable innovations occurred in most countries that will continue to inform future work, generating lessons and tools that have the potential to be replicated and shared with other countries and election assistance groups.
6. The shift to greater online campaigning by political parties and candidates required that election observers devote greater effort and adapt methodologies to monitor these activities before elections. The resources and technical skills needed to monitor online campaigning are likely to grow, as parties increasingly rely on digital platforms, including social media, websites, and other platforms.
7. Remote and hybrid approaches for pre-election assessments conducted by international organizations had mixed results. In the future, conducting pre-election observation missions and assessments in person will remain essential in many cases.

8. Organizations experimented with novel approaches for international observation missions, showing a high degree of creativity in the face of extraordinary challenges. While there were some positive innovations that will be retained, in-person observation missions will continue to be critical.

## **VOTER EDUCATION**

9. IPs adapted quickly to assist EMBs and civil society groups to create and disseminate health and safety information along with more traditional voter education materials. USAID and IPs helped facilitate the shift to online platforms and/or media channels in place of in-person dissemination strategies. Respondents viewed this as a clear success.
10. USAID and IPs played an important role in working with medical experts at the global level to develop and disseminate science-based guidance to inform election-day protocols. Given the limited capacity of EMBs in this area, partner organizations with comparative expertise have a critical role to play in future health crises.
11. Respondents cautioned that voter education often gets deprioritized during crises. Local partners in some cases noted that additional voter education could have been beneficial: for example, in Liberia, where voters' knowledge about the 2020 referendum appears to have been limited.

## **POLITICAL PARTY ASSISTANCE**

12. The shift to online platforms necessitated shorter and more frequent training sessions for parties; in some cases, it required IPs to conduct trainings with one party at a time instead of holding multi-party sessions. IPs added training sessions to help parties navigate the pandemic, including sessions focused on the role of opposition parties during the pandemic, social media usage, approaches for conducting campaigns and voter outreach online, and other topics.
13. While providing support to political parties was not a major focus of USAID-supported activities in three of the four focus countries (with the exception of Serbia), experience from Serbia indicates that shifting training to an online platform for party poll workers worked well in that context.
14. Conducting trainings for party agents online allowed smaller parties, which have more limited funds available for travel to in-person events, to participate in Serbia. This may be a valuable strategy for providing assistance on standardized topics, such as party poll-watching, to a broader set of parties.

## **USAID AND IMPLEMENTING PARTNER MANAGERIAL ADAPTATIONS**

15. Adapting elections and political processes programming to the challenges posed by COVID-19 required an extraordinary degree of flexibility among all actors, including donors, international organizations, local CSOs, and government counterparts. Overall, USAID's acquisition and

assistance mechanisms and procedures proved sufficiently flexible, allowing IPs to revise workplans and budgets in response to changing conditions.

16. Shocks that result in delays in program implementation can create significant funding challenges for USAID's partners, since the ability to submit for reimbursement is often contingent upon completing tasks. This can leave IPs vulnerable when unforeseen events cause program implementation delays.

## **BROADER LESSONS**

17. USAID and implementing partners adapted well to the challenges posed by COVID-19, displaying an extraordinary capacity to innovate in the face of exceptional stresses. The ability to adapt was made possible by strong connections between USAID and partner organizations, based on collaborative relationships, shared interests, and a high degree of trust.
18. Building and maintaining strong relationships with international and local IPs, CSOs, and government counterparts is important for developing programmatic resilience to unexpected shocks that disrupt elections and related activities.
19. COVID-19 accelerated the adoption of ICT-based innovations that will continue to be used, where contextually appropriate, after restrictions on in-person gatherings and travel are removed. At the same time, the movement toward online approaches threatens to widen the digital divide within countries and between them.
20. COVID-19 reduced resistance to adopting new technologies among all stakeholders. Moreover, in the past, donors had been wary about investing in ICT capacity-building, and the pandemic provided a window of opportunity for doing so.

## **7. FACTORS THAT HELPED AND HINDERED ADAPTATIONS**

### **RQ7. WHAT FACTORS ENABLED AND HINDERED ELECTORAL AND POLITICAL PROCESSES PROGRAMMATIC ADAPTATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?**

This section synthesizes the evidence presented above to identify key enabling and hindering factors related to USAID and its partners' ability to adapt to COVID-19.

#### **ENABLING FACTORS**

**Strong relationships.** As noted throughout this report, close relationships between USAID, IPs, CSOs, and government counterparts were critically important for working collaboratively to assess needs, modify activity plans, and address the myriad challenges posed by COVID-19.

**Flexible budgets and workplans.** IPs were able to adjust their activities as the electoral and epidemiological environment evolved due to the flexible nature of USAID funds and contracting / grants

mechanisms. This allowed IPs to shift to remote and online platforms for international and local-level trainings, technical support, election monitoring, data collection, and other key factors.

**Dedicated staff.** Interviews with Missions, IPs, and CSOs routinely noted that key personnel redoubled their efforts to modify projects and keep them moving forward during the pandemic.

**Technology capacity.** USAID and its partners provided critical technical support for deploying ICT-based approaches, conducting trainings through web-conference platforms, training local counterparts to use those tools, providing assistance on developing new voter education materials for traditional channels and social media platforms, and many other tasks.

**International networks.** Networks between and within major international agencies proved valuable for sharing information about the pandemic, mitigation strategies, and programmatic adaptations. Respondents conveyed multiple accounts of how experience from one context was used to inform programming in other settings.

**Experience from prior crises.** Several interviewees cited the experience combatting Ebola as a valuable knowledge base that informed adaptations to COVID-19. For example, in Liberia, lessons learned from prior Ebola outbreaks informed the multipronged media campaign prior to the December 2020 elections.

## HINDERING FACTORS

**Tight timelines.** USAID and its partners faced impossibly tight timelines for adapting election-support activities to COVID-19 in many cases. While many elections were postponed, particularly in the early months after the pandemic's onset, most national elections were not, and in countries that did push back elections, the delay was typically only a few months. Moreover, the evolving nature of disease spread and prevention measures meant that government agencies, donors, IPs, and CSOs typically faced considerable uncertainty in the months and weeks leading up to election day. As documented above, tight deadlines often meant insufficient time to implement new special voting arrangements for vulnerable groups or to develop voter education materials tailored to the needs of vulnerable and marginalized communities.

**Budgets.** Several respondents noted that there were additional costs related to shifting to online platforms, developing new ICT-based tools, procuring PPE, and other unanticipated modifications. While some groups realized savings (e.g., from lower travel expenditures) that helped offset these costs, others struggled to maintain their operations, in some case cutting back to core staff.

**Inflexible legal provisions.** The ability to support core electoral adaptations was in some cases limited by inflexible legal frameworks. For example, in Sri Lanka USAID and IPs were ultimately unable to support the election commission's decision to expand postal voting due to constitutional stipulations that required in-person voting at polling stations for most voters.

**EMB and government capacity.** While IPs reported strong working relationships with EMBs and other government partners, they also note that technological capacity frequently posed a barrier to

providing support. Several partners reported that they provided training to government counterparts to increase their ability to use web-conferencing tools like Zoom.

**Political factors.** In some instances, government leaders inhibited programmatic adaptations by creating difficult political environments. For example, leaders in Serbia downplayed the severity of the COVID-19 situation in the lead-up to the June 2020 election, abolished the state of emergency<sup>52</sup> on May 5, 2020, to continue electoral processes, and announced health and safety regulations just six days prior to the election.

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<sup>52</sup> The state of emergency had been introduced on March 15, 2020.

## **APPENDICES**

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## **APPENDIX B: ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED**

### **LIBERIA:**

USAID Liberia

IFES / Liberia

Institute for Research and Democratic Development (IREDD)

The Election Coordination Committee (ECC)

### **THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC:**

USAID Dominican Republic

Participación Ciudadana

### **SERBIA:**

USAID Serbia

IFES / Serbia

NDI / Serbia

IRI / Serbia

The Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA)

The Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID)

### **SRI LANKA:**

USAID Sri Lanka

IFES / Sri Lanka

NDI / Sri Lanka

IRI / Sri Lanka

### **INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:**

IFES HQ

NDI HQ

IRI HQ

The Carter Center

International IDEA

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

### Introduction and Consent Statement [for all respondents]

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am working with the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. We are conducting a study for USAID that explores how USAID and its implementing partners responded to the challenges COVID-19 created for programming related to elections and political processes. We are conducting this assessment in four countries: Liberia, the Dominican Republic, Serbia, and Sri Lanka. The findings will help USAID generate lessons learned so the agency can effectively respond to similar crises in the future.

Because of your knowledge and experience in the governance space and the country, we would like to talk with you today to learn your insights. This interview will take about an hour. We will share your opinions with USAID only in a report, but your name and identity will be confidential and will not be shared with USAID or anyone else. If you agree, we would like to record our discussion so that we can accurately summarize what you are saying. We are also taking written notes, so we can more deeply understand your thoughts. Your name will be kept separate from the notes and recordings, and these will all be stored on password protected computers. This interview is for purposes of analysis only and the recordings and notes will be destroyed once the analysis is finished and the report is approved by USAID, about six months from now.

Please know there are no “right” or “wrong” answers. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary, and you can choose to stop participating at any time and leave without penalty.

#### **Consent:**

Do you agree to participate in this interview? [Yes / No]

May we start the recorder? [Yes / No]

Do we have your permission to share notes or recordings without your name or affiliation in case we have such a request? [Yes / No]

## USAID MISSION STAFF

- 1) From your perspective, what were the most significant challenges posed by Covid for the elections that took place in [COUNTRY X] in [YEAR]?

Probe: Government capacity and resources to adjust election administration

Probe: Civil society capacity to provide information / civic ed

Probe: Political party campaigns

Probe: Election observers

Probe: Dealings with disinformation

Probe: Lack of citizen trust / legitimacy of the process

Probe: Other

- 1) In what ways did the government's response improve or harm the quality of elections and democracy in [COUNTRY X]?

Probe: Innovative strategies for participating in elections, campaigning, civic ed, etc.

Probe: Suppression of opposition actors, media, marginalized groups

Probe: Closing of political space for citizens and civil society (assembly, association, expression)

Probe: Opportunity to expand power

Probe: Delayed elections

Probe: Digital rights/technological surveillance

Probe: Access to public services

Probe: Management of information

- 2) Were some populations, for example women or youth, affected more or less than others by the challenges Covid posed for the elections in [YEAR]?

Probe: Impact on youth

Probe: Impact on women

Probe: Impact on LGBTQI communities?

Probe: Impact on the disabled?

Probe: Refugees/IDPS/laborers

- 3) Some countries have faced major health crises in the past, including Ebola, HIV, and SARS. Did experience with prior crises play a role in how the government and its partners addressed the impact of Covid on elections and political processes in [COUNTRY X]?

Probe: Access to safe equipment

Probe: Implementing safe practices

Probe: Public awareness campaigns

Probe: Managing the information environment

- 4) What adaptations did the Mission make in response to Covid related to its elections and political processes programming?

Probe: In what ways did USAID relationships change with other donor organization? How useful or effective were these relationships? Can you provide examples?

Probe: Support to elections bodies  
Probe: Transparent decision making around postponing elections  
Probe: Adaptations in international and domestic elections observation that facilitated transparency and access to complaints processes  
Probe: Access to campaigns and voter education and registration  
Probe: Supporting a healthy media ecosystem  
Probe: Issues around maximizing citizen participation/turnout/inclusion while ensuring citizen safety?  
Probe: Issues around limitations on conducting in-person campaigns, voter registration, and civic education and awareness efforts?  
Probe: Managing external interference (People's Republic of China and misinformation)?  
Probe: Anything else?

- 5) What managerial changes did the Mission have to make to support these adaptations in its election-related programs?

Probe: More reliance on local staffing?  
Probe: More reliance of local CSOs  
Probe: Strategy development?  
Probe: Reallocation of funds, modification of existing contracts/grants/workplans?

- 6) How did USAID Mission adaptations evolve during the COVID-19 pandemic? Were some periods more challenging than others?

- 7) How did implementing partners manage the adaptations?

Probe: More reliance on local staffing?  
Probe: More reliance of local CSOs  
Probe: Strategy development?  
Probe: Reallocation of funds, modification of existing contracts/grants?

- 8) How did USAID and implementing partners in [COUNTRY] modify program designs and workplans in response to Covid, relative to the original plans in place for election-related assistance prior to Covid?

Probe: Modified priorities -- new program components added / planned components that could not be implemented  
Probe: Different working relationships, methods of service delivery

- 9) Did any of these adaptations or strategies work especially well or less well? Can you provide examples?

Probe: Did the adaptations produce any unintended outcomes? Can you provide examples?

- 10) What factors hindered adaptations to the challenges posed by Covid?

Probe: Were some more significant than others?

- 11) What factors enabled adaptation to the challenges posed by Covid?
- 12) How can USAID contribute to sustaining any gains in democratic resilience that were made in response to the Covid crisis?
- 13) What, in your experience, are key lessons learned that should inform USAID's response to future crises?

Probe: What are priority issues for USAID in future crises?

Probe: Did you see any missed opportunities that should be highlighted in the future?

## **IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS IN COUNTRY**

- 1) From your perspective, what were the most significant challenges posed by Covid for the elections that took place in [COUNTRY X] in [YEAR]?

Probe: Government capacity and resources to adjust election administration

Probe: Civil society capacity to provide information / civic ed

Probe: Political party campaigns

Probe: Election observers

Probe: Dealings with disinformation

Probe: Lack of citizen trust / legitimacy of the process

- 2) How were the USAID-funded election activities your organization was implementing affected by Covid? What modifications or adjustments did you have to make?

Probe: Changes to workplans, cost, staffing, goals

- 3) How successful were these program modifications in terms of meeting the original goals of the project(s) and dealing with the new challenges posed by Covid?

Probe: Specific examples of successes or failure

Probe: Did the adaptations produce any unintended outcomes? Can you provide examples?

- 4) What resources did you find most useful in navigating the challenges posed by Covid?

Probe: Other partner organizations, donor agencies, the government, other

- 5) To what extent did USAID help or hinder the modifications you had to make to the programs you were managing?

Probe: Flexible financing, additional funding

Probe: Adjusting workplans, timelines, and deliverables

Probe: Challenges you encountered with USAID?

- 6) Some populations, for example women or youth, were affected more than others by the election-related challenges posed by Covid. What issues related to inclusion did you face in [COUNTRY]? Were you able to address these challenges in your programs?

Probe: Impact on youth  
Probe: Impact on women  
Probe: Impact on LGBTQI communities?  
Probe: Impact on the disabled?  
Probe: Refugees/IDPS/laborers

- 7) Some countries have faced major health crises in the past, including Ebola, HIV, and SARS. Did experience with prior crises play a role in how the government and its partners addressed the impact of Covid on elections and political processes in [COUNTRY X]?

Probe: Access to safe equipment  
Probe: Implementing safe practices  
Probe: Public awareness campaigns  
Probe: Managing the information environment

- 8) How did your organization's response evolve during the pandemic? Were some periods more challenging than others?
- 9) From your perspective, did the government seek to take advantage of the pandemic for its own political purposes or to roll back democracy in [COUNTRY X]?

Probe: If yes, can you provide specific examples?  
Probe: If yes, how successful was civil society in countering the government's actions?

- 10) How can USAID contribute to sustaining any gains in democratic resilience made in response to the COVID crisis?

- 11) What, in your experience, are key lessons learned that should inform USAID's response to future crises?

Probe: What are priority issues for USAID in future crises?  
Probe: What advice would you offer to USAID for preparing for future crises like Covid?

## **USAID IN DC / IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS IN US / OTHER DONORS**

- 1) Covid created acute challenges for agencies supporting elections around the world. In what ways did you modify your elections-related programming at the headquarters level in response to covid?

Probe: Managerial and staffing  
Probe: Financing and contracts  
Probe: Workplans and timelines  
Probe: New innovations – working groups, networks, resource creation and sharing

- 2) Overall, how successful was your agency at the headquarter level and in field offices in modifying its election-related programs to address the challenges posed by Covid?

Probe: Specific examples of successes or failure



- 3) What factors most contributed to effective responses within your agency, among the larger community of stakeholders, and in your field offices?  
  
 Probe: Task forces, networks, information sharing  
 Probe: Flexible contracting and funding options
- 4) What factors most limited an effective response within your agency, among the larger community of stakeholders, and in your field offices?  
  
 Probe: Personnel limitations, travel restrictions, remote working conditions  
 Probe: Limited ability to mobilize new funding  
 Probe: Challenges in coordinating with other actors
- 5) What resources did you find most useful in navigating the challenges posed by Covid?  
  
 Probe: Other partner organization, task forces, networks, other
- 6) Some populations, for example women or youth, were affected more than others by the election-related challenges posed by Covid. How well was your agency able to address these challenges related to inclusion in your programs?  
  
 Probe: Impact on youth  
 Probe: Impact on women  
 Probe: Impact on LGBTQI communities?  
 Probe: Impact on the disabled?  
 Probe: Refugees/IDPS/laborers
- 7) Did prior experience with major health crises -- such as Ebola, HIV, or SARS -- play a role in how your organization addressed the impact of Covid on elections and political processes programs?  
  
 Probe: Access to safe equipment  
 Probe: Implementing safe practices  
 Probe: Public awareness campaigns  
 Probe: Managing the information environment
- 8) How did your organization's response evolve during the pandemic? Were some periods more challenging than others?
- 9) Governments in some countries sought to take advantage of the pandemic for their own political purposes or to roll back democracy. To what extent did your programming attempt to counter these anti-democratic actions? How successful were your efforts?  
  
 Probe: Specific examples?  
 Probe: Factors that contributed to or inhibited success
- 10) How can USAID contribute to sustaining any gains in democratic resilience made in response to the Covid crisis?

12) What, in your experience, are key lessons learned that should inform USAID's response to future crises?

Probe: What are priority issues for USAID in future crises?

Probe: What advice would you offer to USAID for preparing for future crises like Covid?

## INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS

1) Covid created acute challenges for governments that held elections during the pandemic, and for international agencies that sought to support these elections. From your perspective, how successful were governments and donor agencies in adapting to these challenges?

Probe: Major areas of success

Probe: Major areas of weakness

Probe: Specific examples

2) What factors most contributed to effective responses among the international community of donors and organizations working to support elections during the pandemic?

Probe: Task forces, networks, information sharing

Probe: Flexible contracting and funding options

3) What factors limited a more effective response within the international community of donors and organizations working to support elections during the pandemic?

Probe: Personnel limitations, travel restrictions, remote working conditions

Probe: Limited ability to mobilize new funding

Probe: Challenges in coordinating with other actors

4) From your experience, were some donor agencies more or less successful in adjusting their election-related programming in response to Covid? If yes, what factors contributed to success or inhibited effective responses?

Probe: Organization structure, staffing, funding, other

5) Thinking specifically about USAID's efforts to support elections and political processes in emerging democracies, what were some of the key factors that allowed USAID at the HQ and Mission level to adjust their election-related programming effectively? What challenges did you observe?

Probe: Major areas of success

Probe: Major areas of weakness

Probe: Specific examples

6) From what you observed, did prior experience with major health crises -- such as Ebola, HIV, or SARS -- play a role in how governments and donor organizations addressed the impact of COVID on elections and political processes programs?

Probe: Access to safe equipment

Probe: Implementing safe practices  
Probe: Public awareness campaigns  
Probe: Managing the information environment

- 7) Governments in some countries sought to take advantage of the pandemic for their own political purposes or to roll back democracy. From your perspective, how successful were donor agencies, int'l partners, and civil society groups in countering these efforts?

Probe: Specific examples?  
Probe: Factors that contributed to or inhibited success

- 8) What, in your experience, are key lessons learned that should inform USAID's response to future crises?

Probe: What are priority issues for USAID in future crises?  
Probe: What were some missed opportunities that could have been addressed?  
Probe: What advice would you offer to USAID for preparing for future crises like Covid?