



CECOE

**Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society
Organizations for Elections**

CECOE Commentary

**Quality of the Recruitment and Training of
Election Officer by the National Election
Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) during the
Sixth General Election**

July 2023

Introduction

Ethiopia held its Sixth General Elections on June 21 and September 30, 2021 respectively, in which citizens voted for their representatives for the House of People's Representatives (HoPR) and Regional Councils for a period of five years. The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) is responsible for organizing elections in Ethiopia, and one of its mandates is to establish the necessary structures, such as constituencies, polling stations, and regional branch offices to facilitate the electoral process. These structures are critical for executing various electoral activities, including voter and candidate registration, election day procedures, and post-election procedures, among others.

To fulfill its statutory duty of organizing the Sixth General Elections of Ethiopia in 2021, the NEBE recruited over 150,000 election officers who were trained and deployed in each of the structures established under the electoral law. However, the Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE) observed gaps in the technical, professional, and ethical capacity of election officials required by law to carry out the election activities. The deficiencies in their capacity led to the NEBE annulling the results in some polling stations and constituencies, among other reasons.

CECOE Observation of the Sixth General Elections

CECOE has been actively advocating for electoral reforms based on the findings of its observations during the Sixth General Elections of Ethiopia. The observation report revealed serious professional limitations in the capacity of some election officers, which had significant consequences on the electoral process. For instance, on election day, indelible ink was not

applied to voters, and some voters whose names appeared on the election roll were not allowed to vote, while citizens whose names did not appear on the roll were allowed to cast ballots. Additionally, in the Somali region, there were reports of involvement of the ruling party officials in the wrongful registration of voters, circulation of empty registration cards to kebele level, and officials' disenfranchisement of citizens believed to have been supporters of the opposition party. There were also concerns about the impartiality of election officers, most of whom were believed to be employees within the government structure.

These findings suggest that the NEBE experienced difficulties and did not put in place appropriate mechanisms to screen out individuals affiliated with political parties in its election officers recruitment process. As a result, the NEBE was compelled to suspend elections in the region after an investigation revealed irregularities during voter registration.

In light of these findings, CECOE recommended that the NEBE revisit its recruitment and training of election officers to ensure that elections are executed as per the electoral law without irregularities. This recommendation reflects the need for the NEBE to give priority to the quality of recruitment and training of election officials to improve the integrity of future electoral processes. This commentary is based on the methods and processes used by NEBE in recruiting and training the election officials ahead of the deployment for the 2021 Sixth General Elections.

Recruitment of Election officers

The NEBE established 50,000 polling stations for voter registration and vote casting and subsequently recruited over 150,000 election officers to staff the polling stations for the Sixth General Elections using an online application method, which provided an opportunity for

competent individuals to become election officers.¹ However, in practice, 42,585 polling stations were opened for voter registration, and 40,365 polling stations were established for vote casting day. A total of 152,700 election officers were able to conduct voter registration.²

To be eligible for the position of election officer, the NEBE set education, work experience, and non-partisanship as requirements for serving as an election officer. Applicants were also required to show that they had never worked at lower government levels and that they did not participate in the execution of the previous elections, except for the Sidama Referendum organized in 2019. These requirements were put in place to ensure the capacity and independence of election officials. The online recruitment form included a consent form, which provided that disclosing false information to the NEBE would give rise to criminal liability

The NEBE has acknowledged that recruiting electoral officers was the most challenging part of the process. This was mainly due to the difficulty of having willing and non-partisan election officers because of the lack of skilled experts, weak culture of volunteerism predominantly observed among the educated, and lack of support from political parties.³

The process mainly involved recruiting volunteers through an online advertisement to the public. However, this approach narrowed the chance of getting qualified, capable, and impartial workers who were in their nature ‘Stipended volunteers’.⁴

1 National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). “Observer Registration Form for the 6th General Elections.” NEBE, 2021. Accessed June 26, 2023. <https://www.nebe.org.et/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Observer-Registration-Form-for-the-6th-General-Elections-2021.pdf>.

2 National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). “Sixth General Elections Results.” NEBE, 2021. Accessed September 16, 2022. <https://www.nebe.org.et/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Final-Report-English.pdf>,

3 The June 21, 2021 Ethiopian Parliamentary Elections: A Comprehensive Report.” National Democratic Institute, October 2021. Accessed June 26, 2023. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/LEOME_Report_of_the_June_21_Elections_Final_Final.pdf.

4 Clark, Alistair, and Toby S. James. “Electoral administration and the problem of poll worker recruitment: Who volunteers, and why?” *Electoral Studies*, vol. 79, February 2023, Article 102220. Accessed June 26, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102220>.



Photo: BBC



Although the announcement was notable for its transparency, it had its disadvantages. The NEBE had to rely solely on applications from volunteers from the public, which caused a poor turnout of poll workers, and NEBE had to advertise the call repeatedly. Additionally, political parties doubted whether the NEBE had actual control over the electoral process at the regional and sub-regional levels.⁵

Some of the recruited poll workers who were young university graduates and interested in the assignment turned out not to be volunteering in its truest sense, but for short-term financial gains. As a result, some poll workers tasked with voter registration refused to open registration centers unless payment was made. Furthermore, some of these young recruits were politically affiliated, despite meeting the other qualification requirements.

Recommendations

Designing and implementing a robust poll worker recruitment strategy is essential in any electoral process. Given the significant role that poll workers play across each electoral administration level, it is important to have a recruitment modality that ensures the existence of impartial, independent, and capable poll workers. While the efforts made by the NEBE to create opportunities for women to serve as poll workers were commendable, there were major gaps in terms of having a large number of qualified and independent personnel. To address these challenges:

- The NEBE should consider diversifying its recruitment approach by employing a mix of recruitment through public advertisement and from local organizations that can mobilize the needed number of poll workers who fulfill the capacity and impartiality requirements. By involving a mix of recruitment approaches, the NEBE can ensure that it reaches a larger pool of potential poll workers and that the recruitment process is more efficient. This

⁵ Supra Note at 4, *ibid*

could help to address concerns about the impartiality and capability of poll workers and ensure that the electoral process is conducted with integrity and accuracy.

- Independent civil society organizations, mass-based organizations, professional associations, and other similar organizations having a national and grassroots level geographic presence should take part and contribute to the recruitment of qualified and independent poll workers by NEBE in future elections.
- Overall, the recruitment of qualified and independent poll workers is critical to the success of any electoral process, and the NEBE should take proactive steps to ensure that it has a robust recruitment strategy in place for future elections.

Training of Election officers

According to the NEBE training department, the NEBE used cascading training for constituencies and polling station workers who were recruited to administer the June and September 2021 elections. This intervention included the design of a comprehensive training plan, development, translation to local languages, and printing of training manuals and guidelines. The NEBE recruited and trained 220 master trainers who had more advanced knowledge in the subject matter, mobilized from NEBE's internal staff and different partners. There were also more than 5000 field trainers who were trained by master trainers in 21 centers. These field trainers were responsible for training election officers in 674 training centers. The training process included simulation of the election operation, duplication, and showing every material used in the election, allowing poll workers to have practical knowledge to administer the election operation.

The NEBE used two training manuals, a voting day manual and a voter registration manual, designed to enhance the capacity of trainees to

manage every aspect of the election at polling stations. However, due to the extensive substance of the manual, it was challenging for election officials to understand and assimilate the manual's content. To tackle this challenge, the NEBE prepared a short video version of the manual to assist election officers.

The cascading training model had three stages with different trainers with different levels of performance. However, it was observed that trainers in the lower level had not internalized their training given by the lead trainers, leading to distortion of messages transferred during the training. The intended messages were often altered, and their effects were diluted through miscommunication and different interpretations of the same messages. On top of this, only two days were allocated both for the Training of Trainers (ToT) and cascading training which is inadequate, to say the least, when the vastness of the training topics.⁶

Another challenge faced was the difficulty in managing the training. The NEBE provided the training simultaneously in different parts of the country, and the vast number of registered trainees and the distance between the central and training centers made it difficult for the NEBE to manage the effectiveness of the training. Unwillingness on the part of trainees to take part in training unless advance payment was made was another obstacle that adversely affected the time frame for the training.

Regarding the language of delivery of the training, the NEBE intended to deliver the training using four different local languages (Amharic, Afaan Oromoo, Afar, and Somali). However, the NEBE found it difficult to find master trainers who could speak Afar and Somali languages. In addition to that, it struggled in finding qualified individuals with the right motivation and experience.

Security risks and logistical obstacles posed

⁶ National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. (n.d.). Observers Accreditation. Retrieved July 4, 2023, from <https://nebe.org.et/index.php/en/node/407>

challenges to NEBE training of poll workers. Due to security risks and lack of transportation, trainers were unwilling to give training in some places. The use of different local languages reduced the quality of training materials due to translation errors.

Recommendations

Election officers play a critical role in ensuring that elections run smoothly, and it is crucial to provide them with the right training to carry out their work effectively. However, the NEBE's training program only lasts for two days, which may not be sufficient for election officials to comprehend the training fully.

- To have a long-lasting impact on the election, the NEBE should devote more time to the training or organize election documents better. Additionally, trainees should be divided into groups to avoid overcrowding in the training center and to facilitate smooth administration of the training.
- The NEBE should review its training program to ensure that it is effective in preparing election officials to carry out their duties competently and impartially. This may involve providing more time for training, organizing trainees into smaller groups, and exploring alternative training models that can address the challenges faced during the cascading training model. By doing so, the NEBE can help to ensure that elections are conducted with integrity and accuracy, and that election officials are well-prepared to carry out their critical role in the electoral process.

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The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOIE) develops commentaries as a valuable resource for advancing electoral reform in Ethiopia. They provide evidence-based and policy-focused analysis as well as specific recommendations for improving the legal framework for electoral processes. CECOIE's commentaries offer a blueprint for creating a more transparent, accountable, and inclusive electoral system, making them an essential tool for policymakers, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders committed to strengthening Ethiopia's democratic processes.

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