



CECOE

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

CECOE Commentary

**Support for Civil Society Organizations
Engaged in the Provisions of Voter
Education Needs Improvement**

May 2023

Introduction

On 7 April 2022, CECOIE held a validation workshop on the assessment it conducted on voter education activities by Ethiopian civil society organizations (CSOs) during the sixth general elections held in 2021. Nearly 50 participants from across the different parts of the country attended the workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to share CECOIE's assessments findings with participants on voter education activities organized by Ethiopian CSOs ahead of the polls. The validation workshop also aimed at identifying additional inputs, particularly on recommendations for the future.

Reforms ahead of Sixth General Elections

Following the controversial Third General Elections of Ethiopia in 2005, the government enacted “draconian” electoral and civil society legislations that severely restricted the participation of CSOs in elections. The financial and mandate limitations in the 2009 CSO proclamation prohibited “Foreign” and “Ethiopian Resident” civil society organizations from carrying out any work related to elections. In the same vein, the then electoral legal framework required CSOs to choose between voter education and election monitoring activities, with participation in both prohibited during the same electoral cycle. Under these restrictive conditions, Ethiopia held the Fourth and Fifth General elections, limiting the potential contributions of CSOs to the democratization process.

During Ethiopia's Sixth General Elections, engagement by civil society groups grew as a result of the repeal of restrictive laws. Remarkably, local CSOs mobilized themselves to engage and contribute to the electoral process. The National Electoral Board of

Ethiopia (NEBE) accredited 167 CSOs to conduct voter education (VE) activities. However, as noted in the Election Observation Report from the NDI-IRI Limited International Election Observation Mission to Ethiopia (LEOME), Ethiopian CSOs faced challenges related to legitimacy, capacity to design effective VE programs, and ability to raise funds to carry out VE activities. Due to such challenges, only half of the accredited CSOs were engaged in VE activities. According to the LEOME report, these challenges were worsened by the shifting timelines of the Sixth National Elections and ineffective means of accreditation by the NEBE.

Highlights from CECOIE Assessment

The assessment expounded on the role of Ethiopian CSOs in voter education. Despite the recognition of the immense relevance of CSOs in this area, civil society organizations, very little contributions were noticed during the election period.

During the 6th general elections, most CSOs reported financial challenges as the primary challenge in implementing voter education activities. Additionally, they also stated challenges such as pressure from local authorities, lack of capacity, reporting gaps, and inability to meet project requirements as major challenges.¹

Institutional and human resource capacity

Due to years of inactivity in the area, civil society organizations lacked fundamental technical and financial capacities, impacting their ability to design effective voter education initiatives. Most

¹ Access CECOIE's assessment study titled: voter education activities by Ethiopian CSOs during the 6th general elections in greater detail.

organizations surveyed did not have any prior experience delivering voter education in previous elections. The lack of expert professionals to design and deliver voter education activities was reported by both CSOs and donor organizations interviewed by CECO. NEBE also delivered limited training to CSOs on the matter.

The NEBE's manual for voter education

Civil society organizations used a newly designed voter education manual prepared by the NEBE in October 2019. The manual was described as comprehensive and clear to understand. However, several respondents stated that the manual was repetitive, used difficult technical terms (jargon) and was not available in braille for visually impaired voters.

Duration of Voter Education Activities

Only a quarter of the surveyed organizations carried out voter education activities for more than three months, despite experts recommending initiatives start much earlier than that. Findings from this study and observation reports by different groups, including the CECO shows that preparation and delivery of voter education did not start early enough to have lasting impacts on targeted voters.

Reach and Inclusiveness of VE Activities

According to observation reports and key informant interviews with donors, most of the CSOs' voter education activities were limited to urban areas for several reasons, including COVID-19, and security concerns. However, two-thirds of the voters trained by the surveyed organizations were in rural or remote



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areas. The 20 surveyed organizations claimed that they reached over 24.5 million voters. However, the bulk of the CSOs claimed to have reached less than 50,000 voters apiece.

Language used

Most of the surveyed CSOs used singular mediums to reach their voters, despite literature suggesting that using multiple mediums to deliver voter education is more effective. Most of the organizations surveyed used only one language (mostly Amharic), with a considerable amount also giving VE in Afaan Oromo. One CSO, however, used 21 languages to deliver voter education in the SNNP Regional State. The majority of CSOs used face-to-face training and campaigns to deliver their messages. However, the COVID-19 rule of holding meetings with a maximum of 50 participants limited the reach of CSOs.

The Way Forward

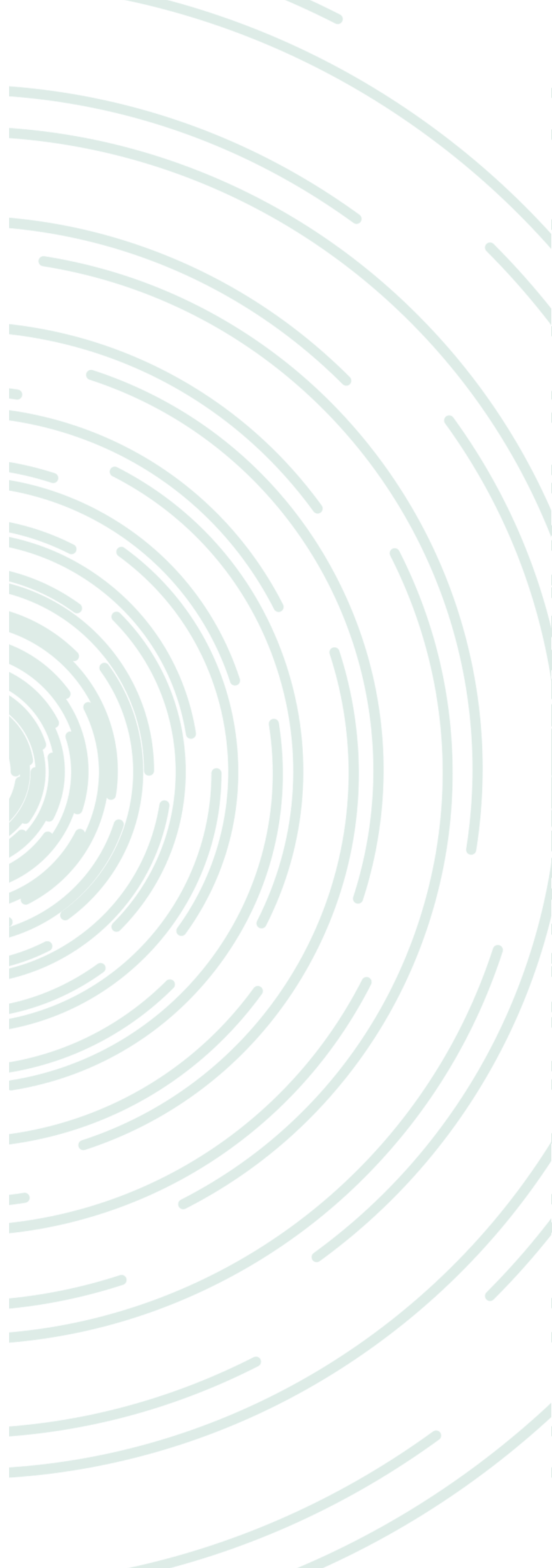
Despite some successes made by CSOs, the majority of the suggestions made by the participants revealed that there were myriad of challenges faced by CSOs in their bid to provide voter education, some of which have been noted in the preceding section. Similarly, NEBE's representative at the workshop stated that the NEBE also faced several challenges in working with CSOs to facilitate voter education efforts. Stakeholders present at the workshop agreed that the identified shortcomings needed to be addressed. Unless these shortcomings are rectified ahead of future elections the wish to hold participatory, inclusive and democratic elections will remain a pipedream.

Participants set forth recommendations for CSOs, NEBE, partner and donor organizations, and local administrative bodies as follows:

- The attempt by CSOs to implement voter education activities during the Sixth General Elections was marred by a lack of technical and financial capacity and a general lack of experience in implementing democracy and human rights projects. CSOs must build their institutional and

financial capacities so as to make more meaningful contributions in future elections. Both NEBE and the CSOs must build their project management expertise. Furthermore, CSOs must develop scientific and tangible project indicators to ensure that their activities can be assessed after completion. Inviting other researchers to conduct similar assessments on the impacts of their programs would be a plus for their effectiveness

- Voter education activities should start as early as possible in order to have a lasting impact on voter insight, knowledge retention, and political participation. CSOs should use more languages to educate voters so that they can reach more citizens. To that end, the NEBE should accredit CSOs as early as possible in future elections, or perhaps permanently accredit selected organizations subject to accreditation renewal near election times.
- The obstacles posed by local government authorities was one of the challenges to CSOs' VE activities during the Sixth General Elections. Several voter education activities were interrupted by government officials due to lack of awareness and politically driven grounds. In future elections, the government must ensure that its officials do not engage in acts that hinder voter education activities.



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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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