

Transcript

First of all, I would like to thank Georgetown University and International IDEA, who have set up this important program on stories of democracy in order to gather lesson learned and memories of people who have contributed to important electoral processes over the years and to create a backlog, important also for public opinion but especially for researchers or electoral practitioners.

When it comes to myself, I'm Fabio Bargiacchi. I'm the founder and director of the European Center for Electoral Support, a not-for-profit foundation established in 2010, that is supporting the facilitation of electoral cooperation between the European Union European Union Member States and partner countries that request electoral support. We've been working in the last 14 years—almost 15 years—in more than 50 countries, mostly in Africa and the Middle East. I'm the (co)founder, and the other (co)founder with me is Abbot Apollinaire Malu Malu, former president of the Electoral Commission of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). That is exactly the country where I would like to illustrate the experience I lived in 2004-2006, all the way until nowadays as we are still interacting with that specific country for their own electoral processes.

Why have I suggested to Jeff Fisher, a long-lasting-friend, colleague and senior to many of us as electoral practitioners, that I would like to speak about DRC? Because back then, we were able to contribute to the implementation of a very challenging biometric voter registration process. That was one of the first times that it was implemented to such scale in Africa and actually opened up the way to biometric voter registration processes in many other African countries.

Here we talk about a country that did not have a multi-party election for 41 years. We talk about the country that was exiting an important conflict—the Great Lakes Conflict—that involved many surrounding countries of the East and Southern Africa. Therefore, we are talking about a country that very difficultly had found a peace agreement in 2003, that foresaw the organization of constitutional referendum and of an electoral process, legislative and presidential before the end 2006.

In this context the international community played a very important role, with the United Nations peacekeeping mission Monusco (United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and with one of the largest UNDP-managed basket funds, to which the European Union has contributed over 165 million euro that, until today is the largest contribution to an electoral system project of the European Union. I was actually tasked to build up this contribution to the UNDP-managed basket fund.

On the registration process, the seasonal issues [faced] were linked to the possibility to carry out a civil registration and a census, considering that the census in DRC, the only census in DRC until today, had been carried out in 1984 and most of the data was lost

during the conflict.. Therefore it was decided at a certain point to carry out only the voter registration process, and not actually carry out a census or civil registration process to extrapolate the data and to do a voter register.

Obviously, there was also the decision to adopt biometrics back then, and we are talking about 2003 and 2004, or actually carrying out manual voter registration, as many other African countries were actually carrying out. African countries, including DRC, are experiencing, sometimes even today, the same issues: lack of the inaccurate civil registration procedures and civil registration practice and process, whereby the death and the birth are not all the time registered. [] Therefore you still have many countries, nowadays, that have a more accurate voter registration or voter register than a civil registration per se. This was the case in DRC where, until today, and I will explain later on, the biometric voter registration card is the only national ID card existing and available for citizens of Democratic Republic of Congo.

This was one of the reasons that brought the Independent Electoral Commission, back then, the Congolese authority and the international community to select biometric voter registration in order to issue on-site a biometric voter registration card that could have actually played the role of temporary ID card, and therefore played also an important role of having citizens and potential voters to go and register themselves because they knew that this voter registration card that would have also acted as a temporary ID card that till today is actually the case.

So here [DRC circ 2004-2005] 10,000 biometric voter registration kits were actually purchased through the UNDP-managed basket funds. In order to illustrate to the public opinion and to the voters to the candidates, in a post-conflict setting, in a country of 2.3 million square kilometers, that this was the best choice ever, the selection of the of the company was actually organized through a televised voter registration mocking [] to check what was the best company to be selected. Especially to illustrate to the public opinion that this process was accurate and transparent, and would have prevented disenfranchisement of voters in different specific areas.

So now, once the 10,000 biometric voter registration kits were purchased, there was the important challenge of delivering these 10,000 kits in 9,000 center, knowing that the country, as I was saying, is the second largest in Africa (2.3 million square kilometers and bordering with 7 countries) and in some of the areas, until nowadays, by the way, in the east part of the country the conflict was still ongoing. Therefore, the United Nations peacekeeping mission played a very important role in transporting this material by air, by river, by boat, and by land. Obviously, we had also the challenges of the security for these vote registration kits and the challenges of energy obviously were also 10,000 or more gasoline generators had to be purchased and to be transported throughout the countries.

[In] the end, given the important challenges of logistics, operations, and finance, the voter registration process was not actually carried out in one go throughout all the countries, but the country was divided in 5 operational zones. Instead of carrying out the process for 3 months, the process was extended to 9 months in order to register, if I'm not mistaken, almost 25 million voters and carry out the automatic fingerprint identification system check-in, to make sure that one fingerprint is actually counter-checked with all the other 25 million (registrations) in order to detect double entry, and actually stripped the right to vote to those that attempted to register twice or 3 times and had several ID cards.

This was also a challenge, because the cards were actually delivered in order to increase the confidence and trust in the process. The cards were produced on-site. They were delivered immediately to people who came to register. Later on, you had a list of some 100 thousand that were stripped of the right because they had attempted to register twice, and therefore in the register their name was actually coming out as registered in several places.

So all in all, [without going into detail] the result of the electoral process eventually was a peaceful one and brought to the election of President Kabila. Back, then through different steps, first a constitutional referendum, and then presidential elections in two rounds. I think the voter registration process played a very important role in DRC, and in Africa, to show that these kind of exercises were possible in Africa, opening up the way for many other biometric voter registration processes that actually are being carried out throughout Africa until nowadays, addressing the issues of lack of appropriate civil registry that is not actually maintained by the attitude of some part of the populations in African countries that lived in rural areas and not in urban areas, and do not need to have an ID card per se in order to interact themselves with public administration for their own daily life. So this is still the challenge in several of the countries.

One most important aspects I would like to mention is the borrowing of 3,000 biometric vote registration kits that were bought for DRC by Togo, that decided to organize snap elections in 2007, after the elections and the voter registration terminated in DRC. There was the challenge, of course, to maintain these 10,000 kits in the appropriate format and functioning for the future electoral process given the very important investment that was made. We are talking about 45 million euro, if I'm not mistaken, to purchase those 10,000 biometric voter registration kits. [] 3,000 of those kits were actually borrowed by Togo in order to organize their own voter registration process in short time, because they didn't have the time actually to go through the process of the purchasing [their kits]. There was this agreement between DRC Election Commission, Togo Election Commission and the United Nations and European Union, in order actually to lend this material that was actually reconditioned–reorganized when it comes to the software–and allow Togo to

carry out a very rapid voter registration process. These 3,000 kits that later on were actually returned to DRC.

If there are no further specifications that are requested from my side, this is what I wanted to share when it comes to the biometric voter registration process 2004-2006 in DRC. That, as I was saying, the mother of all operation when it comes to biometric vote registrations in Africa and it opened up the way and brought confidence to other countries to actually implement a similar process given that this was successfully one of the biggest, if not the biggest or the second biggest country in Africa, with such challenging conditions when it comes to operations and logistics.