

Localization through Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting in Iraq

A CEPPS IPEA Program Perspective

The Consortium for Elections and Process Strengthening (CEPPS), in conjunction with core partners the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), implemented the Iraq Provincial Election Activity (IPEA) program from October 2018 to September 2023. During a period when Iraq's political situation fluctuated significantly, CEPPS leveraged locally led collaboration, learning, and adaptation to get regular updates on the political context and adjust its programming based on data and feedback shared by its partners and stakeholders. From the start of the award, CEPPS/IRI supported local civil society organizations (CSOs) by delivering civic education, while CEPPS/IFES worked with the Iraq Independent High Election Commission (IHEC) to prepare for the provisional election.

In 2019, the youth-led Tishreen movement influenced changes in legislation and the electoral process including early parliamentary elections, changes to the IHEC and election laws, and the indefinite postponement of provincial elections. In response, CEPPS partners adapted their mentorship and capacity building support for local civil society partners and to help the IHEC understand the new legal and institutional framework in preparation for the early parliamentary elections.



CEPPS CSO partners attended training in Muthanna on integrating technology into their organizational operations for improved transparency, effectiveness, and efficiency.

With CEPPS's support, each of these efforts led to enhanced collaboration and more effective feedback loops between citizens and policymakers, positioning the IHEC to take an increased ownership in the administration and implementation of Iraq's new election laws and processes.

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Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Practices in Iraq

Adaptation of programming from provincial election support to parliamentary election.

In the aftermath of the Tishreen protest, Iraq's parliament called for an early election, postponed the provincial election indefinitely, and modified the election law. The new law replaced the top three levels of the IHEC (the board of commissioners, the heads of departments, and the heads of sections) with new, inexperienced members who did not have the technical know-how of electoral procedures. Moreover, due to a paralysis in the parliament, the government could not pass the budget in time to prepare for the national election. These unexpected shifts necessitated CEPPS/IFES to significantly adapt its previously planned activities and implement emerging priority interventions not allocated in the CEPPS/IFES budget. New IHEC leadership required onboarding and training on the technicalities of electoral processes. Cascade training needed to be prepared for poll-station workers. Voter registration and other logistical and operational plans had to be made in advance. International consultants were brought in to comply with best practices. Ultimately, these interventions resulted in an election that was lauded by the international community for its timeliness without any major disputes.

Regular learning and reflection sessions encouraged local partners to take ownership of program activities.

At first, local partners were juggling alternative priorities and did not see the value of "pause and reflect" sessions. They were also hesitant to share information, mistakenly thinking that the reflection sessions were an accountability exercise. However, as the CSOs became more involved in the co-creation process of reflection sessions by selecting topics for the agenda, as well as assessing gaps and opportunities from learning, they formed stronger bonds and networks with one another and with CEPPS. CEPPS/IRI enhanced these informal quarterly "pause and reflect" sessions by offering peer-to-peer cohort training on advocacy and financial management, which enabled the CSOs to identify core issues around their citizens' engagement in elections, to develop an initial advocacy plan responsive to these issues, and to determine the financial and logistical requirements of activities within each plan. This approach enabled the local partners to implement stronger CEPPS funded programs and better positioned them to seek additional funds from the United States Government, and other donors independent of the consortium.

CEPPS support to IHEC led to effective strategy planning, monitoring, oversight and complaint handling systems and processes.

Following the parliamentary election, CEPPS/IFES supported multi-day, lessons-learned workshops which enabled the IHEC to identify issues and act upon election operations, boundary delimitation, and complaints adjudication. With CEPPS support, the IHEC also established a strategic planning committee and fully incorporated eighty-two recommendations from the workshop into the IHEC's strategic plan. Additionally, the IHEC was able to create a monitoring committee to track and report on the plan's implementation and managed a grievance system which efficiently processed public complaints regarding the IHEC's handling of the electoral processes. CEPPS/IFES also assisted in growing the IHEC's capacity in other areas like media and public outreach, ballot papers, polling day procedures, and electoral dispute resolution, as well as strategic planning, and cyber security. Lastly, CEPPS/IFES helped the IHEC construct a candidates and political parties management system, and similarly, provided training to members of the electoral judiciary panel. This training became significant when some electoral dispute rulings following the 2021 elections did not take into consideration some essential details.

Inclusive participatory monitoring and learning approaches enabled CEPPS to provide targeted support.

Initially, CEPPS held semi-annual "pause and reflect" sessions among its core partners only. While these semi-annual sessions were helpful in collaborating on joint partner initiatives, the consortium still struggled to get sufficient information on Iraq's rapidly changing political context to effectively assess the progress of its programs. The local partners provided reports regularly, but a gap remained in the delivery of quality data. CEPPS/IRI set out to close these gaps by training local partners to operationalize complexity-aware monitoring, including those local partners in reflection sessions, and increasing the frequency of these sessions every quarter. Inclusive and participatory monitoring, evaluation, and learning approaches helped local partners to not only receive up-to-date quality data with more nuanced information, but also to learn how political shifts affected their ability to implement projects. This effort, ultimately, gave the consortium the ability to better provide all local partners with targeted support.