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Lessons Learned Processes: Advancing to the Next Elections

Guidelines from and for Election Management Bodies

By IFES in collaboration with:



Lessons Learned Processes: Advancing to the Next Elections

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Lessons Learned Processes: Advancing to the Next Elections

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About IFES

IFES advances democracy for a better future. We collaborate with civil society, public institutions and the private sector to build resilient democracies that deliver for everyone. As a global leader in the promotion and protection of democracy, our technical assistance and applied research develops trusted electoral bodies capable of conducting credible elections; effective and accountable governing institutions; civic and political processes in which all people can safely and equally participate; and innovative ways in which technology and data can positively serve elections and democracy. Since 1987, IFES has worked in more than 145 countries, from developing to mature democracies. IFES is a global, nonpartisan organization based in Arlington, Virginia, USA, and registered as a non-profit organization [501(c)(3)] under the United States tax code.

Overview of Lessons Learned Processes

Meaningful lessons learned exercises can help:

- **Improve future electoral processes.** They enable EMBs to be more informed, conduct more effective evidence-based planning (including strategic planning), and use the time between elections productively.
- **Build EMBs' institutional resilience and capacity** to manage ongoing and emerging challenges.
- **Enable EMBs to increase collaboration and build trust** with stakeholders, including marginalized groups and the public more widely, as well as support EMBs' accountability.
- **Enhance EMBs' credibility, leadership, and authority**, including in building relationships with other state agencies and in seeking funding. This can help strengthen their perceived and actual independence as well as professionalism.
- **Improve internal EMB functioning.**
- **Promote more responsible behavior by stakeholders.**
- **Support positive electoral development and reform** that is accepted within the EMB and by stakeholders, including to strengthen inclusion efforts.
- **Mitigate the risk** of future election-related conflict and defend democratic space.

These guidelines were developed based on input from a variety of key electoral stakeholders, including:

9 organizations partnered with to distribute the survey



57 individual electoral management bodies who responded to the survey



8 citizen observer groups engaged



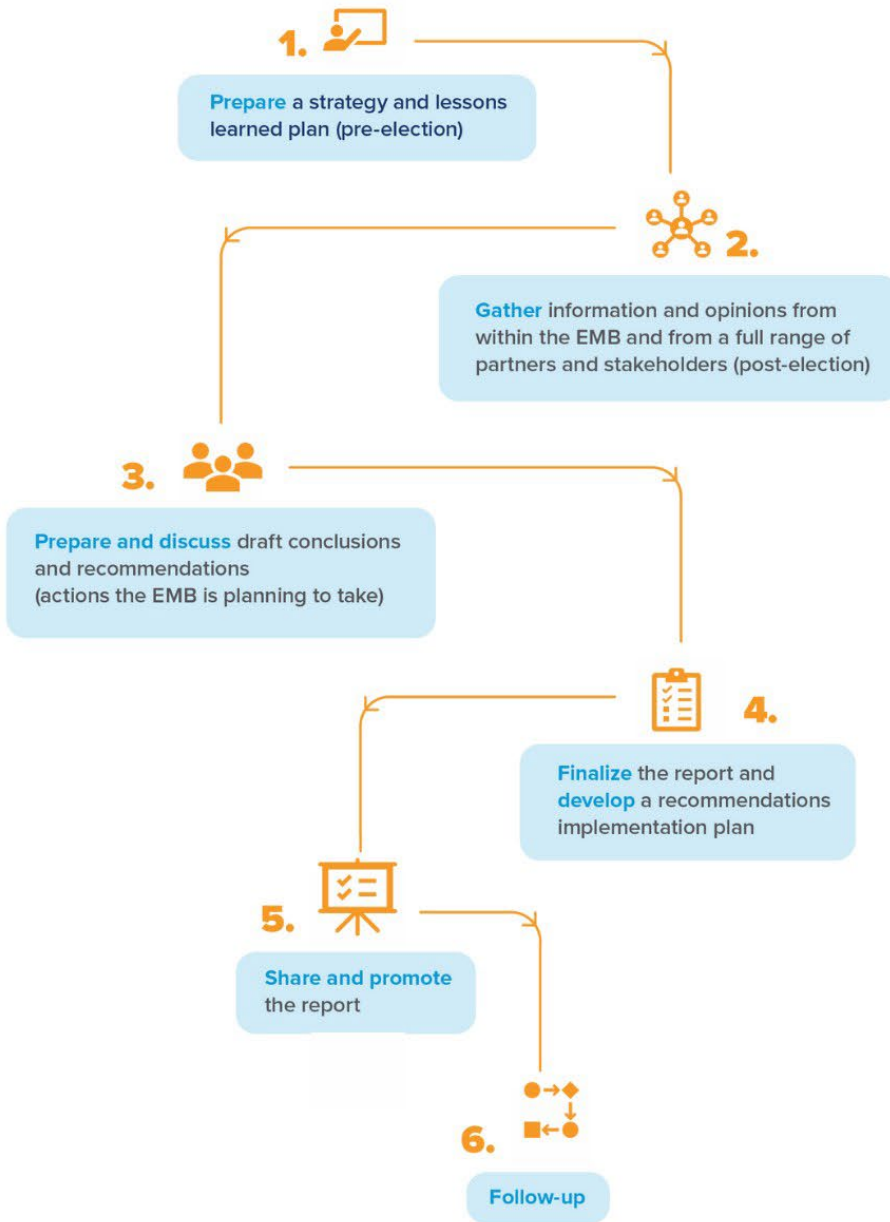
8 organizations that work with political parties engaged



32 international electoral experts engaged via survey



6 Key Actions for Effective Lessons Learned Processes:



7 Key Principles for Effective Lessons Learned Processes:

1) Establish a framework for the lessons learned process well before an election and involve stakeholders.

2) Collect all available information to enable informed decision-making.

3) Consult and engage meaningfully within the EMB and with partners and other stakeholders.

4) Be constructive in acknowledging shortcomings and focusing on systemic issues and opportunities.

5) Draw clear and balanced conclusions, make specific feasible recommendations for future actions, and link them with EMB planning.

6) Establish a schedule for monitoring the implementation of lessons learned recommendations.

7) Be transparent and accessible about the lessons learned process, conclusions, recommendations, and the subsequent monitoring of progress.

Developed by IFES in collaboration with:

ACEEEO, the AU, ArabEMBs, the Carter Center, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the European Commission, EPD, GNDEM, International IDEA, IRI, NDI, OAS, OSCE/ODHIR, UN DPPA, and UNDP.

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Foreword

No election is perfect, but given the current democratic challenges across the world, it is more important than ever that we try to hold elections that are trusted, credible and inclusive. We need electoral processes that can meet the ongoing difficulties there can be and also the emerging challenges that we face in the 21st century. It is critical that we learn effectively from each election to improve future processes, to serve current as well as upcoming generations.

These guidelines are from views and suggestions collected from election administrations around the world, with additional input from a wide range of other actors, including technical experts, citizen observers, organizations working with parties, and also development partners. The extensive institutional and personal assistance given to development of these guidelines shows the broad commitment there is to supporting election administrations' learning, in order to be increasingly effective and impactful in the delivery of their services. We would like to thank all of the organizations and individuals who have supported the development of these guidelines.

The work of election administrations is critical for effective democratic functioning and governance. These guidelines seek to support election administrations around the world in undertaking their work responsibly and effectively, involving wider stakeholders, and finding ways forward through all the challenges we face now and in the years that come. Lessons learned exercises are critical as the most substantive link between a just-completed electoral cycle and setting the stage for the next. We hope that the guidelines are of use to election administrations, political parties, civil society organizations, and development partners amongst others.



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In particular, IFES thanks the main collaborating partners: the African Union (AU), the former Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO), ArabEMBs, the Carter Center, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the European Commission, the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Organization of American States (OAS), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNPPA), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

A number of other organizations contributed to this research. These included the Pacific Islands, Australia, and New Zealand Electoral Administrators Network, (PIANZEA), the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD), Demo Finland, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), the Oslo Center, and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD). Citizen observer organizations also assisted: Transparencia Electoral (Argentina); Misión de Observación Electoral (Colombia); Iniciativa Social para la Democracia (El Salvador); Al Hayat Center (Jordan); Africa (Nigeria); The Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (Serbia); Opora (Ukraine); and the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN). In addition, various development partners and many individual election experts made contributions.

Various IFES Country Directors assisted with the development of this project, which also underwent IFES's peer review process. Additionally, the research team would like to thank IFES' monitoring and evaluation team for their support in developing and disseminating the surveys. Chief Technical Advisors from UNDP also helped facilitate and contribute to the research. The main collaborating partners listed above reviewed the draft text of the guidelines, as did some additional election administration representatives, including from the Australian Electoral Commission. In addition, a number of experienced practitioners reviewed the draft text.

IFES would also like to thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for supporting and funding this comprehensive and inclusive approach to developing international best electoral practice.

List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Name
AAR	After-action review
ACE Project	Administration and Cost of Elections Project
ACEEEO	Association of European Election Officials
AU	African Union
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CRTA	The Center for Clean and Fair Elections
DFAT	Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DIPD	Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy
EMB	Election management body
EPD	European Partnership for Democracy
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus group discussion
GNDEM	Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICT	Information and communications technology
IFES	The International Foundation for Electoral Systems
INEC	Independent National Electoral Commission
International IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IRI	International Republican Institute
KAS	Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung
MOE	Misión de Observación Electoral
NDI	National Democratic Institute

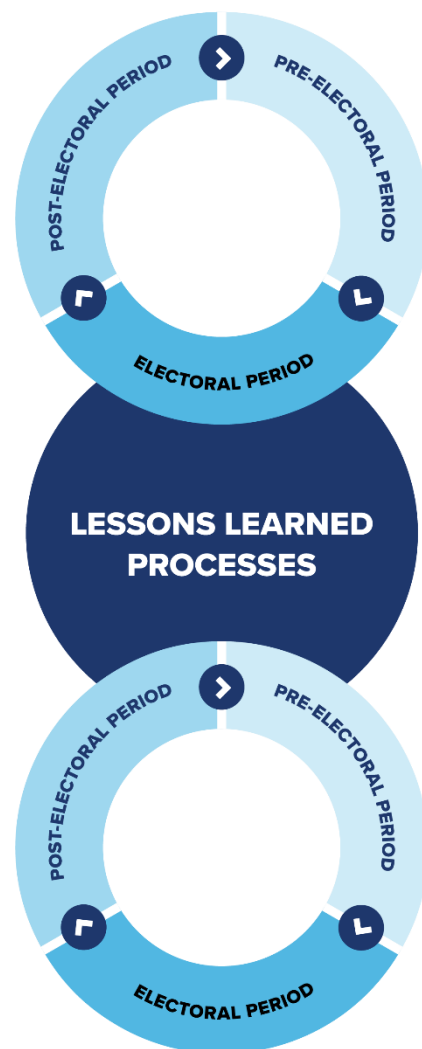
LESSONS LEARNED PROCESSES: ADVANCING TO THE NEXT ELECTIONS

NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
NIMD	Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy
OAS	Organization of American States
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE/ODHIR	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
PIANZEA	Pacific Islands, Australia, and New Zealand Electoral Administrators Network
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
Sida	The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SMART Goals	Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals
UN	United Nations
UNCAC	United Nations Convention Against Corruption
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDPPA	United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
UNEAD	United Nations Electoral Assistance Division
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy
ZESN	Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network

Introduction

Lessons learned exercises conducted after an election provide an effective way to review how an electoral process went and plan for future improvements. Many EMBs conduct such exercises albeit within different formats and with varying degrees of effectiveness. The research for these guidelines revealed just how much EMBs and other stakeholders value lessons learned exercises—and that the process can also bring challenges and frustration. The research team gathered information on current practices, challenges faced and overcome, and ways forward. From this research, with strong EMB involvement, we developed these guidelines to help facilitate positive lessons learned exercises for the benefit of election administrations and societies more broadly.

A good lessons learned process can strengthen planning, service delivery, and relationships with stakeholders, all of which help make for better electoral processes. A learning approach can help EMBs optimize their work and keep up with changing electoral circumstances and challenges. After an election, an effective lessons learned process is a pivotal step toward the next election cycle, enabling improvements and development, as well as avoidance of repeating the same mistakes. Good lessons learned processes help determine actions, put learning into practice, and are natural starting points for strategic planning. Such processes can help staff across the organization feel heard and contribute to improving services. They are also essential to building trust and collaboration with stakeholders, including groups that have been historically marginalized from electoral processes. Additionally, these processes can contribute to conflict-prevention and the building of democratic resilience. The vast majority of EMBs surveyed reported that they do not have



written methodologies for lessons learned exercises. These guidelines seek to facilitate a structured and effective approach to developing practice.

Lessons learned processes can take varied forms and have different names. In essence, though, they are about having a systematic approach to reviewing what has gone well, what could be improved, and how to go about making appropriate changes. If done well, lessons learned exercises involve genuine consultation with stakeholders that have an interest in election processes. These may include parties and candidates, citizen observers, the media, civil society groups (including identity-based groups), community leaders, relevant experts, and others.¹ Good lessons learned processes also involve the public sharing of a report that presents clear conclusions and recommendations and that links to future actions. Lessons learned exercises are not about casting blame but are instead about acknowledging strengths and challenges and laying out ways to make improvements for the future. This is particularly important now, in the context of challenges such as disinformation and democratic backsliding.

Comparable exercises may be called after-action reviews (AARs) or retrospects. Originally military exercises, AARs are now standard practice in a wide range of sectors.² Businesses large and small, government agencies, civil society, and health care organizations use them. AARs are also common following humanitarian emergencies. Sometimes the acronym “AAR” may refer to a quick, reflective exercise during a project or ongoing initiative, while the term “retrospect” may refer to capturing team-based learning upon the completion of a project.³ This publication uses the term “lessons learned processes”, which is more in line with the wording that EMBs use. The term also emphasizes the idea of an ongoing process rather than one-off activities or reports.

The literature on lessons learned–type exercises in general and in specific settings rarely addresses elections. This is despite the fact that election administrations around the world have conducted many lessons learned exercises over the years. To date, however, there has been no review of lessons learned exercises by different EMBs, and no practical guidelines that have defined good practice or described how to approach such reviews in the context of election administration. For example, election contexts require careful consideration of the

¹ Identity-based groups can include organizations of persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and women’s groups, among others.

² For an analytical review, see Darling, Parry, and Moore’s [Learning in the Thick of It](#), as published in the Harvard Business Review.

³ For example, [After Action Review, UNICEF](#) and [Retrospect, UNICEF](#).

range of external stakeholders involved in the process, as well as the political dynamics, which the more general literature does not address.

Some limitations and shortcomings are evident in some EMBs' practices. These may include limited or no consultation with stakeholders during lessons learned processes, no links between findings and actions, a lack of public reports or updates on implementation, timeframes that do not promote effective participation by other actors, and the absence of consultation with lower-level or *ad hoc* EMB staff. Challenges that EMBs often report include insufficient knowledge of how to conduct a lessons learned exercise, not enough time or resources, the quality of contributions from stakeholders, and lack of interest among the EMB leadership.

“Unfortunately, lessons learned exercises are often done to simply tick the box.”

– EMB representative

These guidelines seek to address this methodological gap by providing information on why lessons learned processes can be useful for EMBs and how to conduct these exercises effectively. Every context is different. Thus, rather than taking a prescriptive approach, overall principles and possible actions are emphasized. These guidelines can help EMBs elaborate their current practices and save time in developing lessons learned processes. The guidelines cover the benefits of and principles for a positive lessons learned process, related international standards, and key action points. They look at inclusion, concerns, risks, and ways to work with international development partners. They then go into working-level details and provide step-by-step suggestions for lessons learned processes, along with sample templates.

The content of these guidelines comes primarily from the experiences and recommendations of EMBs across the world, as well as others involved in elections. These include partner organizations, citizen and international observers, agencies that work with political parties, election experts, and development partners.⁴ Developed through an extensive consultation process and wide collection of global data, it is hoped these guidelines can be meaningful and practical. In developing the guidelines, reference was made to survey

⁴ The [Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers](#) (2005) establishes the basis for credible international election observation.

responses from EMBs in 57 countries and from 32 international experts. Input was also received from eight leading citizen observer groups, eight organizations that work with political parties, and four leading development partners. There was also collaboration with 15 organizations that work on elections, including multilateral agencies and EMB networks. Through survey responses, focus group discussions, interviews, and desk reviews, we obtained input from approximately half of all countries in the world that hold elections.⁵ A number of EMBs reviewed drafts of the guidelines, which also went through the IFES peer review process. Feedback is welcomed, especially as more lessons learned processes are conducted, to support further development of the guidelines and practices.⁶

The guidelines are from and for election administration practitioners to help establish good practice professional standards. They are about EMBs' lessons learned processes and

9 organizations partnered with to distribute the survey



are intended for use primarily by EMB leadership and staff. Depending on the institutional structure, different agencies may be involved in administering

57 individual electoral management bodies who responded to the survey



elections and may also take part in lessons learned exercises.⁷ The guidelines are also designed to be

8 citizen observer groups engaged



useful to a wider group of actors given that, as with an election, all stakeholders need to play their part constructively to contribute to an effective lessons learned process.

8 organizations that work with political parties engaged



Lessons learned processes will vary according to context and do not always need to be

32 international electoral experts engaged via survey



undertaken fully comprehensively. However, following the principles and key action points will make any initiatives more

effective. Lessons learned exercises can be organized in different ways. For example, a lessons learned exercise may cover all aspects of an election, or the process may be

⁵ Calculated based on countries rated as liberal democracies, electoral democracies, or electoral autocracies (and excluding closed democracies). See V-Dem Institute, [Democracy in the Face of Autocratization: Democracy Report 2023](#).

⁶ To provide feedback please e-mail lessonslearned@ifes.org.

⁷ For more information on election administration arrangements, see the [ACE Electoral Knowledge Network](#).

staggered, starting by reviewing voter registration and later reviewing the election as a whole. They may focus on national and/or regional elections. EMBs can build on previous lessons learned approaches, scaling up and increasing opportunities for impact with subsequent elections and exercises. Whatever form a lessons learned exercise takes, the principles and key action points described below can help the process delivery for an EMB and the service it provides to citizens in future elections.

1. Why Conduct Lessons Learned Exercises?

Lessons learned exercises have multiple benefits for EMBs, as shown by the research responses collected for these guidelines (see Annex 2). In essence, they are processes, rather than events or reports, which connect past and future actions and occurrences to strengthen service delivery, institutions, and democratic functioning. This is particularly important given that electoral conditions and issues are subject to constant change and challenges. Lessons learned processes provide bridges between elections and are therefore an essential part of an electoral cycle.

Benefits of Lessons Learned Processes

Lessons learned exercises can help EMBs improve future electoral processes. They can help an EMB be more informed, conduct more effective, evidence-based planning (including strategic planning), and use the time between elections productively. Lessons learned processes can give an EMB a more complete picture of how an election has gone and help thoroughly explore ways forward. They allow for effective use of the period between elections by enabling the comprehensive identification and development of improvements, as well as a review adjust implementation prior to the next elections. They provide a foundation for developing and adjusting operational and strategic plans that are more effective and convincing. Lessons learned exercises also help EMBs develop durable solutions and innovations ahead of the political intensity of an election period. Including information from stakeholders provides EMBs with high-quality data and a more complete picture of how to determine next steps. A strong evidence basis for plans, institutional ownership, and a collaborative and consultative approach can also help make it easier for development partners to provide support.

Lessons learned processes can help build EMBs' institutional resilience and capacity to manage ongoing and emerging challenges. Reviews of elections can lead to results-driven actions that are likely to improve service delivery and thereby mitigate future risks. Lessons learned processes can offer effective ways to review progress and innovations and to avoid repeating mistakes. They help EMBs develop durable solutions and innovations and establish a learning culture that can help all parts of the institution improve their performance and professionalism. These processes also increase the likelihood of stronger ownership and active support for practice developments if people within the EMB, as well as partners and

stakeholders have participated in developing recommendations—and see that they are based in evidence. This helps the EMB avoid future problems and manage challenges.

Lessons learned processes can enable an EMB to increase collaboration and build trust with stakeholders, including marginalized groups and the public more widely; they are also part of EMB accountability. An EMB can develop trust through a meaningful lessons learned process that demonstrates a commitment to developing and innovating according to the context, changing circumstances, and issues and problems that arise. The EMB's openness to stakeholders' views and willingness to discuss challenges, shortcomings, and ways forward helps build confidence in the institution and future election processes. Trust is fundamental to any election; without it, there are risks of disputed processes, disruption, violence, and democratic disengagement.⁸ Therefore, it is beneficial for election administrations to do all they can to build trust in the EMB as an institution and in electoral processes. The interval between elections is a critical period for cultivating confidence. Recognized drivers of trust include the degree to which institutions are responsive and reliable in delivering people-centered policies and services and act with openness, integrity, and fairness.⁹ Lessons learned processes give EMBs a unique opportunity to engage stakeholders as partners (and as part of the solution) and can help foster a joint sense of purpose and ownership. This is particularly important for groups that may be disadvantaged in an election cycle. Such processes can help an EMB to build allies, which may be seen as especially important in the current democratic context.

Lessons learned processes can enhance an EMB's credibility, leadership, and authority, including with other state agencies and in seeking funding. This can help strengthen an EMB's professionalism and perceived and actual independence. Sharing lessons learned plans, actions, and results publicly can help stakeholders understand the importance of an EMB having sufficient resources between elections—not only during the electoral period. A lessons learned process can give an EMB a social mandate (public support) through a strong consultative process and an evidence basis for reform decisions. Through organizational openness, stakeholder engagement, and evidence-based planning and subsequent reviews, an EMB is likely to command the respect that is crucial to institutional effectiveness and resilience. Awareness of an EMB's engagement on issues can help build common understanding and

⁸ See Emmons, Vickery, & Shein's [Democracy and the Crisis of Trust](#), published in Foreign Policy.

⁹ See Brezzi, Gonzalez, Nguyen, & Prats' [An Updated OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions to Meet Current and Future Challenges](#), *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance No. 48*.

acceptance of its decisions and actions. A lessons learned process can help make it easier for an EMB's voice to be heard, which is particularly important when disinformation spreads. Rigorous identification of an EMB's needs through a lessons learned process can also make its requests more convincing and support interagency collaboration. Such institutional strength can assist an EMB in obtaining the funding and agreements necessary to operate and to advocate effectively for reforms (including legal changes).

Lessons learned processes can help improve an EMB's internal functioning. Information and ideas from staff are critical in determining practical actions. A lessons learned process that engages staff can help them feel heard, better understand different parts of the organization, know more about how and why decisions are made, and have more confidence in the EMB's leadership. Thus, a lessons learned process can help get staff on board for change, given that they can be a part of the process, see where decisions have come from, and understand the basis for choices being made. A lessons learned exercise can help bridge gaps between technical staff and leadership, which can be especially useful for commissioners who may hold their positions for a limited term. A good lessons learned process that uses a clear framework and evidence basis for decisions can also help an EMB's leadership reach agreement and determine ways forward. The process also helps foster a culture of ongoing, constructive dialogue and continuous learning, rather than waiting for a lessons learned exercise after an election. The ongoing nature of the process strengthens an EMB's ability to mitigate unanticipated risks and deliver credible elections. A lessons learned report—one product of the process—documents accomplishments, challenges, and plans to the benefit of future EMB leaderships at the national and subnational levels. This can help support an enduring learning culture for long-term institutional growth.

Lessons learned processes can help promote more responsible behavior by stakeholders. Involving stakeholders in jointly determining electoral developments helps solidify their commitment and buy-in for arrangements and changes, thereby increasing their voluntary compliance with EMB procedures and acceptance of decisions. A lessons learned exercise that refers to stakeholder actions can also help increase accountability. Therefore, it is important to engage stakeholders in lessons learned plans in advance of an election and inform them that a range of actors will be consulted and that the report will be a public document. This may also help incentivize stakeholders to collect and contribute their own data and information.

Lessons learned processes can spur positive electoral development and reform (including with regard to inclusion) and foster acceptance within the EMB and by stakeholders. Lessons learned processes can involve related institutions, partners, and other stakeholders in responding to new challenges and implementing reforms. Consultation and evidence-based reviews and planning increase the likelihood that durable, impactful measures can be agreed upon and implemented effectively. This is particularly important in transitional settings, polarized environments, and where there is a history of elections that have not been broadly accepted or respected. Lessons learned processes can also help promote agreement on measures to promote the inclusion of women, youth, persons with disabilities, and minority groups that are underrepresented in electoral processes.

Meaningful lessons learned processes can help defend democratic space and mitigate risks of election-related conflict. Lessons learned exercises can improve electoral practices, build trust with stakeholders, and thereby help prevent conflict. This can reduce the risk of an EMB being involved in clashes with stakeholders and in broader societal conflict as a result of disputed elections. Lessons learned exercises can also help mitigate conflict through alleviating the pains of a difficult election and by instilling confidence that future elections will be better. Through a lessons learned process, an EMB can reaffirm electoral principles, reemphasize factual information (as distinct from problematic or false narratives), as well as engage and motivate people to go forward using democratic means. This may be seen as particularly important in times of democratic backsliding and shrinking civic spaces. Lessons learned processes may therefore be seen as a democratic responsibility that helps defend and develop democratic space and contribute to a more peaceful electoral environment.

Risks of not undertaking a meaningful lessons learned exercise

In contrast, not undertaking a meaningful lessons learned exercise has multiple risks. Neglecting institutional reflection, or doing it in a *pro forma* way, without understanding or acting on shortcomings, can harm future EMB performance and damage stakeholders' confidence in the election authority or electoral processes. This can weaken an EMB's access to critical information, undermine effective planning, and reduce its ability to find creative solutions to operational and integrity problems. Lacking an effective lessons learned process, stakeholders—including marginalized groups—can feel disengaged or overlooked and may therefore be more resistant and even hostile. Another risk is reduced trust in the institution, which increases the risk of the rejection of electoral processes and the results of future

elections. Without lessons learned exercises, the electoral reform agenda will be incomplete and lack stakeholder backing, and there will be less opportunity for institutional cohesion and reform. Without constructive reflection, positive interagency relations and arrangements across state entities are less likely to develop. The time between elections is likely to be utilized less effectively, increasing the potential for challenges in the next election. EMB staff motivation and commitment may also diminish. Finally, not conducting a meaningful lessons learned process increases the risk of conflict and democratic backsliding.

“Elections are a continuous evolutionary process. Through learning from past experiences, stakeholders’ input, consultations, proper groundwork, trainings, and implementing the reforms, EMB post-elections reviews help in identifying the challenges and how to tackle them.”

– EMB representative

While a lessons learned process incurs costs, these are an investment, and risks can be mitigated. Costs include the time and resources required to conduct an exercise, the personnel involved, possible external facilitation, consultation meetings, and publication and promotion costs. All can be seen as investments in better planning, service delivery, and stakeholder relations. Potential risks can be mitigated through a robust and rigorous lessons learned process that is properly planned and explained to stakeholders and staff (see Concerns and Risks, Section 5). Exposing shortcomings can show that an EMB is honest and can be trusted when it says things are working well. Moreover, it can demonstrate that the EMB is open to engaging others to address problems—all of which can help build long-term institutional and democratic trust.

“Lessons learned exercises are very important to any EMB, as they help to improve the level of credibility and acceptability of an EMB by all the other stakeholders in the electoral process.”

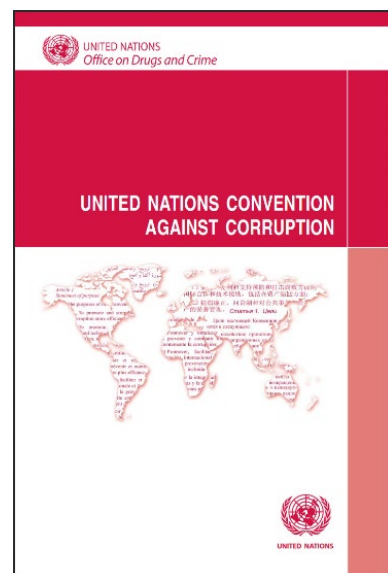
– EMB representative

A lessons learned process is an integral and crucial part of the election cycle. Lessons learned exercises allow the time between elections to be used well. They are opportunities to plan changes and gather internal and external support for reforms and developments as electoral circumstances evolve.

Lessons Learned Processes and International Standards and Good Practice

Meaningful lessons learned processes align with international norms around transparent administration and can help an EMB fulfil a variety of international standards, good practice, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) regarding elections. Widely recognized international instruments acknowledge the importance of transparency and consultation, and they increasingly focus on intergenerational responsibilities (i.e., the importance of serving the needs of both current and future generations). Such instruments also address inclusion (see Section 6, Working with International Partners). All of these can be enhanced through a positive lessons learned process. As a state body, an EMB has a distinct responsibility to help a country fulfill its commitments.

Various human rights and treaty commitments refer to principles of transparency and consultation that underpin meaningful lessons learned processes. The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and authoritative interpretation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) note the importance of transparency and the active participation of individuals and groups from outside the public sector.¹⁰ There is also a responsibility to consult with groups broadly representative of women and persons with disabilities under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).¹¹ Indigenous and tribal groups under the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention outline similar responsibilities.¹² Depending on the country and the instruments to which it is a signatory,



¹⁰ See United Nations [ICCPR](#) Article 19 (2) “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds”; the [UN Human Rights Committee’s General Comment 34, Paragraph 19](#): “States parties should proactively put in the public domain Government information of public interest”; [UNCAC Article 7.4](#): “Each State Party shall...endeavour to adopt, maintain and strengthen systems that promote transparency”; [UNCAC Article 10](#): “Taking into account the need to combat corruption, each State Party shall...take such measures as may be necessary to enhance transparency in its public administration”; and [UNCAC Article 13](#): “Each State Party shall take appropriate measures...to promote the active participation of individuals and groups outside the public sector, such as civil society, non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, in the prevention of and the fight against corruption.”

¹¹ See [The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW Committee, General Recommendation 23, Paragraph 26](#) and the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) Article 4.3.

¹² See [Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, ILO C-169 1989](#). See also the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). The [Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#) also includes election-related obligations.

various regional obligations will be relevant. In addition, there are good practice standards, such as the Open Election Data Initiative, which elaborates on the sharing of electoral information so that it can be freely and easily used by citizens.¹³



SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions includes various relevant targets. These include 1) effective, accountable, and transparent institutions; 2) inclusive and participatory decision-making; and 3) ensuring public access to information.¹⁴ The Principles of Effective Governance for Sustainable Development, for fulfilment of the SDGs, refers *inter alia* to transparency, participation, intergenerational equity, and leaving no one behind.¹⁵ Transparency should be “subject only

to the specific and limited exceptions as are provided for by law.” Regarding participation, “all significant political groups should be actively involved in matters that directly affect them and have a chance to influence policy.” Common strategies in this regard include public consultation, multi-stakeholder forums, and community-driven development. Leaving no one behind involves public policies that should “take into account the needs and aspirations of all segments of society, including the poorest and most vulnerable and those subject to discrimination.” To provide for intergenerational equity, it states that administrative acts should “balance the short-term needs of today’s generation with the longer-term needs of future generations.” Thus, EMBs have a responsibility to consult, include, and provide for youth in all aspects of electoral administration.

It may also be argued that there are evolving standards regarding open government and changing expectations, particularly among the youth. For example, the 75 countries that are current members of the Open Government Partnership signed the Open Government Declaration. The declaration commits countries to “foster[ing] a global culture of open government that empowers and delivers for citizens and advances the ideals of open and participatory 21st century government.”¹⁶ The declaration includes a commitment to increasing

¹³ See the National Democratic Institute’s [Open Election Data Initiative](#). This refers to data being timely, granular, available at no cost on the internet, complete, in bulk, analyzable, non-proprietary, non-discriminatory, license-free, and permanently available.

¹⁴ See [UN Sustainable Development Goal 16 and targets](#).

¹⁵ See [Principles of Effective Governance for Sustainable Development](#), endorsed by the UN Economic and Social Council in 2018. This voluntary set of principles provides practical, expert guidance regarding implementation of the 2030 [Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). The principles are linked to a variety of commonly used strategies for operationalizing responsive and effective governance.

¹⁶ See Open Government Partnership and Open Government Declaration.

the availability of information about governmental activities and supporting civic participation, with an emphasis on public engagement, to improve the efficiency of government, create and use channels to solicit public feedback, and deepen public participation in developing, monitoring, and evaluating government activities.

“It’s about having a truly independent EMB, accountable to the voters, not to the government. Sharing lessons learned helps.”

– **Representative from a citizen observer group**

Guiding principles for good practices for EMBs emphasize transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, professionalism, and service-mindedness.¹⁷ These good practices are recognized as applicable regardless of the model of EMB that is used. Election observers look for such qualities in scrutinizing the work of electoral administrations as well as looking at broader electoral obligations.¹⁸

¹⁷ For example, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)’s Electoral Management Design: Revised Edition.

¹⁸ See, for example, European Union’s [Handbook for European Union Election Observation, Third Edition](#) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)’s [Observation Handbook, Sixth Edition](#) and [Handbook for the Observing of Election Administration](#).

2. Principles for Effective Lessons Learned Processes

The research conducted for these guidelines revealed ways to make lessons learned processes meaningful and effective. While lessons learned exercises may take different forms, the principles discussed below can help the process go well and the outcome serve the needs of an EMB and its stakeholders.

1 Establish a framework for the lessons learned process well before an election and involve stakeholders.

Developing a clear framework ahead of an election shows that an EMB is serious and responsive; doing so also helps encourage stakeholder buy-in. It is helpful for stakeholders and partners to see that recommendations from the process will feed into changes, including for operational and strategic planning. It is also important to manage expectations, so stakeholders know what is planned and realistic at different stages of the process and for potential electoral changes. It is also helpful if stakeholders and partners can comment on the design of the lessons learned framework. Developing the framework well before an election gives stakeholders time to prepare and make meaningful and timely contributions. Involving leadership, particularly from political parties, can help promote buy-in, high-quality submissions, and support for conclusions. Lessons learned exercises are also important opportunities to build consensus after an election, with a focus on the process—not the electoral outcome—and next steps.

2 Collect all available information to enable informed decision-making.

It is important to collect quantitative information and opinions (qualitative data) from a range of sources at different levels of an EMB, as well as from partners and other stakeholders. This range of data and respondents will enable the EMB to draw informed conclusions and make appropriate recommendations for better planning and service delivery. It is preferable to cover all aspects of an election—certainly more than just Election Day. A lessons learned exercise may also cover aspects of an election over which an EMB does not have full responsibility.

3

Consult and engage meaningfully within the EMB and with partners and other stakeholders.

Listening to the views of EMB staff and people outside the institution enables an EMB to be more informed and to build trust and a collaborative approach with stakeholders. This involves hearing from a range of people, especially those who may be critical of an election process, including representatives of political parties, civil society organizations, and historically marginalized groups. Lessons learned processes are most effective when they are inclusive, with research and reports reflecting diverse views. A good lessons learned process involves dialogue. An EMB must make it safe for people to express criticism, including enabling them to do so anonymously, without negative consequences. People need to be asked about the election process that has taken place, and also their suggestions for ways forward. Participants may find it useful to hear the experiences and views of others. Meaningful consultation is key to an inclusive co-creation process that can lead to better design and support for developments.

4

Be constructive in acknowledging shortcomings and focusing on systemic issues and opportunities.

Acknowledging shortcomings fosters trust in an EMB and the lessons learned process. A focus on learning rather than blaming makes it easier for participants to engage in the process and contribute to more impactful decisions. In contrast, a culture of blame and punishment discourages people from joining in and speaking freely. A lessons learned process is not about individual performance but about identifying systemic issues and developing ways to improve overall results. The process makes it possible to transform a problem or shortcoming into an opportunity.

5

Draw clear and balanced conclusions, make specific feasible recommendations, and link them with planning.

Lessons are only truly learned if they are put into practice. Therefore, taking part in a lessons learned process is only useful if doing so will affect future EMB actions. Otherwise, the process serves little purpose and stakeholders can be left frustrated. Specific, detailed, recommendations are more likely to be implemented. A lessons learned process will be more convincing if it examines all aspects of an election, considers what has gone well, and identifies shortcomings. To be effective, recommendations need to link to an EMB's operational and strategic planning for the forthcoming electoral cycle.

6 Establish a schedule for monitoring the implementation of lessons learned recommendations.

Monitoring enables an EMB to evaluate how recommended actions have been implemented and to adjust plans as needed. Lessons learned findings, conclusions, and recommendations can form the basis of a new strategic plan; with monitoring as part of reviewing and adjusting the plan. A commitment to monitoring helps show stakeholders that the EMB is serious in taking constructive actions to optimize its service.

7 Be transparent and accessible about the lessons learned process, conclusions, recommendations, and monitoring.

Making information about plans for a lessons learned process available can help cultivate stakeholders' confidence in the EMB. A public report on lessons learned demonstrates its commitment to institutional accountability, which can also motivate stakeholders to engage constructively. The report can increase support for reform (such as legal changes), funding, and relationships with other government agencies. A report that is easy to read and navigate will help audiences understand its conclusions and recommendations and can build support for developments from within the EMB and stakeholders. The more information that is placed in the public domain before, during, and after the lessons learned process, the easier it will be for stakeholders to understand an EMB's need for resourcing between elections.

3. Summary of Key Actions for Effective Lessons Learned Processes

Six key stages recommended for a positive lessons learned process are summarized below. They are based on research findings and available literature and are elaborated further in Section 7.



Stage 1: Before an election, prepare a lessons learned strategy and plan.

Start before election preparation becomes intensive—typically, five to six months ahead of time. This allows stakeholders and partners time to consider and comment on a draft strategy. First, identify the EMB staff who will be responsible for the process. Consider forming a working group of EMB representatives and determine whether to add stakeholders later. Decide if the process would benefit from independent facilitation, keeping final responsibility for the report with the EMB leadership to maintain institutional ownership. Prepare an internal resourcing plan that identifies any external resources to be mobilized. Disseminate information to the public on the concept and plan in order to build confidence that the EMB is open, constructive, and active in improving its service. Consider using a survey and/or focus group discussions to ensure thorough data collection. Plan a schedule that enables the EMB and stakeholders to obtain the best quality input for the exercise.



Stage 2: After the election, gather information and opinions from within the EMB and a full range of partners and stakeholders.

Collect documentation and opinions from within the EMB (staff have critical roles in identifying issues and making changes) and from partners (including other state agencies). Additionally, collect information from other stakeholders, including organizations that represent those most at-risk of being disadvantaged or marginalized in the electoral process. It is good to have a variety of formats available to enable verbal and written submissions of information (and options for confidential treatment). Focus on what went well, what did not go well, possible reasons, and suggestions about what to do differently in the future.



Stage 3: Prepare and discuss draft conclusions and recommendations (actions the EMB plans to take).

Discuss a first analysis and recommendations with the EMB leadership and then with EMB staff, partners, and other stakeholders (possibly through validation workshops). This sequence will enable the EMB to elicit feedback and obtain buy-in for the next steps. Adapt conclusions and recommendations accordingly. Recommendations need to be specific, actionable, achievable, meaningful, and time-bound. Ideally, there will be consensus with stakeholders on recommendations, including which are the most important. Consider adding some recommendations for agencies other than the EMB that are involved in elections.



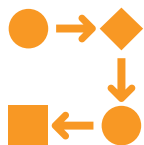
Stage 4: Finalize the report and develop an implementation plan for addressing the recommendations.

Finalize the report with the EMB leadership. It needs to be easy-to-navigate and understand, with clear conclusions and ways forward. Prepare an implementation plan for necessary actions that lists who is responsible, what resources are needed, and additional information. The recommendations can also support EMB strategic planning and updates to streamline reforms and avoid duplication of efforts. Also plan a timeframe for monitoring the implementation of recommendations.



Stage 5: Share and promote the report.

Raise awareness and lead discussions about the report to help generate traction and build trust in the EMB as an open institution that is adapting to changing circumstances and challenges. Discuss the report within the EMB, partners, and other stakeholders, and make it available to the public. This is a time for constructive consideration by stakeholders as a way forward is forged.



Stage 6: Follow up (monitoring, public reporting, and reviewing the process).

Monitor and report publicly on the implementation of recommendations as well as how the lessons learned process went. This will help motivate those involved with reform and keep the EMB accountable. It is also an opportunity to adjust plans well ahead of the next election. This is when changes demonstrate whether lessons have been learned.

A methodical lessons learned process is in keeping with a meaningful electoral cycle approach. An EMB’s commitment to a thorough lessons learned process, planned ahead of an election, can help promote positive engagement and the mobilization of any resources and capacity development that may be needed.

“Post-election reviews and engaging with stakeholders after elections can be time consuming, expensive, and sometimes challenging, but it is useful for reforming the electoral legal framework, improving the electoral processes and procedures, and for promoting transparency and inclusivity.”

– EMB representative

Indicative Timings

The timing of lessons learned processes will vary according to circumstances and preferences. However, a suggested timeline involves starting to plan for the exercise up to six months before an election and to publish a report up to about six months after an election. Beginning well before the election allows for a thorough and inclusive planning process before the election period intensifies.

Time will be needed after the election to gather views and reports from stakeholders (for example, observers) and to consider any electoral dispute decisions. Finalizing a lessons learned process much more than six months after an election risks losing important data, momentum, and time for implementation.

A longer process also increases the risk that key personnel in the EMB or other agencies may leave their posts and that the EMB may appear passive rather than proactive in making improvements.



4. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and access are essential to full participation for a meaningful lessons learned process. The principle of diversity acknowledges the range of differences between people. Equity provides fair opportunities, including through measures to level the playing field for all. Inclusion is the desired outcome, thereby ensuring equal opportunities for full participation for all. Accessibility makes things easy to understand, obtain, and take part in, including for persons with disabilities.

EMBs typically have statutory responsibilities under national legislation, binding international treaties, and the SDGs. In particular, CEDAW and its authoritative interpretation refer to *de facto* equality (with the removal of *de jure* barriers necessary but not sufficient) and the need for temporary special measures to ensure the equal representation of women.¹⁹ At the time of writing, 189 of the 193 United Nations member states are parties to the CEDAW treaty. The CRPD emphasizes full participation, identifying the lack of universal design and reasonable accommodation as forms of discrimination. The 185 states that are party to the CRPD are obliged to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination on the basis of disability.²⁰ Under the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, states are obliged to provide for free participation at all levels of decision-making in elective institutions and administrative bodies to at least the same extent as other sectors of the population. Related standards are contained in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.²¹ Similarly, the Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination also includes election-related obligations. SDG 10, on reducing inequality, includes a target of empowering and promoting the social economic and political inclusion of all; SDG 5, on gender equality, includes a target related to women's full and effective participation in political and public life.²²

In reviewing an election and possible improvements, it is essential to consider the interests of diverse groups. This is particularly important for those at-risk of being disadvantaged or marginalized. A lessons learned process therefore needs to consider how to include diverse and disadvantaged or marginalized groups in each part of an election—including as candidates, voters, or observers, in the campaign, and in the election

¹⁹ See [CEDAW](#), [CEDAW Committee](#), and [CEDAW General Recommendation 23](#), Paragraphs 15 and 43.

²⁰ See [CRPD, Article 4.1 \(e\)](#).

²¹ See [Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, International Labor Organization C-169 1989](#), ratified by 24 countries at the time of writing; and the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

²² See [SDG 10](#), Target 10.2; [SDG 5](#), Target 5.5.

administration. This requires EMBs to have disaggregated data and to consult with organizations that are composed of and representing the interests of disadvantaged and historically marginalized groups. Those consultations are most effective when they are about the election in general and not only topics that immediately affect a group of people. Meaningful inclusion also requires information to be available and easily accessible to a full range of people. While an EMB may have dedicated inclusion strategies, policies, and departments, it is critical that a review of an election process considers the needs and views of all citizens.²³ It is therefore helpful to ask EMB staff, partners, and other stakeholders explicitly about what is being done to provide for an inclusive election and what further steps could be taken to benefit a variety of disadvantaged groups.

It is helpful for an EMB to map a list of groups who may be most at-risk of not fully participating and organizations that represent their interests. These may include organizations concerned with: women, persons with different types of disabilities (auditory, visual, physical, intellectual, psycho-social or others), Indigenous populations, persons with neurodiversity, displaced persons, transitory or unhoused people, and others. Additionally, an EMB should consider a variety of lenses for ensuring equitable participation, including the participation of peoples representing diverse ethnicities, religions, gender identities, sexual orientations, age groups, levels of education or literacy, and others. It is also important to consider intersectional issues that affect people who identify as members of more than one marginalized group and may experience difficult combinations of barriers and discrimination. People are the best experts on their own experiences and needs, so it is important to speak with people directly rather than with persons who may speak on their behalf (such as assistants, caregivers, or relatives).

At times, there can be criticism that election processes are captured by the elite and do not in practice give opportunities for all citizens' real interests to prevail. This perception can undermine confidence in elections and deter people from taking part as voters, candidates, members of political parties, or election workers. Many factors are beyond an EMB's control, but an election authority can take measures to foster citizens' confidence in election processes. An EMB can demonstrate its independence, act with integrity, be fully transparent, show willingness to make decisions against the interests of elites to protect the process, make it as easy as

²³ For more information, see IFES's [Developing a Disability Inclusion Policy: A Strategic Planning and Implementation Guide for Election Management Bodies](#).

possible for people to take part in election processes, engage regularly with civil society organizations that represent citizens' interests, and use plain language that most people can understand. An EMB can also make visible and continual efforts to improve the process, including through lessons learned exercises. During those exercises, it can ask overarching questions about how to increase and broaden participation (including voter turnout). An EMB can also suggest that as part of a lessons learned process, parties consult with underrepresented groups within their parties (for example, women's and youth wings, and people who live away from the capital, including in rural areas).

5. Concerns and Risks

EMBs and others referred to a number of challenges that could arise, also noting possible solutions. These potential issues and concerns about a lessons learned process and possible mitigating measures are detailed below.

- **Problems within the EMB will be exposed, making it look weak and stirring controversy about recent elections.**

It is a sign of institutional strength to be able to acknowledge problems and puts the organization in a much better position for working out ways forward with stakeholders on board. People can more easily accept an EMB's shortcomings if they know it is addressing them and is committed to improvement. Participants in lessons learned processes may vent frustrations, which can be productive if they feel heard (especially for the first time) and can then look ahead. It may be helpful to remind them that the process is not about an election outcome or individual blame but is intended to gather information and identify opportunities for systemic change. Constructive facilitation can help direct criticism into recommendations rather than entrenching negative attitudes. A lessons learned report enables the EMB to keep an accurate record of what went well, even if problems in some areas may have dominated the narrative of an election. A strategic communications plan that accompanies the lessons learned process can also help stakeholders see the positive steps the EMB is taking.

- **Not all stakeholders may agree with the report, including the leading parties.**

An EMB's decisions need to reflect its mandate to implement the law to serve the citizens of the country. At times, those decisions may not be popular with some or most contenders. While this can be difficult for an EMB, especially with ruling parties that may have control in some way over EMB resourcing and ability to function, it is part of delivering a public service, and is also an opportunity to foster broader confidence in the institution. It is important for an EMB to explain decisions, why certain actions are needed, how they help the process, stakeholders' views, and supporting research. A thorough and transparent lessons learned process supports an EMB's social mandate, making it easier to justify decisions with which some parties disagree. EMB staff,

partners, and stakeholders need to know that the EMB is responsive to stakeholders but does not bow to whoever shouts loudest or has the most power, and ultimately, the EMB is guided by its mandate to serve the citizens of the country (including future generations). Staying true to its purpose and explaining the rationale for decisions will help generate trust in the EMB, its commissioners, and the electoral process.

- **Stakeholders believe the report has been co-opted or lacks credibility.**

A report may be doubted if there is a perception that the process was not genuine, the recommendations are not substantive enough, or no action will be taken. Such beliefs can foment distrust of an EMB and may lead to accusations that it is influenced by interest groups. The most effective ways to counter this risk are for an EMB to conduct a robust lessons learned process, demonstrate that it can be self-critical and listen to stakeholders, and prioritize the implementation of recommendations. A glowing lessons learned report is unconvincing and has little value for stakeholders or to help an EMB develop its practice. Natural affirmation bias within an EMB is understandable (with staff wanting to please their superiors). Therefore, it is important for leadership to show interest in problems and acknowledge the organization's shortcomings. It is also important to demonstrate that the EMB has consulted a wide range of stakeholders, including members of marginalized populations, and involved them in the process. If some then complain that their views are not represented in the report, the EMB can explain that there was a broad consultative process and that the report could not reflect all views exhaustively.

- **The process and report will not get much traction.**

Generating interest in electoral matters between elections can be challenging. On a practical level, it may be helpful for each stakeholder to identify a point of contact for ongoing engagement, including the lessons learned exercise. It is helpful if the report is clear in its conclusions and recommendations, without excessive detail, so readers can easily understand the key points. Involving the EMB's leadership can help raise the profile of the process, report, and recommendations. Sometimes it is not a problem to have limited attention on a report if people have engaged and accepted the findings. The full benefits of the work may only become clearer later, as change is seen to have

occurred. It is good to work out a media plan around launch of the report and can be helpful to forewarn journalists that the report is coming so they can plan more substantive pieces at that time.

- **The lessons learned process will generate unrealistic expectations for change.**

Some stakeholders may underestimate the complexity of change or assume their suggestions will be implemented. They also may not understand the limits of an EMB's mandate. Therefore, it is helpful to clarify from the start how the EMB leadership will make decisions and the factors it will consider. For example, an EMB can emphasize that it will base its decisions on the law, its own mandate, available resources, stakeholder views, research, international standards, and good practices for elections. The report can explain why some suggestions were not feasible or realistic (for example, due to limited resources). Similarly, it is useful to explain the steps involved in implementing recommendations to clarify that change can take time. An EMB can also emphasize that the learning process is ongoing and that further changes may occur in the future. The lessons learned process can inform stakeholders of an EMB's situation and choices and help them understand the challenges faced in implementing change. It needs to be very clear if a recommendation is beyond an EMB's mandate and is being to others (for example, legal reforms).

- **EMB problems may be evident before an election, but the lessons learned process takes place after an election.**

These guidelines focus on a classic lessons learned process that takes place after general elections or a referendum. However, a learning approach can be applied at any time after any action, although perhaps at a smaller scale.²⁴ Whatever form an exercise takes, it is important to review what went well, what could have been better, and what to do differently. Involving stakeholders makes the review more robust and effective. For example, a learning review can occur after voter registration or candidate nomination. It can focus on a particular aspect of an electoral event, such as public outreach or staff training for voter registration. Smaller reviews can help prepare EMB staff, partners, and

²⁴ For example, see: [After Action Review, UNICEF](#) for more information.

stakeholders for a more substantive process after an election. It is useful for EMBs to provide staff with a platform to record observations and make recommendations throughout an event. Every action can be an opportunity for learning and optimizing service delivery.

- **The lessons learned process duplicates other strategic planning exercises.**

An extensive lessons learned consultation, report, and plan for implementing recommendations could overlap with EMB strategic planning that typically occurs between elections.²⁵ However, the two exercises can be complementary and synergistic. A good lessons learned process and report can form the basis for developing or revising a strategic plan, thus easing administrative burdens. A lessons learned process has the advantage of collecting information directly after an election, while it is fresh in people's minds and there is more time to implement. This process can also help establish momentum for engaging with stakeholders and conducting reforms. Given the value of lessons learned exercises, it is positive to include them as points of action within strategic plans.

- **The lessons learned process will not improve service delivery.**

Conducting a lessons learned exercise will not automatically improve service delivery. A poorly executed process can entrench problems and increase disillusionment with an EMB. A lessons learned process has to be genuinely and professionally undertaken to be effective. If the exercise has gone well but service delivery does not improve, then the EMB must look into the reasons and next steps as part of the follow-up stage of a lessons learned process. It may be that overly ambitious recommendations and targets were made (generally, people underestimate the time needed for changes). As a lessons learned exercise is held early in the electoral cycle, typically there is time for adjustment before the next elections.

²⁵ See IFES' [Strategic Planning for Effective Electoral Management](#).

- **Some internal and external actors will not support an open approach to election administration and may be invested in maintaining the status quo.**

There could be resistance or refusal to engage in a lessons learned process or even attempts to sabotage it. It is important that an EMB communicates clearly about the lessons learned exercise in advance and gives people within and outside the organization a chance to comment on the plans to minimize any grounds for criticism later on in the process. It is also important that it is easy for people to participate in the exercise, and that the EMB is clear in advance about what makes for a good submission and how it will make decisions. Working this all out in advance, and being publicly clear about this, can also help expose factors who resist or are destructive. As it is positive to have stakeholders on board for changes, there can be value in some compromise in how the lessons learned process is conducted and in the recommendations that are made. However, all EMB actions have to primarily be about fulfillment of the organization's mandate and its responsibility to the citizens of a country.

- **The EMB leadership has reservations about the process.**

There may be multiple reasons why an EMB's leadership may be hesitant about a lessons learned process. It may seem risky to face stakeholder criticism; the exercise may place pressure on the organization to develop; change may be unpopular with staff or others; the EMB may seem out of step with other government institutions; or the exercise may strain resources and capacity. These are all understandable concerns, but the potential institutional benefits outweigh the potential disadvantages and risks and a lessons learned process establishes a positive leadership legacy. The process can be made easier for EMB leaderships by being involved in the planning and implementation and making sure they are fully informed at all stages. Ultimately, the EMB leadership controls the content of a report and therefore the entire narrative of the lessons learned process.

- **The EMB lacks resources or capacity.**

With limited staff and financial resources, it can be tempting not to conduct a lessons learned process, or to ask a technical assistance provider to do so on behalf of the EMB. While the exercise requires time and resources, it is an investment in better elections and a stronger EMB. Asking others to conduct the exercise reduces its effectiveness, as the EMB is not engaging directly with stakeholders and building trust. Also, there is not the same ownership of the process and conclusions and recommendations. Furthermore, the EMB is not developing its own learning culture and capacity. Therefore, it is beneficial for an EMB to lead the process, even if the exercise is limited. Assistance could be provided through external facilitation and the involvement of partners. Implementing some recommendations may require additional resources, which may not be available. Therefore, it is important to be realistic. A good lessons learned process can increase the possibility of obtaining additional resources from the state or donors to implement recommendations to improve electoral administration practices.

6. Working with International Partners

Obtaining support from development partners is easier with a good lessons learned process that includes evidence-based identification of problems and next steps, institutional ownership of reform, and an open governance approach. A good lessons learned process helps development partners recognize an institution's needs, see that proposed reforms have been thoroughly worked out, and understand stakeholders' views. Carefully developed plans—based on honesty, transparency, and consultation make it easier for partners to justify the allocation of both national and donor funds. Monitoring implementation helps reduce risks for development partners. Furthermore, recommendations from the EMB that are based on comprehensive consultation mean that development partners can help support national ownership.

Although it is positive to involve development partners in a lessons learned process, it must remain nationally owned and driven. Development partners should see how lessons learned processes are conducted and it is useful if they can contribute their views. Their views are especially useful given that some will have substantive election expertise and that they may have conducted monitoring of the electoral process, contributed to international election observation missions, or undertaken more limited diplomatic watch activities. Their comparative experience can also be useful in reviewing an election process. It may be helpful to discuss draft recommendations with development partners to obtain their views and any initial thoughts about supporting their implementation. However, the process should always be nationally driven, and development partners' roles should be understated to avoid actual or perceived interference.

Development partners (donors) may be interested in helping support the costs of a lessons learned process. It is much easier for development partners to contribute funds if 1) a strategy and plan, including identification of necessary resources, is developed well in advance of an election so partners have time to consider and budget for possible support; 2) the EMB is clearly committed to conducting a thorough and comprehensive lessons learned process involving stakeholders, publishing conclusions and recommendations, and carrying out actions which will then be subject to review; 3) the donor has confidence in the EMB team that will lead the process and any independent facilitation; and 4) the EMB will cover some costs,

demonstrating its commitment to the process. Development partners may also be able to support other stakeholders in how they contribute to lessons learned processes.

Organizations that provide technical assistance can help an EMB conduct a lessons learned process. However, the conclusions and recommendations are a matter for the EMB leadership, so that there is clear institutional ownership and responsibility. Organizations that provide technical assistance can help train staff on how to conduct lessons learned exercises, suggest types of data to be collected and how, and support in planning the specifics of a lessons learned process. They may also then assist with implementation, for example, with the costs of consultations, printing, publicity for the report, etc. They may also cover the costs and contracting arrangements for independent facilitation for the process. Consideration needs to be given to conflict of interest issues that may arise for experts who have provided substantive technical assistance in the election process and may not therefore be appropriate choices as independent facilitators on a lessons learned exercise.

If several organizations provide technical assistance to an EMB, the respective areas of support need to be clearly defined. Agreement in advance will support a clear plan and division of responsibilities and minimize conflict or misunderstanding. This can be a sensitive area, as the lessons learned process may identify issues and shortcomings that reflect on the involvement of outside partners or reveal sensitivities or conflicts with or between them. Recommendations can also have implications for future programmatic activity and resourcing opportunities. It is easier to manage such sensitivities if organizations that provide support and technical assistance have confidence in the process and see that it is thorough, conducted in a principled way, and is led and facilitated by trusted professionals who work within clear parameters. Support to a lessons learned process can be divided up between different organizations. It is helpful if all this is agreed upon in advance, so there is a clear plan and division of responsibilities (similar to any other government-led consultative process that may be taking place).

7. Step-by-Step Suggestions for Conducting Lessons Learned Processes

This section elaborates on suggestions for conducting lessons learned exercises. It discusses points that an EMB can consider when deciding on a plan that responds to their particular circumstances, resources, and preferences. It is divided into six sequential stages, covering possible steps and considerations. Before beginning, it can be helpful for an EMB to mobilize necessary resources and develop capacity to perform the exercise.

Stage 1: Before Elections, Prepare a Lessons Learned Strategy and Plan



The main aims of the preparation stage are to a) develop a clear framework for the lessons learned exercise well in advance, and b) obtain stakeholder input and buy-in for the process. The strategy establishes the aim and parameters of the exercise, and the plan describes what will happen and when. An internal resourcing plan should describe what is envisaged and will be delivered. This involves devising the data collection approach, identifying research to be conducted (typically a review of documentation and stakeholder submissions, and possibly the conducting of surveys and/or focus group discussions). The more comprehensive the data collected, the stronger the evidence basis for decision-making, and the more effective the exercise is likely to be.

Planning is best undertaken before the intensiveness of an election begins, so the EMB can then focus on its core responsibilities of conducting the election and so parties have time to think about and organize for the lessons learned process. Preparation can also be undertaken later, but it may be harder for an EMB to have time to focus on it and to get party leaderships engaged. Typically, it is useful to begin planning a lessons learned process around six months before a scheduled election (and a minimum of three months before Election Day), although this can of course be adapted for short-notice elections or in case of need. While this

planning is invaluable, it should not distract from the EMB's core mandate of planning and conducting credible elections.



Possible steps include the following:

1. **The EMB leadership establishes the purpose and importance** of the lessons learned process through a formal public decision.
2. **The EMB leadership selects responsible staff and external facilitators.** This includes identifying EMB staff to manage and implement the lessons learned process. A small working group could be established, including staff who are close to or part of the senior management and are given the authority to lead the process effectively. Consideration could also be given to possibly including or involving a very limited number of stakeholders.

Any external facilitation required needs to be arranged and contracted at this stage (see sub-section below). Such persons need to be skilled at election planning in the country in question, organizing, information management, analysis, thinking constructively and practically, understanding organizations, working collaboratively, facilitating meetings, summarizing information, writing clear reports, and presenting. Stakeholders must trust external facilitators to be objective and impartial.

3. **Prepare a draft strategy and plan for the lessons learned exercise.** This can cover the overall purpose and principles of the exercise, an outline of the methodology, timing, and the persons responsible for its implementation. Additionally, a period for review with a deadline for receiving comments on the draft strategy and plan (and who such comments should be sent to within the EMB) may be useful. The timing of subsequent stages of the lessons learned process need to be planned to work for an EMB, as well as for stakeholders, so that the best quality input can be received. For example, parties need to have time to undertake internal consultations (including at the local level), and observers need time to prepare their reports on how the electoral process went. It is also prudent to consider any previous lessons learned exercises that the EMB conducted (for

example, for a previous election or after different stages of the current electoral process, such as voter or candidate registration), and their strengths and limitations.

It should be clear that there is a commitment to making the report public and to integrating conclusions and recommendations into EMB planning. It can therefore be helpful to also plan media engagement before, during, and after the lessons learned exercise, including on progress on implementation of recommendations. It should be clear that this is forward-looking and about identifying possible improvements to the process. It is helpful if it is clear about who has final sign-off on the report (which is typically the board of commissioners). In developing the draft strategy and plan, it is also useful to consider any previous lessons learned exercises undertaken by the EMB and their respective strengths and limitations. This may be a full lessons learned from a previous election, or it may be from smaller exercises conducted after different stages of the current electoral process (for example, voter or candidate registration).

4. **Discuss the draft strategy and plan within the EMB.** It is advisable that the EMB leadership sees the initial draft strategy and plan and then agrees for the draft to be shared with a wider group within the EMB for their comments and suggestions. A draft internal resourcing plan could be shared at the same time.
5. **Prepare an internal resourcing plan.** Identify needs such as commissioner and staff time required (and when); actions required by EMB departments; rooms for meetings; printing needs; travel costs; survey and focus group resources; and others. EMB departments might need to track commentary about the EMB in the media (particularly criticisms); conduct outreach to stakeholders; manage data; organize online meetings; design graphics and other materials; translate documents; and engage the media on plans, activities, and on the final report. A plan for data management will need to be established so there is a recording and archiving structure for information coming in and notetakers for meetings. This is also a good time to review any external support that may be needed, for example, from technical assistance providers and development partners.
6. **Hold consultation meetings with key stakeholders on the draft strategy and plan.** To foster high-level engagement, it is helpful if the EMB leadership (chair/commissioners/CEO, if possible) meets with EMB staff, party leaders, state

agencies, and other key stakeholders to discuss the lessons learned process and the importance of contributing to it. Explain the purpose of the process, the opportunities it brings for stakeholders to feed into future changes, the draft strategy and plan, and how stakeholders can make effective submissions. It is helpful if the EMB leadership commits to making the report public and connects it to future plans. Moreover, it is important to manage expectations, so stakeholders know what is realistic at different stages of a lessons learned process, as well as potential electoral changes. The EMB leadership should make it clear that people should be honest and that there will be no negative repercussions for critical comments. Emphasize that stakeholders have a chance to comment on the strategy and plans within a certain time period. Stakeholders may be met with in one meeting or separately, either in dedicated meetings or with other matters in a broader meeting. It is useful if stakeholders identify a point of contact within their organization for the purpose of the lessons learned process. It can be useful to involve development partners in reviewing the draft strategy and plan so they can comment and are aware of how the process is foreseen to be undertaken and how they may be able to support the exercise.

7. **Review comments and finalize the strategy and plan, as well as the internal resourcing plan.** It may not be possible to incorporate all suggestions made by staff and stakeholders, but it is good to try and respond to some more important ones to show that the lessons learned process is a joint exercise, although final authority rests with the EMB leadership.
8. **Disseminate the strategy and plan publicly.** Share the finalized strategy and plan within the EMB, with partners and stakeholders more broadly. Post it online so the public knows the EMB's approach and what to expect after the election. This enables stakeholders to prepare for timely contributions and helps build wider trust in the EMB.
9. **Develop the research methodology, including for post-election consultations.** Identify documentation and data to be collected (see Stage 2). Prepare a stakeholder map that identifies those that are most critical. Develop a standard submission form for stakeholders to use to submit information and opinions (see samples in Annex 3). It can be helpful to follow-up with organizations' points of contact to confirm arrangements for the lessons learned process and to review what makes a useful submission,

emphasizing the value of prior consultation within their organization (including with groups that are underrepresented in the election process).

It can be very useful to commission surveys and/or focus groups, for example, of permanent and/or *ad hoc* EMB staff, either managed in-house or contracted to a specialist company. A specialist company can be particularly useful in the commission of surveys and/or focus groups with the public, both of which require the specialist capacity of an organization with experience and reach for such research.

10. **Prepare the tentative format for the final report.** Agreeing on a tentative report format with the EMB leadership, including the headings, approximate length and form (with consideration to any corporate styles), at an early stage provides a joint starting point, although changes are likely. See Annex 3 for sample templates.



Points to consider

- **Should the EMB arrange for independent facilitation?** Stakeholders need to know they will not experience negative repercussions if they give critical commentary. An EMB needs to establish such an enabling environment to have a meaningful process that fosters trust. In contexts where there is a mistrust of offices of the state and/or a history of rejection of results by contestants, stakeholders may trust the process more if it is externally led and information can be treated confidentially. When EMB staff conduct the process, there are risks of affirmation bias (wanting to please the EMB hierarchy). For this reason, or because EMB staff capacity may be limited, it can be advantageous to recruit one or more independent experts to lead the process. The expert(s) should work with dedicated EMB staff to keep the EMB involved throughout. Final responsibility for the report should remain with the EMB leadership to maintain full institutional ownership. With after-action reports done in other sectors, respondents generally see outside facilitators as more effective.

Independent facilitation may be undertaken by a neutral person from the country, an international expert, or a team consisting of one local and one international expert. It is

most important that the EMB and key stakeholders trust the facilitator(s), who should have knowledge of relevant electoral matters. Facilitators should not have been extensively involved in the electoral process, which would make it harder to maintain objectivity. Additional independent consultants may also be contracted at the local level to undertake consultations.

- **Should the work be contracted to an outside company?** A contractor can provide experienced and objective personnel, but there may be disadvantages. The EMB will have less ownership, which reduces its opportunity to develop its own internal capacity in lessons learned processes. Contracting the work also diminishes opportunities for stakeholders to develop trust in the EMB. However, it may be difficult to contract companies with appropriate expertise given the particular nature of elections, and stakeholders may be uncertain about the firm's capacity and neutrality. It may be useful to contract some aspects of the process out externally, such as conducting surveys and focus group discussions (with questions developed by the EMB and independent facilitators), and graphic design.
- **Should the lessons learned process include surveys and focus groups?** It can be helpful to systematize hearing directly from the public through surveys, which have the advantage of being more representative than voluntarily submitted comments. Anonymity in surveys enables honest responses that add to an EMB and stakeholders' understanding of the electoral process. Surveys and focus group discussions can help reinforce that an EMB is accountable to citizens rather than political interest groups. They can help make a report more convincing and add weight to later advocacy for change. Ideally, nationally-representative surveys and focus groups can be part of a years-long series that could measure trust in an EMB and views on its performance over time. It can also be helpful to hear directly from EMB staff at different levels and in different locations through surveys and focus groups.

These types of data collection need to be planned out in advance of the election, so data is available for the lessons learned process. Planning includes developing, testing, and adjusting questions before use in surveys or focus groups. Questions might address overall trust in the election administration; whether trust has increased or decreased during the current election process; confidence in the accuracy and reliability of election

results; aspects of the election that went well or could have gone better; priorities for the EMB to work on before the next election; the quality of the EMB's communication; whether the EMB is neutral and independent; confidence in local election administration officials; if voters felt safe coming to a polling station; views on specific changes introduced since the last elections; difficulties or barriers encountered; and others. In surveys, it can be helpful to include multiple-choice answers to questions (with additional space for free text at the end) so the data is easier to compile and use.

Surveys are helpful in eliciting information from a cross-section of people in a quantified form that is easy to refer to and compare over time. Focus group discussions can provide more insightful information on people's views and reactions, using open-ended questions that lend themselves to varied responses. It can be useful to commission a mixed-method model that uses both surveys and focus group discussions. As always, there needs to be a balance of respondents and participants representing a cross-section of gender identities, geographical locations, ethnicities, professions, disabilities, and other factors, and that the process as accessible as possible.²⁶ It can be helpful to conduct a pre-test of a survey or focus group to refine the methodology before undertaking it at scale.

In addition to nationally representative surveys, more limited specific surveys and focus groups could also be undertaken. For example, a survey could be conducted of persons with disabilities on their experiences of accessing the process. Surveys and focus groups could also be undertaken of EMB staff, including *ad hoc* workers, which could include questions related to knowledge, needs, views on organizational functioning, etc.

- **Who are the key stakeholders?** As part of stakeholder mapping, it is useful to identify key stakeholders who have an interest in the election process. Stakeholders may include political parties and candidates (including independent candidates), citizen observer groups, the media, civil society groups that are broadly representative of disadvantaged or hard-to-reach groups (such as women and persons with disabilities), other related civil society organizations, groups that represent young people (given the EMB's

²⁶ Questions from the [Washington Group on Disability Statistics](#) can be used to assist in including diverse participants, especially those who identify with more than one marginalized group. For example, the use of sign language interpreters and easy-to-understand graphics and text can enable the participation of persons with hearing or visual disabilities or low levels of literacy.

intergenerational responsibility), community leaders, and selected experts. There may also be international stakeholders, such as international observers and development partners.

It is also helpful to discuss the plans with partners, who work with an EMB, such as security agencies, other ministries (for example, if polling stations are located in schools), the national bank (if vaults used for storage of sensitive material), as well as private contractors (for example, providing ICT or transport support). Other people from related agencies can also be included, such as parliamentary representatives and members of the judiciary. Additionally, development partners, organizations undertaking technical assistance with an EMB, and bodies undertaking international election observation can be included.

- **What levels of confidentiality should there be?** Organizations may want to submit information in their name and have no issues with the information being public. However, this may be more difficult for people working within the EMB, as well as some partners and stakeholders. It can therefore be useful to explain that the information will be treated fully anonymously (unless agreed upon otherwise). That is to say that it may still be referred to in discussion and reporting but not in a way that it can be attributed (so people cannot identify who has said what). This includes the information being treated confidentially within the EMB and its leadership.
- **Should the public be able to comment?** It can be useful for the public to be able to give their views and this helps keep EMBs accountable to citizens and shows institutional openness. However, a high volume of responses can be overwhelming. It is important to remember that responses may not be representative, as some groups may encourage submissions more actively or have greater online access. To keep the process manageable, consider developing a standard electronic form for submissions from the public so that data can be automatically logged according to the basic questions of what they think has gone well, what could have been better, and suggestions for improvements. Consideration could also be given to alternative ways of making feedback possible for people who do not have internet access.

Stage 2: After the Election, Gather Information and Opinions from the EMB and a Full Range of Partners and Stakeholders



The main aim of Stage 2 is to collect information and opinions on what went well in the election process, what did not go well, and what improvements could be made. This involves collecting information and opinions from inside the EMB and from partners and stakeholders more broadly. Ideally, these groups will first undertake their own internal consultations (including with underrepresented groups within their organizations), and then prepare comments for submission. These can be provided in writing or verbally in either small meetings or a larger stakeholder meeting. It is helpful to hold consultations at the local level as well as centrally. The key goal of this stage is to listen.

“Having discussions about the lessons learned exercise far enough out from the election so that the details of when, where and who are agreed, and arrangements put in place will make it much easier to get a good result.”

– Representative of a development partner

Gathering information and opinions can begin directly after an election results process to allow time for the EMB, partners, and stakeholders to prepare their submissions. The lessons learned exercise will review the entire electoral cycle completed. Therefore, it is imperative to clarify the timing in advance so that different EMB departments can be prepared and collect data before people forget or depart from their positions, likewise with partners and stakeholders. Soon after an election, the EMB can first gather data and opinions internally, from its permanent and *ad hoc* staff. Stakeholders can then be consulted after they have had time to hear from people within the organization and prepare their submissions. Observing organizations may need some three months to prepare their reports. The exact timing depends on the electoral context and may need to be adapted under certain circumstances (for example, if there is a difficult legal challenge).



Possible steps for collecting information include:

1. **Conduct a desk review to identify and collect EMB-related information and documentation.** This can include data on electoral operations (including, for example, disaggregated data on voter registration, polling efficiencies, and results aggregation processes); status reports on strategic planning; numbers and types of complaints; reports by citizen and international observers; expert analysis; media commentary; and surveys of permanent and/or *ad hoc* staff. It can be helpful to produce short summaries of these sources to keep the information manageable and to be able to identify recurring themes. Key information can also be identified for use in consultation meetings with EMB staff, partners, and stakeholders.
2. **Collect opinions from within the EMB, including from field staff from across the country.** This enables staff at all levels and in different locations to have a chance to contribute so the full picture can be understood. Staff need to know that they can express opinions freely without jeopardizing their careers or damaging working relationships. EMB leadership should clearly emphasize that constructive criticism is welcomed but that staff can comment anonymously if they prefer. Mechanisms for commenting can include written submissions by each department, meetings with departments, and individual submissions. Meetings with departments may be held separately, in clusters, or as a whole. Whatever the format, it is important that departments can comment on their own areas of responsibility as well as the election process more broadly. Information may also be gathered on a regional basis rather than by department.
3. **Collect information and opinions from partners.** Partners can include state agencies involved in the electoral process, such as security forces; local authorities; cybersecurity agencies; procurement authorities; and privately contracted companies that provide, for example, ICT, transportation, communications, and printing support. It should be clear that this is not a contractual review but part of an effort to gather multiple views to improve the election process.

4. **Collect information and opinions from stakeholders.** This information gathering can be in written form, in small meetings, or in a larger meeting with multiple stakeholders. The important thing is that stakeholders feel free to share their information and give their opinions and do so constructively, with a focus on ways forward. To increase efficiency, it is prudent to advise stakeholders ahead of the exercise about what is expected from them and how they can best contribute. Inclusion can be promoted by arranging for sign language interpretation and other accessibility measures so that persons with varied disabilities are able to contribute to the process.

5. **Maintain records of what respondents from each organization have said or submitted, by date.** It is helpful to have an easy-to-navigate record of written and verbal submissions, as these form the evidence basis for future decisions. To protect confidentiality, it may need to be stored in a location other than the EMB's server. It can be useful to maintain a log of submissions, including each respondent's main suggestions. A log could record the date; organization (or anonymous); type (e.g., party/contender, observer, media, commentator/expert, civil society organization, state institution, or contracted company); form of submission (written, group meeting, or individual); information to be treated confidentially (yes/no); documentary evidence supplied; key points; and key suggestions.



Engaging stakeholders effectively:

- **Give stakeholder organizations the option of responding in writing or verbally.** If an organization prefers to respond in writing, request a single submission, to avoid information overload.

- **Cultivate a communication style that encourages information sharing.** This stage is about trying to understand how different people see the election process, so it is best not to be judging of answers. There are no right or wrong opinions. As this stage is about listening, there is no need to defend the institution. Rather, this stage is about enquiring about how others see it. However, some factual information may be corrected if it is clearly wrong. Any personal attacks should be stopped as the process is about looking

at overall functioning, not personal behavior. Keep the focus on a constructive review of electoral processes and identifying ways to improve them.

- **It can be useful at the start of a meeting to clarify the purpose/objectives, and ground rules including that information will be treated anonymously for the session.** Explain that the goal at this stage is to listen, and explore findings and suggestions, and that the focus is looking at what went well and what can be improved. It can be helpful to say the information will be used but it will not be attributed to any individual or be used in an identifiable way, unless someone wants it to be. It can also be helpful to clarify the length of time for the meeting and what the subsequent stages will be of the lessons learned process.

“It’s a civil process that involves everyone. It’s an opportunity to improve and to include everyone.”

– Representative from a citizen observer group

- **Provide information that helps stakeholders give informed commentary.** This can clarify the mandates of the EMB and other related institutions and also include more specific information on the election. For example, information could be collected on the gender identity of candidates, rates of invalid ballots by constituency, turnout figures, security incidents, and other data. It may be useful to have copies of the EMB’s strategic and operational plans available, as well as any tracking reports.



General questions to ask are:

- **What went well?** Prompts can include: What was good about the election? What met legal requirements and international standards? What went better in this election than in previous ones? What should be repeated in future elections?

- **What did not go so well?** Prompts can include: What were you not sure about? Which things could have gone better? What was problematic? Which problems were the most serious? What was worse than in previous elections? What could be problematic in the future? What did you hear others criticize?
- **Why do you think these things did not go so well?** Prompts can include: were there differences to what was planned? If so, what, and why? What context factors and EMB factors affected these shortcomings? Have these always been problems, or have they changed since the last election?
- **What should be done differently next time?** Prompts can include: In an ideal world, what should be done to improve election processes? What specifically can the EMB do? What would make the most difference? What changes are most feasible and realistic? What possible problems or objections might this suggestion cause? Do you think any research or trials would be useful to explore these suggestions? Would any legal change be necessary or advisable? What actions might help benefit future generations?
- **What are the most important changes to make?** Prompts can include: Which three of your suggestions are most important? Which changes are most urgent for the next elections? Which are more long-term suggestions that will require several election cycles? Which do you think is most manageable to implement and will improve the election process? What are the first steps you would like to see the EMB take?

It can be helpful to ask both general and more specific questions. It is good to query different aspects of the election process and the election administration. Process questions relate to different stages of the election, such as voter registration, candidate nomination, campaigns, operational preparations, out-of-country voting (if applicable), voter information and education, Election Day, vote counting/tabulation, announcement of results, and management of complaints. Questions on organizational issues can relate to general institutional performance, including the EMB's transparency, relationships with partners, reliability of service, perceptions of independence, leadership appointment process, resourcing, value for money, planning, procurement of sensitive materials, internal communication, logistics, ICT, and others. Questions can be asked about any suggestions regarding the legal framework or address inclusion and opportunities for different disadvantaged groups, security, and how to improve

participation in general. Emerging issues can also be asked about, such as how the EMB can reduce its carbon footprint, protect data, or address disinformation challenges. It is also good to ask at the end if people have any other further points to add that have not been covered.

“Ensure a safe environment so that parties can express their points of view...and with clear expectations of learning and action.”

– **Representative of an international organization working with political parties**

Questions can be tailored according to the context and the specific stakeholder. Different questions may be asked of people working within the EMB to those asked to partners and to different stakeholders more broadly. The number of questions may vary according to the resources available to manage the information and the type of stakeholder.

Encourage respondents to be specific in their comments. Probe for details about what they liked or did not like, and the precise changes they suggest. Particularly regarding shortcomings, ask exactly what happened, the scale of the issue (for example, whether it was isolated or widespread), and the severity of the impact. Similarly, it's good to emphasize that suggestions need to be feasible to be implemented.

Ask about any recommendations made during a previous lessons learned exercise, if applicable. For example, do participants know or believe they were implemented? What helped with implementation? What was problematic with the recommendations or their implementation?

Allow space for participants to discuss other topics. This is an opportunity to air overarching observations or ideas that may have been missed and reinforces that the EMB is open to stakeholders' thoughts and suggestions.

While the focus of a lessons learned exercise is on an EMB's actions, it can be useful to consider wider issues. An EMB may identify ways to promote positive change in related areas (for example, electoral legislation) to enhance future electoral functioning.

“An ideal exercise involves structuring it in such a way that you understand where it has come from, why it’s being done, have a safe space for feedback, and is an exercise for planning ahead.”

– **Representative from a citizen observer group**



Points to consider

- **Should you meet with stakeholders in groups or separately?** The important thing is that high-quality data can be collected on stakeholders’ experiences and suggestions and that stakeholders feel comfortable, heard, and have a sense that they are contributing to a productive process. This also needs to be balanced with efficiency, so the lessons learned process does not become overly protracted or resource intensive. Ideally, offer stakeholders the option to respond in writing and/or in-person. It may be useful for stakeholders to hear others’ views. However, it is not always easy to manage a larger meeting, and some respondents will not respond well in this format. Smaller meetings may encourage franker conversations but require more time overall. It is important to consider different stakeholder preferences for the type and size of meeting and plan accordingly.
- **Should you hold subnational meetings with stakeholders?** It can be useful to hear the views of stakeholders at the local level about how things worked in practice and about issues in their part of the country. This may be particularly important if national-level stakeholders do not consult effectively within the organization. If meetings take place at a variety of locations, it is important to keep a political and geographical balance to avoid accusations of bias.
- **Could some consultations be held online?** Online consultations can be more efficient, cheaper to organize, and increase accessibility, particularly for those that are further away. However, they may not be as effective in building connections, engagement, and trust. Some respondents may be uncomfortable in an online setting. Concerns about internet access, privacy, and cybersecurity may also lessen meaningful participation. Consider a mixed approach that includes holding most meetings in-person and include

online options if they are more convenient for some respondents and for stakeholders beyond the core group.

Stage 3: Prepare and Discuss Draft Conclusions and Recommendations (Actions the EMB Plans to Take)



The main aim of Stage 3 is to prepare key findings, conclusions, and recommendations and discuss these within the EMB and with partners and stakeholders. This involves analyzing the data, comments, and suggestions collected; identifying key conclusions; and formulating recommendations. Following this, it is useful to review these points with the EMB leadership and then more broadly within the EMB and with partners and other stakeholders to obtain their feedback. During this process, conclusions and recommendations may evolve. Discussion is critical to develop effective conclusions and recommendations that can work in practice and to obtain buy-in for proposed changes from EMB staff, partners, and stakeholders.

Preparation of conclusions and recommendations can begin once a critical mass of data has been gathered. While timeframes may vary, it is reasonable to give stakeholders (such as observers) three months to prepare comments and finalize their reports. Taking longer may encroach on the time an EMB has between elections to make changes before the next election. Delays may result in missed opportunities to implement lessons learned, for example, if the deadline for the submission of an EMB's annual budget passes, by-elections take place, or the EMB's leadership changes. As time passes, the public may wonder what an EMB is doing, and whether future elections will be any better.



Possible steps include:

1. **Prepare a draft analysis of the data gathered and clear conclusions from it.** Triangulate the data gathered through cross-referencing the different data sources. Identify the main points regarding 1) what went well, 2) what did not go well, 3) possible

reasons why things did not go well, and 4) suggestions for what to do differently. It is good to do this for a range of electoral areas as well as for the election administration as a whole. If possible, indicate which issues stakeholders were most concerned about and thought were the most important to address.

2. **Try to identify one or more draft recommendations for areas that did not go well.**

Consider each area of the election and the election administration overall (for example, look for overarching points about the EMB's professionalism, independence, cost-effectiveness, communication, or transparency). It may be useful to draft several recommendations on an issue; then, through discussion, narrow them down to the most important. Recommendations must be specific, actionable, achievable, meaningful, and time-bound. They also need to be feasible, assuming there is political will to implement them. It is useful to consider potential risks and possible mitigation measures. At times, it may be that no recommendation is drafted. This can happen, for example, if changes would be difficult, infeasible, or too risky to undertake without sufficient mitigation measures. A report can explain why some suggested options are not feasible or realistic. Although some actions may not be within the EMB's competencies, it may be able to take some action. For example, an EMB cannot change the law, but it may be able to suggest and advocate for legislative amendments. While recommendations should relate primarily to the EMB, some may apply to important actions by others. It can also be helpful for a report to spell out why some suggested options are not feasible or realistic. Similarly, it may be useful to explain some of the different steps involved in implementing recommendations so that immediate change is not expected.

3. **Discuss the draft analysis, conclusions, and recommendations with the EMB leadership.** This gives the EMB leadership a chance to make corrections and changes before discussing the draft conclusions and recommendations with stakeholders.

4. **Discuss the draft analysis, conclusions, and recommendations within the EMB and with partners and other stakeholders.** This is a chance to test conclusions and recommendations, hear about problems that could arise, and to get a sense of what people think is most important and what the next steps should be. It's also a chance to get buy-in for proposed changes, ideally with a consensus that has been reached on recommendations. Given their role in lawmaking and the executive branch, this is

particularly useful with regards to leading political parties. It can therefore be helpful if there is engagement from the senior levels of the EMB to stress the importance of the recommendations. It can be useful to establish the purpose of the meeting and to be clear that it is expected that there will be different opinions and disagreements and that it's helpful to understand stakeholders' different views. Clarify that the EMB will make decisions based on the discussions and the law and its responsibility to citizens and future generations, as well as research, international standards, good practice for elections, and available resources.

Such meetings or conferences, sometimes called 'validation workshops', may be held with all stakeholders over several days (often dividing into working groups for more substantive discussions followed by a plenary session to share key points). Alternatively, meetings may be held with smaller groups of stakeholders or bilaterally. Some meetings are better held in private, so participants can speak freely.

It is important that key actors have the opportunity to be fully involved (including: political parties, citizen observers, external experts, and representatives of marginalized populations). It may be helpful to circulate the draft text (perhaps online), set a deadline for comments and make it clear that this is a draft. It is also important that comments on the draft are recorded. Record and log comments, noting which recommendations stakeholders consider most important. If a key actor has not contributed, this can be noted in the report.

- 5. Revise the draft analysis, conclusions, and recommendations as appropriate.** Adjust the report as warranted from consultations (either at the end or progressively as meetings are held). Base adjustments not on who shouts the loudest or is most powerful, but on what will most help the EMB learn lessons and make improvements. These must reflect the EMB's statutory responsibilities under the law, international standards, and good practices for elections, as well as the EMB's responsibility to citizens and future generations. Discuss any significant potential changes with the EMB leadership before integrating them into the report.

"It's not pointing fingers or blame, but it's natural to want to be better."

– Election expert working with EMBs



Point to consider

- **What if stakeholders truly disagree with each other or the EMB?** Stakeholders may have very different opinions from each other and the EMB, and exchanges can therefore become heated on electoral matters. Sometimes, it can be helpful for stakeholders to hear and read each other's opinions to afford them a better understanding of what the election administration is dealing with. In this case, joint meeting can be useful. In other contexts, this can be counter-productive, and it may be better to meet groups separately. If stakeholders truly disagree with the conclusions and recommendations, it can be helpful for the EMB to show how thoroughly it has undertaken the exercise, as well as highlight the evidence basis for recommendations (from information collected during the lessons learned process). Ultimately, full agreement may not be possible. Still, it is important that the EMB understand as much as possible about stakeholders' positions and explain its professional approach to developing conclusions and recommendations. At a minimum, stakeholders should know that their input was considered.

Stage 4: Finalize the Report and Develop an Implementation Plan (for Addressing the Recommendations)



The main aim of Stage 4 is to finalize the report and plan for implementation. This requires the EMB leadership's agreement on the conclusions and recommendations, finalization of the text, and the development of a plan for implementing the recommendations (which can be potentially integrated into strategic planning).

Recommendations are actions that the EMB is prepared to take. They require detailed planning, including identifying how they will be implemented by the EMB, by whom, and possible timeframes. This can be a standalone document or can form the basis of EMB strategic planning or updating, in order to streamline the reform agenda and avoid duplication of efforts.

The sooner this stage is undertaken the better, as it enables an EMB to use the time between elections more effectively and gives confidence that it is making improvements. Finalizing the report promptly can help maintain momentum within the EMB and with stakeholders. While it may be optimal for a recommendations implementation plan to be developed before an EMB signs off on a lessons learned report, in practice, it may require more time and be undertaken after publication of the lessons learned report. is disseminated.



Possible steps include:

1. **Revise the report and submit it to the EMB leadership for comment and sign-off.** Final adjustments may be necessary before leadership approves the report and implementation of recommendations. The clearer the report, the more likely that the EMB leadership and staff, partners, and stakeholders will read and understand it.
2. **Format the report so it is user-friendly.** The report should be easy to read, understand, and remember. Accessibility issues should also be accommodated so that all members of society are able to access the report's findings.
3. **Obtain approval from the EMB leadership.** This is crucial to ensure institutional ownership of the report and recommendations, as well as for advancing to the next stage. The more involved leadership has been along the way, the easier this step should be.
4. **Prepare a recommendations implementation plan, either as a standalone document or as part of a strategic plan or update.** Limit the plan to recommendations to be implemented by the EMB (as opposed to those that are directed at other agencies). A comprehensive plan can include information such as: what actions need to happen for a recommendation to be implemented (for example, research, piloting, etc.); the responsible department; other involved parties or departments; resources; anticipated targets; estimated timeframes (including milestones that must be implemented); and other information, such as potential risks (see Annex 3 for a sample

template). More detailed information on implementation can also be part of strategic planning, or as a part of updating of an existing strategic plan, to avoid duplication of effort and streamline planning for reform. Recording such specific information makes it easier and more likely that recommendations will get implemented. Recommendations that fall within the purview of other organizations should be clearly identified. An implementation plan also makes it easier to discuss possible support with development partners.



Writing a clear report and recommendations

- **Keep the report easy to understand.** Use straightforward language, avoid jargon, and explain terms that are used. More complicated information can be added to footnotes and annexes so readers can more easily follow the main text. The report need not be exhaustive. It can be more effective to cover a limited number of points well than to address every issue. Including quotes can bring an issue to life, so long as the people quoted are not identified without their permission. A helpful method for writing clearly is to have the first sentence in each paragraph be the main point, with the remaining sentences elaborating on or explaining with more detail on the issue. This helps make it easier to read and follow a report. Additionally, this can make it easier to write clearly and identify the main points that should be in an executive summary. It can also be helpful to make sure paragraphs are not too long and to use bullet points and lists.
- **Make the report convincing.** Readers need to know that this is a serious piece of work, so it is good to explain the methodology used, including the reach of the consultation and the diversity of groups of people that have contributed. State the limitations of the methodology. It is good to have an opening statement from the EMB's leadership to show that the report has weight and the EMB is committed to taking action. The report should be balanced and cover different aspects of the election, as well as different stakeholders' concerns. It should acknowledge difficult or problematic aspects of an election, along with positive ones. To be convincing, a report should address shortcomings, including the impact and scale of problems. It is understandable that

reports may focus more on shortcomings as it is important to understand them and to identify recommendations going forward.

- **Present the recommendations effectively and prioritize them.** Recommendations should be **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**chievable, **r**elevant, and **t**ime-bound (SMART) so they are feasible to implement and track and will make a difference. Therefore, it is good if each recommendation has one distinct point. Note which EMB department is responsible for implementing the recommendation. Most recommendations should focus on what the EMB—not other actors—can do. For example, while the EMB does not typically decide the size of its budget, it may be able to request and advocate for more resources well in advance of an election. It can be helpful to identify which of the recommendations are the highest priority ones, so it is clear within the EMB and to stakeholders about where there is most need to focus attention and undertake actions. Some recommendations may be about undertaking further research or stakeholder consultation on an issue. However, too many of these types of recommendations may imply that the EMB is avoiding action. It is good to identify which recommendations would also benefit from a change in the law, and, if time allows, mark which ones relate to recommendations made by observer missions. Implementing some recommendations may require more than one electoral cycle, but trackable steps before the next elections can still be identified and committed to.
- **Make the report easy-to-navigate.** Develop a logical structure with a table of contents, descriptive headings, clearly identified conclusions and recommendations, colorful graphics that draw attention to key points, and a numbered list of recommendations in one place. Use tables and bulleted or numbered lists to help readers manage the information. An executive summary should cover all the main points succinctly, including key recommendations, bearing in mind that this may be the only part of a report that is read. Include a list of acronyms and annexes as is useful.



Points to consider

- **How to decide what to include in the report and what to leave out?** The report does not need to be exhaustive. It is most important to include information on problems that are 1) within the EMB's remit; 2) have the most impact on the election process; 3) address areas where the law; international standards; or good practice are not adhered to; 4) are of greatest concern for a range of stakeholders and/or EMB personnel and partners; 5) will likely continue to be problems in future elections; and/or 6) can be improved upon by the EMB. It is better to discuss a limited number of points that the EMB leadership owns and will act on rather than presenting extensive lists that will not be acted on. Additional information beyond what is in the report can be submitted to the EMB leadership if it is useful. It is not necessary to include election results, because lessons learned reports focus only on the electoral process.
- **How much factual information and descriptions should be included?** The most important thing is that the conclusions and recommendations are clear, so the emphasis is on lessons learned and actions that will be taken. It can be helpful to include some factual information and descriptions to help readers understand the situation, the issues arising, the choices made by an EMB, and the plans for future actions. This information can serve as a record of the election and help establish a balanced narrative. Additional factual information can be included in annexes so as not to overburden the main body of the report.

“Actively seek common ground so that the people, together, can push for reforms that deepen the quality of democracy.”

– **Representative of an international organization that works with political parties**

- **How many recommendations should be included?** The number of recommendations will vary, but all must be actionable and measurable. Recommendations that contribute meaningfully to future election processes should ideally be prioritized. Other changes can be made if useful. For example, departments may want to come up with more detailed action points for their respective areas of responsibility (in order to implement the recommendations from the lessons learned exercise and to further develop their work).

Stage 5: Share and Promote the Report



The main aim of Stage 5 is to raise awareness of the report and gain support for its conclusions and recommendations. This is an important opportunity for the EMB to show it is committed to improving its service and is open and responsive to stakeholders. The EMB's leadership can increase visibility and support for change—both externally and within the institution. The more traction there is to the report, the more likely it is that changes will happen, even if there is a change in commissioners. This also helps build a positive legacy for future lessons learned processes. This is a time for intelligent consideration by stakeholders, which may also help them think about actions they may take.

Sharing and promoting the report can take place as soon as the report is ready. Plan ahead so the report is distributed within the EMB, to partners and stakeholders, and to the public.



Possible steps include:

1. **Prepare the report for dissemination.** Have a copy in the proper format for the EMB website and social media. Additionally, print hard copies if required. While it is more

environmentally-friendly to only use electronic copies, it can help with presentation and traction to have a limited number of paper copies available. Consider whether to make translated versions of the report available.

2. **Prepare summaries of the report for presentations and easy access** These may include the executive summary and a version for on-screen presentation (for example, in PowerPoint). Such summaries need to be short so that the main information can be grasped with further information available in the report. It is also important to prepare summaries that make the report accessible to persons with different types of disabilities, for example, by including easy-to-read versions.
3. **Prepare an outreach plan that outlines how to reach each targeted audience.** This will make the best use of time and resources and reap the maximum benefit from distributing the report.
4. **Prepare media materials and plans for interviews.** Media materials can include a press release and social media content. Include quotes from the EMB leadership to convey a sense of ownership and make the presentation more personal and relatable. Prepare answers to commonly asked questions for EMB representatives who may speak publicly about the report.
5. **Meet with EMB staff to discuss the final report.** It's good if EMB staff know that the report has in part come from them and that their contribution to the report is valued. It is therefore an opportunity to thank staff for their contribution, explain the conclusions and recommendations, and to motivate staff to take actions forward. It is good to show that this has been approved by the highest levels of the EMB, that there will be monitoring of the implementation of recommendations, and that public updates will be given. These actions can help strengthen a culture of public service, accountability, and responsiveness. It is an opportunity to praise staff for the work undertaken, as well as to show that solid decisions are being taken to improve the EMB's service and that this has stakeholder support. It is good if staff also have a chance to comment on the report (including reservations or frustrations, as well as positive comments) and to ask questions. If possible, travel to EMB offices around the country to meet with regional staff in-person and discuss the report with local stakeholders.

6. **Present the report to stakeholders.** This can include a press conference and meetings with stakeholder groups (in the capital and possibly in other parts of the country), including donors. At these meetings, it can be helpful to explain how the lessons learned exercise was conducted and that it will not be perfect and satisfy everyone, as elections are constant work in progress. Stress that the most significant and feasible developments have been identified and review the report's main conclusions and recommendations. Emphasize what the EMB did well and what can be improved. Describe the next steps, including monitoring the implementation of recommendations. Stress that the EMB is open to talking about ongoing plans, actions, and developments.

7. **Meet with the legislature, executive, and other state agencies to present and discuss the report.** In some jurisdictions, an EMB is legally required to produce a lessons learned report. In others, the exercise is at the EMB's discretion. In either case, it is useful for the EMB to present the report to the legislature, the executive (who may have budgetary influence), and other state agencies (such as security services). This helps them see that the EMB led a serious exercise and has a social mandate for its actions, making it easier to make requests and conduct advocacy. When meeting with the parliament it is good to identify which recommendations would benefit from legal reform, and helpful to explain any stakeholder support for such changes, including from political parties.

“Good communication with the electorate and the citizenry at large is key for transparency and to legitimate the exercise.”

– Election expert working with EMBs



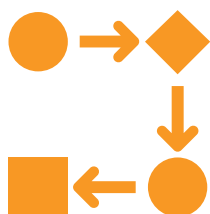
Points to consider

- **What if some EMB staff, partners, or stakeholders disagree with the report's conclusions and recommendations?** An EMB can emphasize that it is okay if not everyone agrees to a report and that it is the EMB's responsibility to make the best decisions it can for citizens. Further, the EMB can note that there will be future chances

to review the implementation of the recommendations, as well as future lessons learned exercises. If there are strong divisions, it can be helpful for a report to acknowledge the different positions. It is important to explain decisions and go over why actions are important, how they help the process, other stakeholder views, and supporting research. Additionally, it is useful to listen to the views of others, while being clear that the consultation stages have passed, and the report is now final.

- **Should the report be shared in advance with participants before a meeting?** It can be helpful to give stakeholders time to read and consider the report and their responses to it (or at least the executive summary and/or recommendations). In practice, participants may not have time to read the report, so it is usually advisable to go over the main conclusions and recommendations of the report while also leaving time for questions and comments.
- **Will the report bring attention to EMB shortcomings?** It is natural that a report and coverage will focus more on problems and shortcomings and less on what has gone well in an election process, as recommended changes are the most important part to scrutinize and debate. It is normal that there will be things to develop after an election, especially given emerging electoral challenges such as the role of social media and disinformation. It is important that some positives are identified, that the EMB is upfront about shortcomings, and recommendations are made. Acknowledging shortcomings can be somewhat cathartic, particularly after a difficult election process. Problems can be much easier to address if there is a sense that they will not be repeated in the future and things will get better.

Stage 6: Follow-up (Monitoring, Public Reporting, and Reviewing the Process)



The main aim of Stage 6 is to take a long view of the lessons learned exercise and associated recommendations. This involves 1) monitoring the implementation of recommendations; 2) reviewing how the lessons learned process went; and 3) keeping

the conclusions and recommendations alive, for example, by incorporating them into strategic and operational planning. Structured monitoring of the implementation of the report's recommendations can help galvanize people for action, enable necessary adjustments to be made prior to the next elections, and increase EMB accountability. Monitoring can take place as a standalone engagement, or as part of monitoring the implementation of strategic planning. The implementation of recommendations is one of the most important measures of how effective a lessons learned process has been. It is essential to help sustain a learning culture. Reviewing the lessons learned process enables an EMB to adjust its processes and shows commitment to being an open and learning institution. It is also important that conclusions and recommendations are integrated into ongoing EMB planning activities, so an active approach is taken to the report and institutional developments are more coherent.

A review of how the lessons learned process went can take place after the report has been launched. Monitoring of the implementation of recommendations should take place later, including after the next election. The review of the lessons learned process can take place promptly after the report is released, while memories are fresh and can be added later once the implementation of recommendations has taken place. Monitoring of the implementation of recommendations should be undertaken some time after the release of the report, to allow for time for recommended actions to be implemented. It is helpful if such monitoring of the implementation of recommendations is still in the first half of the electoral cycle, so there is time for readjustment prior to the next election. After the next election, a subsequent lessons learned exercise should include a review of the implementation of previous lessons learned recommendations.



Possible steps include:

1. **Collect views on the lessons learned process.** It is good to ask people within the institution, as well as partners and stakeholders more broadly about what they liked about the process, what could have been better, and what to change in a future exercise. Additional questions can include whether the lessons learned process helped increase trust in the EMB and added to knowledge and understanding of its work, if people believe future election processes will be better, and if they think the

recommendations will be implemented. It may be easier to manage responses if they are collected via an online form or survey, which can maintain the anonymity of respondents. It may be helpful to separate responses from EMB staff from those of partners and stakeholders. Separately, it is good to hear from the EMB leadership about how they think the process has been.

2. **Write a short record of the lessons learned process.** This can include information on what was done, when, and what resources were involved, along with challenges and difficulties faced. It is good to also include a summary of the views of EMB staff and stakeholders on the lessons learned process, suggestions for future lessons learned processes, and the concluding views of the EMB leadership.
3. **Maintain an archive of documents and data related to the lessons learned process.** The archive should be easy-to-navigate and should protect the confidentiality of submissions given.
4. **Prepare a plan for monitoring the implementation of recommendations.** This involves setting a time for the review, identifying and allocating resources, and notifying people within the EMB about the plan and what information they will need to submit. Monitoring could be subsumed into wider EMB internal monitoring of the implementation of a strategic plan (if the EMB has one). The plan should provide for speaking to key stakeholders about their views on how implementation of recommendations has progressed, and any changes needed. A working group or steering committee could be established within the EMB to undertake the tracking of recommendations. Again, it may be more effective to have independent facilitation to reduce risks of affirmation bias (which refers to the desire to please the EMB hierarchy with good news) and to encourage stakeholders to speak freely. While the primary focus is on recommendations that the EMB can implement, tracking could consider recommendations for which another agency is responsible.
5. **Monitor the implementation of recommendations unless this is part of wider monitoring as part of a strategic plan.** Review EMB documentation and talk with EMB staff and key stakeholders to identify 1) the degree to which targets for implementation are being met; 2) what went well and helped the changes take place; 3) the effect or

potential effect of the changes; 4) difficulties in implementation; and reasons for them; and 5) adjustments or further changes that are warranted.

6. **Produce a monitoring report on the implementation of recommendations, unless this is integrated into wider strategic plan monitoring.** It is good if a report states if any further monitoring is planned prior to the next elections. This, as well as the conclusions and possible adjustments or changes, should be discussed with the EMB leadership prior to finalization of the report.
7. **Discuss the monitoring of the implementation of recommendations within the EMB and share the monitoring report with stakeholders and through a press release.** Publishing the monitoring report can help maintain momentum for developments and confidence in the EMB leadership. It can be helpful to meet with stakeholders, particularly to help people to be aware of ongoing challenges and changes at this point, well before the next election.
8. **Update records of the lessons learned process with monitoring findings.** The records should include information on the implementation of recommendations, which may be seen as a true measure of whether the process has been effective. If possible, elicit key stakeholders' views on the lessons learned process and the EMB's performance. Further survey data on trust and perceptions of the EMB can also be useful.
9. **Brief new commissioners or senior staff on the lessons learned process and recommendations, along with other agencies and EMBs, as relevant.** It is important that people new to EMB leadership know how the lessons learned process was conducted, the main conclusions and recommendations, and the status of the implementation of recommendations. EMBs in the region or beyond may be interested in the experience of conducting a lessons learned process. Other institutions in the country may also want to learn about the approach and resulting actions.
10. **Review the implementation of recommendations as part of the lessons learned exercise that follows the next elections.** The next elections will show whether the recommendations were implemented and if they were effective. Such a review will also

identify whether and how the recommendations or their implementation fell short. This process will help inform future lessons learned processes and recommendations.

“For us in our lessons learned, it is for plan creation, not to become something that is left on a shelf when it comes a time to implement.”

– **Representative of a development partner**



Point to consider

- **What if some recommendations are for later stages of the electoral cycle, after the monitoring of implementation is scheduled?** Some recommendations may apply to the next election, although preparatory actions may take place earlier. For example, consideration of improved training for poll workers could include researching shortcomings via focus groups or surveys, developing plans and materials, adapting budgets, and pilot-testing during by-elections.

Annex 1: Methodology for Development of the Guidelines



The methodological approach and research underpinning these guidelines was developed based on input from EMBs and a wide network of partners. EMB expertise from the former Association of European Election Officials (ACEEEO) assisted in the development of the initial research design. Other EMB networks supported implementation. These included ArabEMBs, and the Pacific Islands, Australia, and New Zealand Electoral Administrators Network (PIANZEA). Other partners contributed substantively to the evolution of the approach and facilitated access. The United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) were involved from the start in the development of the research. Other partners involved in the research included the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

(International IDEA), National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Organization of American States (OAS). Discussions with partners before and during the data gathering process resulted in a more elaborate research phase and a stronger basis for the preparation of the guidelines. Partners were also consulted on a draft version of these guidelines, along with a number of interviewees, survey respondents, and IFES peer reviewers.

As a result of a broad partnership approach and extensive research and consultation, the credit for these guidelines should be jointly owned. However, shortcomings should be attributed to the authors. We welcome feedback on the process, the guidelines, and real-life implementation of lessons learned processes so we can improve possible future editions.²⁷

Desk Review

The team reviewed previous lessons learned reports and related documents, as well as guidance from international donors and other organizations on lessons learned processes and after-action reviews (AARs) in related fields. Some of these documents were found online and others were shared by colleagues from IFES, other international organizations, and election administrations. The team reviewed lessons learned reports from the countries listed below.

Region	Countries and Territories
Africa	Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe
Americas	Canada, Ecuador, Guatemala
Asia-Pacific	Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Seychelles
Europe and Eurasia	Georgia, Lithuania, Serbia, Ukraine
Middle East and North Africa	Afghanistan, Palestine, Yemen

²⁷ To provide feedback please e-mail lessonslearned@ifes.org.

Survey of EMBs

The research team compiled an initial draft survey which was then reviewed by various IFES and external experts, including from UNEAD, UNDP, and the former ACEEEO. The final survey consisted of 30 qualitative and quantitative questions. Some sought factual information on the specifics of EMBs' lessons learned process. Others elicited opinions on the challenges, merits, and potential value of lessons learned exercises. Respondents were able to leave questions blank or state that they did not have an answer to any question. Space was also provided for free text comments. Respondents were informed clearly that all data would be treated anonymously.

The survey was translated from English into five languages: Arabic, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Russian. The research team used the QuestionPro survey platform to ensure that it was easy for respondents to use. Additionally, for EMBs concerned about reliable internet access, the team provided an offline version of the survey on request.

The survey was disseminated with support from regional organizations and networks with EMB contacts to improve reach. These included UNEAD, UNDP, the AU, OAS, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the former ACEEEO, ArabEMBs, and PIANZEA.

The survey was sent to respondents in 152 countries via the research team, a partner organization, or both. In total, 84 responses were received from 57 countries for a country response rate of 38 percent. The responses represented a broad range of regions, languages, and country sizes.

Responses were received from the following countries and territories:

Region	Countries and Territories
Africa	Botswana, Cameroon, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Nigeria, Sao Tome et Principe, Somalia, South Sudan, Zambia, Zanzibar
Americas	Antigua, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominica, Ecuador, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago
Asia-Pacific	Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Maldives, Nauru, Pakistan, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste, Tokelau
Europe and Eurasia	Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Iceland, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom
Middle East and North Africa	Iraq, Palestine

Response data was managed by first reviewing by respondent (n=84). Then, the data was adjusted to one response per country (n=57), using the submission of the most senior respondent in each country (where more than one submission was received). This was necessary to ensure a balance of findings across all submitting countries. For questions that involved graded answers, the team used a scoring system (for example, assigning “very useful” a score of 4, “somewhat useful” a score of 3, “not too useful” a score of 2, and “not useful at all” a score of 1). This enabled the overall ranking of answers to be calculated systematically and compared more easily.

Survey of Election Experts

Most respondents who answered the expert survey had been involved with multiple lessons learned processes in different countries. To garner their broader insights, the eight-question survey included space for free text and included a variety of sub-questions to garner additional insights. The QuestionPro platform was used, and respondents were informed that all answers

would be anonymized. Questions were in English, although respondents were free to provide answers in any language they preferred. One respondent requested and received a French translation of the survey.

The survey link was shared broadly with IFES election experts and Country Directors who had participated in lessons learned exercises, current and former United Nations Chief Technical Advisors. Additionally, respondents were reached through other networks, including International IDEA. In total, 32 responses were received.

Focus Group Discussions with Leading Citizen Observer Groups

Two focus group discussions were organized with some leading citizen observer groups in August 2022 in collaboration with NDI, which arranged the virtual meetings. A focus group guide was developed, and participants received advance notice of the questions and were informed that all information would be treated anonymously. Translation was made available. Each focus group discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes.

All participating organizations have endorsed the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations.²⁸ All the groups are well-established, internationally known organizations with extensive experience (some of it international). In total, 10 participants representing eight organizations took part in the focus group discussions:

- Argentina, Transparencia Electoral
- Colombia, Misión de Observación Electoral (MOE) Colombia
- El Salvador, Iniciativa Social para la Democracia
- Jordan, Al Hayat Center
- Nigeria, Yiaga Africa
- Serbia, The Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA)
- Ukraine, Opora
- Zimbabwe, The Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN)

²⁸ See Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors' [Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations](#)

International Organizations Working with Political Parties

To preserve the apolitical nature of these guidelines and given the logistical challenge of reaching out to political parties around the world, the research team consulted with international organizations that work directly with political parties, with the assistance of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD). The team received written input from or held one-on-one virtual meetings with eight such organizations: the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD), Demo Finland, the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), NDI, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), the Oslo Center, and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD).

Development Partners

The research team received input from experienced officials of leading development partners including Sida, EU, USAID, and DFAT. These officials had worked in multiple countries and were therefore able to provide solid and informed overviews from the donor's perspective on what constituted a successful lessons learned exercise.

Research Limitations

Various limitations were encountered in the research. All the data collection methods were "opt-in," leading to a degree of selection bias. The political nature of election administration in some contexts may have resulted in some self-censorship and affirmation bias in parts of the survey, despite the assurance of anonymity. Because lessons learned processes and election administrations vary widely from country to country, and globally standardized questions may at times have been difficult to answer.

In an effort to mitigate these limitations, the team sought a balance of input from a variety of stakeholders beyond EMBs and avoided relying on one singular source. These included citizen observer groups and respondents with extensive international experience (including experts, organizations that work with political parties, and development partners). The team also sought a wide geographic range of responses by liaising with numerous regional organizations or networks and working in multiple languages.

Data from the research sources was triangulated to enable more reliable conclusions. To minimize author limitations, draft guidelines were widely circulated, and data was made available for scrutiny during a peer review process.

Annex 2: Main Research Findings

EMB Survey

The survey of EMBs revealed a high degree of consistency in respondents' views on the ways lessons learned exercises can be useful and how to do them well. Thus, even though there are significant differences in how lessons learned exercises are undertaken, there is clear agreement about the potential benefits and good practices.

Below is a summary of some key points of interest from EMB survey data, from 84 respondents in 57 countries:

- **Over half of EMBs surveyed conduct a lessons learned exercise after every national election.** Most of the others undertake them sometimes, but nearly a fifth of EMBs reported that they never do lessons learned exercises. Reasons for not doing lessons learned exercises included (in order of frequency): lack of a mandatory requirement, cost, time limitations, political sensitivity, limited EMB leadership interest, and lack of accepted lessons learned methodology.
- **Respondents noted that EMBs' last lessons learned exercises particularly helped with knowing what went well** in an election, what actions contributed to things going well, what did not go so well in an election, what should be done differently, and what amendments should be undertaken to improve the legal framework. Respondents also noted that lessons learned exercises helped with knowing what actions contributed to things not going so well and what should be done differently by others.
- **Multiple positive benefits from lessons learned exercises** were reported. The most commonly emphasized included: improving strategic and operational planning, increasing trust and confidence in an EMB and electoral processes among national stakeholders and the international community, raising awareness of an EMB's situation, increasing internal EMB cohesiveness, EMBs learning and being more effective and efficient, strengthening communication with other stakeholders, increasing EMB openness and transparency, and increasing EMB ownership of electoral developments.

Other reported benefits noted by the vast majority of respondents included: documenting stakeholder actions and thereby making them more accountable, helping build stakeholder consensus for electoral reform and advocating for reform, achieving legal reform, and obtaining funding from the state and donors. Overall, the vast majority of respondents reported that lessons learned exercises helped with improving electoral processes.

- **The vast majority of respondents thought that lessons learned exercises are positive for countering misinformation and disinformation.** Lessons learned exercises were seen by nearly all respondents as a good opportunity to show what misinformation and disinformation problems there have been, what actions have been taken and plan future actions.
- **The vast majority of EMBs surveyed do not have a written methodology for how lessons learned exercises should be conducted.** About half had used external assistance of some sort for undertaking their last lessons learned exercise, mostly from international assistance providers, but also from national experts, civil society organizations or contracted companies. Typically, respondents were not aware of any training on lessons learned exercises taking place (or such training being for just a few people).
- **The following documents were most frequently referred to when undertaking lessons learned exercises:** national legislation, EMB documents, complaints court decisions, observer findings, and media reports. Also used were polls and surveys, international standards, lessons learned exercises from previous years, reports from other state agencies and EMB hotline reports.
- **Consultations as part of lessons learned exercises** most frequently took place with: commissioners, headquarters EMB staff, and permanent election officials from across the country. Additionally, temporary staff (poll workers), other government authorities, political parties, observer groups, and partner NGOs were involved. There were lower levels of consultation taking place with groups representing marginalized groups, private companies working with EMBs, media representatives, and independent analysts (such as academics).

- **The most common methods for conducting consultations** used included in-person meetings, online meetings, focus group discussions, workshops and written submissions. Less common are large-scale post-election review conferences (typically held for one or two days) and surveys of EMB staff or other stakeholders.
- **Lessons learned reports are mostly publicly available** and approximately three-quarters of EMBs reported that their EMBs have open data or other transparency policies. Lessons learned reports were mostly drafted by between two to five people, reviewed by up to ten people (sometimes more) and approved by commissioners or the head of the secretariat. For the majority of EMBs, the reports were only available in one language.
- **Respondents noted that they thought reports were most substantively read by: the EMB leadership and staff, members of international organizations working with an EMB, civil society organizations, and international observers.** Respondents noted that they thought reports were least substantively read or not read by private companies contracted by EMBs, EMB *ad hoc* staff, other state agencies, and members of the public and election administrators in other countries.
- **The most frequently reported challenges** were a lack of time, a lack of resources, logistical problems, a lack of knowledge on how to conduct a lessons learned exercise, and political sensitivities. Other challenges included difficulties in writing a report, lack of effective external support, difficulties getting agreement on a report, and observer reports not being available on time or not having clear information or recommendations. Some challenges were also reported with regard to stakeholders not providing clear and realistic input, difficulties accessing information from other state agencies, and stakeholder confusion as a result of misinformation or disinformation.
- **The suggested most helpful actions to undertake as part of a lessons learned exercise** were: 1) consultations; 2) reference to documents; 3) having clear conclusions on what went well, was challenging, and action points; 4) having a clear plan for reviewing implementation of action points; and 5) producing a public report and

presenting it to the public. Most participants also thought it would be helpful for a lessons learned exercise to consider environmental issues when reviewing an elections process.

- **The reported most useful assistance for EMBs conducting lessons learned exercises** included: technical assistance and training, clear commitment from the EMB leadership, a step-by-step guide, peer support, examples from other EMBs, good coordination between technical assistance providers, funding, and examples from other sectors. Additionally, EMBs noted the importance of clear commitment from other state agencies, partnership with civil society, and clear donor expectations.

Election Experts Survey

The election experts survey showed strong consistency both between respondents and with the EMB survey answers. The survey was conducted of election experts who regularly work with EMBs in undertaking lessons learned exercises.

Below is a summary of some key points of interest from the 32 responses to the election experts survey:

- **Lessons learned exercises were assessed by every single expert respondent to be helpful** in increasing EMB awareness of what went well and what could be done differently, increasing trust and confidence in the EMB and electoral processes among national stakeholders and donors, as well as with regards to in EMB learning and being more effective and efficient. Additionally, respondents reported lessons learned exercises were helpful in terms of increasing EMB openness, helping with stakeholder consensus for electoral reform, and in improving electoral processes overall.
- **Nearly all expert survey respondents thought that lessons learned exercises** could help with the development of EMB strategic and operational planning, informing parliament, obtaining funding, advocating for election reform, and raising awareness of an EMB's situation.
- **The most commonly experienced problems reported by experts** were lack of skills within the EMB, political sensitivities, a lack of promotion or use of the report once

finalized, and lack of agreement on how to undertake a lessons learned exercise. Other problems commonly reported included: a lack of interest from EMB leadership, observer reports not being available on time (or lacking clear recommendations). Two-thirds of experts had experienced insufficient resourcing for lessons learned activities. Over half of respondents reported the experience of external stakeholders not providing clear and realistic input. Over half of respondents also reported experiencing difficulty accessing documentation from the EMB, contracted private companies, and other state agencies. Moreover, over half had the experience of EMBs finding it difficult to write and obtain agreement on a final report.

- **The most important factor identified for lessons learned processes to go well** was to have EMB commissioner engagement and willingness to review both strengths as well as weaknesses. Other key factors included: EMB staff engagement, a clear process for conducting a lessons learned exercise, recognition for the need for reform, sufficient resources, as well as a demand from political parties, CSOs and/or the media.
- **All expert respondents agreed that the following should be considered good practice for lessons learned exercises:**
 - **1) Consultations:** including with EMB commissioners and staff from across the country, other state agencies, parties, candidates, civil society organizations, other stakeholders, and technical assistance providers. Emphasis was put on the value of submission of written recommendations for improvements.
 - **2) Review of relevant documentation:** including national legislation, EMB documentation, complaints, court decisions, independent analysis, observer reports, media reporting, and international standards.
 - **3) Clear conclusions and EMB action points:** The importance of identifying responsible agencies and time frames was stressed, as well as the value of having a clear plan for reviewing implementation.

Other points strongly emphasized as good practice included: making the final report public, presentation of the final report to stakeholders, and reference to misinformation and disinformation issues. Other points emphasized by respondents included the use of surveys, review of reports made by other state agencies, and reference to international election resources/materials. The holding of smaller workshops was rated more highly than the holding of one large scale post-election review with all stakeholders together.

This could vary by context, as well as whether the meetings are for gathering data or discussing findings and recommendations.

- **Experts identified the most important support for EMBs in lessons learned as:** clear commitment from EMB leaderships, funding, a step-by-step guide on conducting lessons learned exercises, and peer support/expert guidance. The importance of good technical assistance and coordination between technical assistance providers was also emphasized. Other potentially helpful support included: training, examples from other EMBs, clear commitment from other state agencies, partnerships with civil society, and clear donor expectations.

Citizen Observer Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Like the EMB and expert surveys, there was generally wide agreement among participants on the importance of lessons learned exercises for transparency and accountability. There was also agreement on the way they should be conducted (involving stakeholders). In total, eight citizen observer organizations participated in two FGDs.

In summary, the following key points were made by citizen observer groups:

- Citizen observers noted that **there are problems with lessons learned exercises only being undertaken in a limited way or not being undertaken at all.** In some countries, no lessons learned activities take place or, when the process does occur, it is not a public conversation. Citizen observers noted that there were some instances where the lessons learned undertaken by EMBs were not meaningful, or that lessons learned exercises only considered procedures and logistics (and not the wider electoral process). Additionally, participants raised the point that if an election does not lead to violence, it is often labelled as “good”, even if other problems persist. Groups noted that in some cases, lessons learned exercises are mere tick-the-box exercises and thus do not generate a genuine exercise resulting in concrete measures being taken.
- **Lessons learned exercises are seen by citizen observers as a necessary part of EMB transparency and accountability.** They are seen as a way for EMBs to be open

and transparent to the people. Transparency and openness are critical as a truly independent EMB should be accountable to the voters and not the government. Lessons learned exercises are furthermore seen as a mechanism to build bridges and for EMBs to maintain contact with stakeholders. Citizen observers further stressed that this is particularly important for EMBS under attack. They emphasized the value of all sides understanding that it is in their best interest to have a lessons learned exercise. It was commented that without a proper lessons learned exercise, there is a risk that an EMB is perceived as too soft on itself and that it does not adequately address problems.

- **Citizen observers emphasized that lessons learned exercises should be about honestly looking at an election overall.** It should help people know about the real challenges. Therefore, it is good for the leadership to accept that there are weaknesses in any electoral process. A lessons learned exercise helps people appreciate gains as well as gaps, as well as track progress and map areas for potential improvement. It also helps people see the various challenges that different stakeholders face. It should look at all stages of an election process.
- **Citizen observers stressed that it must be safe for people to take part in lessons learned exercises.** People must know their comments will not be used against them. Participants raised concerns that if they are too critical of an EMB, they may not get accreditation to observe elections in the future or face other repercussions. An open operating space is necessary for a lessons learned process to be meaningful.
- **Citizen observer groups can help contribute to the development of the methodology used for a lessons learned exercise.** It was noted that an EMB should give out information in advance about the process of a lessons learned exercise, including explaining the purpose of the exercise and how it will be conducted. Stakeholders should be updated throughout the process so they can see how it is progressing. Citizen observers stressed the importance of EMBs involving a diversity of people and emphasizing that stakeholders' thoughts will be considered meaningfully. It was also stressed that it is not enough to just have one meeting. Rather, there could be thematic workshops with different stakeholders. The importance of a public document at the end of the process was emphasized, as was subsequent follow-up activities and monitoring.

- **Observers need to make clear and timely recommendations on the electoral process** to help lessons learned exercises to be effective.

International Organizations Working with Political Parties

The findings from discussions with international organizations working with political parties revealed similar findings, with an emphasis on the need to get parties to **effectively contribute to the process**. While it was not possible to meet with political parties directly for this research (given their number and spread, as well as the desire to preserve the apolitical nature of these guidelines), eight international organizations working with political parties were consulted.

In addition to points made by others, some further points were emphasized:

- **Parties need to buy in to the process and see it as meaningful if they are to contribute effectively.** Suggestions were made about how EMBs can help this happen. Emphasis was put on building trust in the lessons learned process and starting this trust-building prior to an election. Actions an EMB can take include:
 1. **Involving senior party members from the beginning:** This could include consulting with parties before an election and asking what they want to see from a lessons learned process, what their needs are, and how they think it should be conducted.
 2. **Demonstrating commitment to an enabling environment and process:** An EMB can demonstrate this commitment by, for example, showing that it is open to feedback and criticism. Additionally, it is important that an EMB is clear about the lessons learned process.
 3. **Showing the importance of a lessons learned exercise emphasizing that it can result in change:** This can include the EMB being clear the final report being made public and shared widely. Additionally, the EMB can stress that subsequent reform could take place, which could in turn impact future party strategies.

It was acknowledged that often parties that do not win are more interested in electoral reform, while those in power do not want to change the system. For this reason, the

value of obtaining buy-in from parties ahead of an election was emphasized, as was the potential for change as a result of a lessons learned exercise (that could affect ruling and opposition parties). Buy-in from parties was regarded as essential to ensure that a lessons learned process goes well, that the conclusions are accepted, and that the parties contribute to the consensus for reform. Parliamentary parties are also critical given the role they can play in legislative reform. It was stressed that lessons learned processes can be a first step in building party ownership and consensus and that similar links with parliament can help promote reform.

- **Only minimal communication between EMBs and parties is problematic.** Without this communication, it can be difficult for parties to understand EMB decisions and actions. Lessons learned exercises are one way to develop communication. Additionally, it is useful for both EMBs and parties if the exercises involve consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including underrepresented groups, the media, business associations, and others.
- **The methodology used for a lessons learned exercise is critical.** Discussants suggested the importance of establishing an agreement on the methodology, timetable, and expected results well before an election, as parties often get busy in the run-up to elections. Parties need to trust the process, including having confidence in the individuals leading the process (who should have knowledge of the parties and the political system). It was also suggested that to be more substantive, people need to be able to speak freely. Thus, it may be more productive to conduct some sessions behind closed doors. Similarly, discussants noted it may be more effective to have separate space for political parties to share and discuss (rather than big workshops), depending on the context. The importance of covering all aspects of the election including relationships with parties was stressed, as was the EMB providing a summary and information on the next steps they will take. Further, it was noted that distinguishing between the lessons learned process and the complaints or petitions process may be useful, as well as the importance of trying to establish a “win-win” approach to reform by involving those who may be in a position to implement reform, such as parliamentarians.
- **Various suggestions were made about what could help parties make more effective submissions.** Discussants noted that it was helpful if parties held internal

reflection processes prior to making submissions. These internal discussions should include individuals with a wide variety of roles in the party, people from disadvantaged groups (such as women, youth, and people with disabilities), and others. The importance of time for this internal party consultation was stressed. It was noted that it could also be helpful if there is a standard format for parties to make written submissions and recommendations. Additionally, discussants noted that it would be useful for EMBs to provide guidance, possibly in the form of an orientation or training, to aid parties in effective submissions.

Development Partners

Interviews with four leading development partners brought up many of the same points, including for example, the importance of political will.

These points included:

- **Lessons learned exercises are part of an election process and cycle and help EMBs take more ownership of their work and development.** It was noted that lessons learned exercises are a tool for enhancing accountability of EMB actions and donor assistance and can help EMBs and this assistance be more credible and effective. Donor partners stressed that lessons learned exercises should lead to actions, for example, by building recommendations into strategic and operation planning processes.
- **Lessons learned exercises are key to EMBs and donor planning for the long-term.** It was noted that lessons learned exercises can be a useful planning tool (rather than just a document on a shelf) and can help with donor funding. They are an opportunity to create a plan and produce a road map.
- **The most successful lessons learned exercises involve engagement from stakeholders and interactive dialogue.** It was noted that it can be difficult at times for EMBs to talk about difficult aspects of an election (sometimes as a result of being mindful of not giving ammunition to critics). It was therefore noted that it is best when there are independent people involved who can criticize (constructively), such as civil society representatives, commentators, academics and/or international experts. The

value of involving a range of civil society organizations and experts was also emphasized (not just one or two). To be effective, it was noted that lessons learned exercises should identify the real issues and should be holistic.

- **Planning lessons learned exercises in advance helps get agreement and necessary arrangements in place.** It was noted that people are often tired after an election, and it may be better to undertake a lessons learned exercise in stages, thereby saving deeper discussion till later. It was noted that it can be useful to undertake activities in smaller groups in order to get more realistic answers. It was also noted that it's important to have a transparent components of the process, even if some of the exercise is behind closed doors.

Annex 3: Sample Templates

The sample templates on the following pages list possible headings for documents, followed by potential content areas.

Sample Template: Strategy and Plan

1. Introduction

Context, leadership commitment, link to future EMB improvements, etc.

2. Aims and Purpose of the Lessons Learned Process

Why the lessons learned process is being conducted, intended benefits, why the process is important, etc.

3. Methodological Overview

Main principles followed, methodological approach and main stages of activities, main general questions, public reporting and information, etc.

4. Consultation

Who will be consulted (within the EMB, partners, and main stakeholder group), methods to be used (written submissions, meetings, surveys etc.), etc.

5. Timing

When key activities are indicatively scheduled to take place.

6. Responsible Persons

EMB leads, external facilitation (if required), final decision-making authority, point of contact.

7. Concluding Comments

Any other comments, final remarks, if any.

Sample Template: Lessons Learned Report

1. Table of Contents

Including report publication date on the cover.

2. Preface

Remarks from the EMB leadership on the importance of the lessons learned process and commitment to implementing recommendations, acknowledgement of those who took part in the consultations.

3. Executive Summary

Short summary of methodology, conclusions, and recommendations.

4. Introduction and Context

Aims and purpose of the exercise, electoral context, electoral changes since the last election, possible information and comments on previous lessons learned exercises.

5. Methodology

Principles, methodological approach, main general questions, methodology in practice (what took place), limitations (e.g., any groups that did not make submissions).

6. Main Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

6.1 The Election Process

Related to different stages of the election, such as voter registration, candidate nomination, the campaign, operational preparations, out-of-country voting, Election Day, counting, tabulation, announcement of results, and management of complaints.

6.2 Organizational

Relating to institutional performance, such as the EMB's transparency, relations with partners, reliability of service, perceptions of independence, leadership appointment process, resourcing, value for money, planning, procurement of sensitive materials, internal communication, logistics, ICT, etc.

6.3 Participation and Inclusion

Relating to overall participation and the participation of specific disadvantaged groups.

6.4 Emerging issues

For example, disinformation and social media, environmental issues.

[It can be helpful to structure each of these sub-sections so they cover 1) introduction (background, description, factual information, and findings); 2) key points from

consultations; and 3) key conclusions and recommendations (with key responsible agency and priority recommendations identified).

7. Next Steps

Including references to 1) promoting the report (making it available publicly, meeting with other agencies, etc.); 2) developing a recommendations implementation plan; 3) the plan and timing for monitoring the implementation of the report's recommendations; and 4) reviewing the lessons learned process, including inviting comments on the process (with contact information).

8. Concluding Comments

Any other comments or final remarks, if any.

9. Annexes

9.1 Recommendations List

All recommendations compiled and numbered.

9.2 Recommendations Chart

Recommendations in a chart with columns for 1) recommendation number; 2) recommendation; 3) priority recommendation (yes/no); 4) responsible agency (EMB or identified other); 5) legal change required (required, desirable, or not required); 6) other notes.

9.3 Additional Methodological Information on the Lessons Learned Process

If needed.

9.4 List of Acronyms

Sample Template: Submissions Form

1. Introductory Text

1.1 Purpose of the Lessons Learned Process

To improve future election processes, use the time between elections, involve stakeholders, etc. To answer key questions about what went well, what did not go well (and reasons), and ways forward.

1.2 Methodological Approach for the Lessons Learned Process

Principles of the lessons learned process, overview of the methodology, decision-making (EMB will listen to many views and then work out key conclusions and recommendations (based on research, consultations, the law, resources available, and international standards and good practice for elections), public reporting, later monitoring of the implementation of recommendations.

1.3 Thank You for Taking Part

2. Submissions Guidance

Submissions are more likely to be effective if they are based on a careful review by the organization/person submitting, precise, constructive (making suggestions for improvements and for these to be feasible), about systemic issues (and not about individuals), not too long, points be numbered format. All information can be presented without identifying individuals who contributed comments or opinions.

3. Submitting Organization

One submission per organization that is based on information collected across the organization is optimal. Determine how to present information: anonymously (yes, no), organization's name, individual's name and position, has consultation taken place within the submitting organization: (i.e., have the views of different people within the organization been considered?), date.

4. Comments and Suggestions on the Election Process

Have numbering in place to encourage more concise and easy -to-navigate submissions. Include section headings (the election process, organizational, participation and inclusion, any other issues)

5. Priorities

Which of the above comments (up to a maximum number) are most important?

6. Comments on the Lessons Learned Process

Any comments or suggestions on the lessons learned process.

Sample Template: Recommendations Implementation Plan

1 Introduction

Brief overview of the lessons learned process, summary of recommendations (including priority recommendations), time until the next elections and related events. This plan focuses on recommendations for the EMB (not those for other agencies).

2 Overall Approach to Implementing Recommendations

EMB commitment to implementing recommendations, incorporation of lessons learned conclusions and recommendations in operational and strategic planning, commitment to ongoing engagement with stakeholders and public reporting on recommendations and their implementation. Plan for monitoring the implementation of recommendations (timing, public reporting, and the EMB's leader for implementation).

3 Plan for Implementing Recommendations

For each recommendation: 1) recommendation number, 2) recommendation, 3) implementation lead (EMB department and role), 4) key actions to be undertaken (responsible department and possible timing), 5) resources needed, 6) targets and milestones, with timing, 7) other information (including potential risks).

Sample Template: Terms of Reference for External Facilitators

The list below is based on the guidelines for the lessons learned process. Select and adapt them as relevant for the context.

The following activities should be conducted in coordination with the EMB leadership, assigned staff, and possible external facilitators. The EMB leadership will make final decisions and be responsible for the content of reporting. Actions of the external facilitator should be consistent with the directions by the EMB leadership, the Lessons Learned Processes Guidelines, national legislation, and international standards for elections.

The External Facilitator will contribute to or lead on the following:

Stage 1: Pre-election preparation of strategy and plan

Activities:

- *Develop a strategy and plan for the lessons learned process*
- *Develop an internal resourcing plan for the lessons learned process*
- *Hold consultation meetings with key stakeholders on the draft strategy and plan*
- *Finalize the strategy and plan*
- *Disseminate public information on the strategy and plan*
- *Prepare the research methodology, including stakeholder mapping and preparation of commissioning surveys and focus groups*
- *Prepare the tentative format of the final report*

Deliverables:

- *Reporting on actions performed*
- *Draft lessons learned strategy and plan*
- *Draft internal resourcing plan*
- *Meeting notes on consultations with stakeholders on the lessons learned strategy and plan*
- *Research methodology materials*
- *Report format*

Stage 2: Following the election, gather information and opinions

Activities:

- *Conduct a desk review of EMB and related information and documentation*
- *Collect opinions from within the EMB (internal consultations)*
- *Collect information and opinions from partners*
- *Collect information and opinions from stakeholders*
- *Archive information*

Deliverables:

- *Notes on consultations within the EMB and with partners and stakeholders on the election process*

Stage 3: Prepare and discuss draft conclusions and recommendations

Activities:

- *Prepare a draft analysis with clear conclusions*
- *Identify draft recommendations*
- *Discuss draft analysis, conclusions, and recommendations with the EMB leadership; make appropriate adjustments*
- *Discuss draft analysis, conclusions, and recommendations within the EMB, partners, and stakeholders*
- *Revise the draft analysis, conclusions, and recommendations*

Deliverables:

- *Draft analysis, conclusions, and recommendations*
- *Notes on discussions of the draft within the EMB and with partners and stakeholders on the election process*

Stage 4: Finalize the report and develop a recommendations implementation plan

Activities:

- *Revise and finalize the report*
- *Submit the report to the EMB leadership for approval*
- *Format the report so it is user-friendly*
- *Prepare a recommendations implementation plan with the responsible department*

Deliverables:

- *Complete draft report*
- *Final report*
- *Recommendations implementation plan*

Stage 5: Share and promote the report

Activities:

- *Prepare the report for publication*
- *Prepare summaries for presentation*
- *Prepare a dedicated outreach plan*
- *Prepare media materials and plan support to the EMB leadership and others for media interviews*
- *Meet with EMB staff to present and discuss the report*
- *Support the EMB leadership in presenting the report to stakeholders*
- *Support the EMB leadership in presenting the report to the legislature and other state agencies*

Deliverables:

- *Report summaries for presentation*
- *Media and interview materials (questions and answers, etc.)*

Stage 6: Follow up

Activities:

- *Collect views on the lessons learned process*
- *Write a report on the lessons learned process*
- *Assemble a full archive of the lessons learned process*
- *Prepare a plan for monitoring the implementation of recommendations*
- *Monitor the implementation of recommendations at a later time*
- *Produce a monitoring report on the implementation of recommendations*
- *Discuss the monitoring report within the EMB and with stakeholders; share the report*
- *Update the records of the lessons learned process*
- *Support the EMB in feeding the lessons learned process into strategic and operational planning*

- *Brief any new commissioners or senior staff on the lessons learned process*
- *Brief others on the lessons learned process and outcomes*

Deliverables:

- *Report on the lessons learned process*
- *Lessons learned process Archive*
- *Plan for monitoring of the implementation of recommendations*
- *Monitoring report on the implementation of recommendations*

Location: [For consultants based out of the country, it may be helpful to specify the number of trips expected to the country, with other work being undertaken remotely. At a minimum this would likely include one trip for preparation of a strategy (stage 1), and a second longer trip for consultations and preparation of the report (stages 2 and 3). A third trip could also be undertaken for promotion of the report (stage 5) and monitoring of the implementation of recommendations (stage 6).]

Timing: Number of days over [specify] period

Reporting and decision-making: [Specify] will hold overall decision-making authority and responsibility for the work. [Specify] will be responsible for daily management, support, and supervision. The work will be performed in conjunction with [specify EMB team/department] and [specify] external facilitators ([specify] with leadership responsibility).

All information should be treated confidentially. Neutrality and impartiality are required in all aspects of the work.

Annex 4: Summary of References

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