

SUMMARY REPORT: PROMOTING INFORMATION INTEGRITY IN ELECTIONS

SPARKBLUE CONSULTATION 10 OCTOBER TO 4 NOVEMBER 2022 UNDP OSLO GOVERNANCE CENTRE AND THE ACTION COALITION ON INFORMATION INTEGRITY IN ELECTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Requests from Member States to protect electoral integrity from information pollution have notably increased in recent years. Practical, programmable actions to address elections-related information pollution are scattered and do not yet benefit from a strong learning agenda. In response, UNDP and other electoral support actors globally have been investing to develop and deploy risk mitigation and response measures for civil society organisations, media, government institutions and other stakeholders. Those responses often employ digital tools to address the issues of scale and technicity of disinformation and hate speech.

In May 2022, UNDP launched an **Action Coalition on Information Integrity in Elections**¹ as part of the Danish Government's Tech4Democracy initiative. Among its activities, the Action Coalition undertook an online consultation on the UNDP SparkBlue platform to explore the key concerns and responses to elections-related information pollution in diverse contexts.

On 10 October 2022, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre and Action Coalition partners launched the four-week consultation which closed on 4 November 2022. This four-week exercise in knowledge exchange aimed to inform and strengthen global and national level mechanisms, decisions, and programmatic options to promote information integrity in elections.

This report summarises ideas, programmatic experience and knowledge exchange, and key points raised by participants. It does not necessarily reflect the views of UNDP Oslo Governance Centre or the Action Coalition on Information Integrity in elections.

The [SparkBlue consultation](#) was divided into three consultative 'rooms':

Consultation Room 1 – Defining the problem

- Technology-enabled information pollution
- Challenges detecting and addressing electoral disinformation
- Legal and institutional gaps and limitations
- Potential impact on electoral processes

Consultation Room 2 - Gathering best practice

- Collect effective programmatic and policy responses to electoral disinformation
- Identify knowledge gaps, risks and challenges specific to different electoral settings

¹ Member organizations of the Action Coalition: UNDP, Africa Centre for Freedom of Information, Centre for Elections, Democracy, Accountability and Representation (CEDAR), Birmingham University, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, International IDEA, Samir Kassir Foundation, Panos Institute Southern Africa and the Maharat Foundation

Consultation Room 3 - The role of digital solutions in responding to electoral disinformation

- Types of digital solutions being deployed
- Benefits and risks of digital tools in an electoral setting
- Recommendations for effectively deploying digital tools into existing information/election landscapes
- How do we understand and measure impact of digital interventions and responses

SNAPSHOT DATA

The consultation was both internal and external, with participation from UNDP HQ, country offices and regional hubs, United Nations sister agencies, academic institutions and think tanks, media experts and journalists, civil society organisations, government institutions, electoral practitioners, and private sector/tech companies.

- Contributors from across 25 countries, sharing learning and best practice from a range of electoral contexts
- Almost 100 contributions from 53 colleagues around the globe.
- Participant from twenty-five countries across many regions (including Sierra Leone, Turkey, Uganda, Libya, Zambia, Philippines, Australia)

KEY POINTS FORM THE DISCUSSIONS:

The consultation took place in three virtual meeting rooms, moderated by skilled electoral and/or information integrity experts from Action Coalition Organisations. Moderators were in charge of a room for one week, allowing a variety of experts to draw on their networks of experience, bringing varying approaches and ideas to stimulate dialogue amongst participants.

The text below seeks to highlight key ideas and interlinkages proposed by the participants.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION ROOM 1: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Disinformation is a serious threat to the legitimacy of elections and therefore to democracy as a whole. When ill-intentioned actors deliberately spread false information before, during or after elections, it erodes trust in the institutions that are critical to a functioning democracy.

Discussion room 1 sought to consider the issues surrounding disinformation tactics and how disinformation manifests in different countries and in differing contexts.

Findings:

1. Electoral disinformation may discredit electoral institutions and undermine the electoral process. Disinformation can range from spreading misleading information about the voter registration process to challenge the independence and transparency EMBS to announcing fake results and denouncing imaginary fraud. (Jasmin Gilera) Nic Cheeseman and Petra Alderman asked, "What are the challenges in detecting and addressing electoral disinformation?"
2. There is a need for involving **multi-faceted solutions a range of stakeholders** deploying a range of solutions-focussed interventions. This is paramount to tackle the constantly evolving challenges posed by information disorder.

3. Disinformation is context specific, affecting different groups to varying degrees and in different ways, with **vulnerable groups being disproportionately affected**. Vulnerable communities need to be at the centre of the conversation on the problem of information integrity and subsequently the solutions proposed, designed and implemented. For example, Harriet Dwyer noted some of the innovation happening around 'social listening'. "The growing capacity around social listening as an additional tool is encouraging however it is not a panacea and its use is extremely complex, costly, and ethically fraught. A gap in using these tools also exists in matching the spread of disinformation and its real impact on human behaviour." As such, a key step to fostering information integrity in elections is **mapping the information landscape ahead of the election cycle** to assess what disinformation looks like at the local level? Who is creating it? Where? What flashpoints can be identified? What role does media, civil society, relevant government institutions play? What interventions would be likely to succeed? Melody Azinim also points out that more focus is required on local languages and dialects.
4. WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter etc. are important sources for people, but offline methods such as local information vans and community market information centres are crucial, as pointed out by Melody Azinim. Nic Cheeseman and Petra Alderman also reiterated this point: to what extent can digital technology play a role in tackling disinformation? The counter-question here is, **what are the limitations of technology in elections?** Also discussed was the need to robustly evaluate tech/digital solutions so that impact and value for money can be assessed. This reiterates concerns that **tech/digital resources could divert from core electoral safeguarding practices** such as the effective monitoring of elections and core media development initiatives such as the training of journalists.
5. Emphasis on regulatory systems and the need to **strengthen regulatory frameworks** was raised by numerous contributors including Alessandro Ercolani. Petra Alderman asked, "What legal and institutional gaps and limitations are contributing to this problem?"
6. Bigambia Bitimi highlighted the need for **well-equipped and well-trained local experts focussing on the tracking of disinformation** (mostly in developing countries). "There is a need for developing a skilled workforce that can work to address this challenge," he said. Bigambia Bitimi also noted that, in some instances, disinformation is a product of a communication gap between the public and key electoral stakeholders. Sometimes, he said, this gap might be linked to a poor understanding of digital technology and electronic processes used in elections.
7. A strong focus of the discussion was on the problem of information integrity in elections was **public trust in institutions**, namely government authorities (from the police to the politicians) and the media. (JDensley). When trust is low, the public is more susceptible to misinformation and disinformation. This is where governance and accountability are key, according to Harriet Dwyer and Melody Azinim. Trusted, independent entities that can play a role in electoral processes are needed, but these institutions do not yet operate at the scale needed to tackle disinformation.
8. Mirna Ghanem and JDensley pointed out **the need for longer-term solutions to be deployed**, such as media and information literacy programmes, ideally starting at a young age, being embedded in educational curricula and teaching critical thinking skills.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION ROOM 2: GATHERING BEST PRACTICE

Elections are being targeted by disinformation campaigns that seek to undermine the democratic process. While there are no simple solutions for addressing this problem, there are many important and innovative initiatives being tested to mitigate the impact of election-related disinformation.

Consultation room 2 focused on discussions around possible solutions, partnerships, and current and prospective programming in order to share information and understand what impact these interventions are having and what kind of interventions could be deployed.

Findings:

1. **Fact-checking** was the subject of robust discussion. While there were concerns about it being unable to counter the influence of seeded narratives (Ajay Patel), Vusumuzi Sifile, Gideon Chibwe and Sarah Mwenya discussed more positive experiences working with fact-checking (specifically, iVerify) to, according to the Vusumuzi Sifile, “provide reliable, impartial and digital technology platforms to foster information integrity in elections”. Vusumuzi Sifile added that fact-checking is not enough and “needs to be complemented with efforts like response actions and counter messaging”. Janett S'mwanza Xhosa mentioned **the need for appropriate partnerships** to leverage fact-checking initiatives while Kondwani Thindwa reiterated the **need to fact-check the right kind of information**; that which specifically threatens the integrity of elections. Carolyne Wilhelm raised the issue that fact-checking initiatives could be hijacked or, indeed, initiated under false premises and therefore pose both issues of trust and integrity in fact-checking as well as further perpetuating disinformation.
2. Simon Finley pointed out the need to faithfully evaluate programme challenges and failures. **Robust research and evaluation of interventions is currently lacking** and evidence-based interrogation and assessment needs to be more fully utilised. With a thorough analysis of new and innovative approaches, learning from – and building on – programmatic strengths to improve interventions offers potential for greater impact.
3. Ali al-Bayati highlighted the concerns around **integrity of elections and the use of technology**. Technology, he said, raised concerns about secrecy of votes and could cause distrust in the electoral process.
4. Ajay Patel notes from research on the UNDP SELECT project that “there is an onus on platforms to increase their attention to the matter, deploying the range of opportunities within their scope - i.e., moderation, design, technical choices, monetisation decisions etc”. This reiterates discussions across all three discussion groups focussing on **the need for technology companies to work with a range of stakeholders to ensure that social media platforms and search engine algorithms do not “weaponize” disinformation** by increasing traffic to information that is counter to the integrity and credibility of electoral processes.
5. Candidates and political actors have a responsibility to uphold ethical principles in the context of elections. **Codes of conduct for political actors** was raised as a potential focus area, but concerns remain regarding compliance (Ajay Patel).
6. Juliana Gargiulo shared three examples of **south-south cooperation to enhance the transparency and credibility of electoral processes**.
7. Tamara Bralo noted **the need to more fully understand the context under which journalists and the media are working**. State and public media is generally poorly funded and often subjected to pressure from incumbent government actors. Where independent media is able to operate,

media workers and journalists can be subjected to online and offline threats and intimidation.

The role of the media as both an amplifier of disinformation as well as a target of disinformation needs to be assessed as part of the ongoing challenge of building the capacity of independent media to hold power to account. Jasmin Gilera and Bianca Lapuz highlighted several successful, mainstream media interventions to increase access to and **trust in the media** as a provider of trusted electoral information in the Philippines.

8. Nyambe Jere raised important local context in Zambia regarding hate speech directed at ethnic groups and tribes during the election and the inability of the EMB or technology companies to counter this. This reiterates the finding in discussion 1.5 on **regulatory reform** as well as reinforcing a discussion across all discussion groups regarding **a more robust role that needs to be taken by the digital/tech/social media industry**.
9. Bianca Lapuz noted the need for **more regulation around campaign finance**. As such, governments and stakeholders should be encouraged to consider whether measures to provide transparency, information sharing and oversight of online campaign finance could help address the risk of abuses, manipulation of voters and corruption.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION ROOM 3: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL SOLUTIONS IN RESPONDING TO ELECTORAL DISINFORMATION

In recent years, digital technology has played an increasingly important role in elections. Social media platforms have been used to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion and ill-intentioned actors have been accused of weaponizing online dissemination methods to interfere in the electoral process. However, digital technology can also be used to combat these threats. In discussion room three, discussion focussed on harnessing the power of digital technology, alongside more 'traditional' approaches, to better protect our elections from interference and manipulation.

Findings:

1. Mark Belinsky reiterated **the need to improve ways to measure the impact of online tools** (in this case, iVerify) to improve the efficacy of the software. Brian Simpande, who helped to implement iVerify in Zambia stated that, "digital tools especially designed for electoral settings may risk losing their credibility if they are partial, lack professionalism, and are not transparent. These principles are important if citizens must embrace any digital tool in an electoral setting." This mirrors the issue of trust highlighted in discussion room point 2.1.
2. Mark Belinsky highlighted **the difficulties of monitoring social media for hate speech**, especially platforms like TikTok due to lack of access to APIs as well as the challenge of monitoring video and audio. Issues of accountability of tech companies across jurisdictions also need to be considered. Jiore Craig stated that **tech companies needed to do more to ensure electoral integrity by providing more access to data for researchers**. "Tech companies have policies - both public and internal policies - that if enforced would improve the information ecosystem around elections and in general. Their failure to enforce their own policies and/or their prioritization of profit over safe spaces online has led to several flops where interventions could have been deployed but weren't. The Facebook "Break glass plan" comes to mind".
3. Bacem Chouat noted the positive utility of digital platforms to disseminate information on issues such as **voter enrolment and public education campaigns** that provide information (for example, on the electoral system) to the public, including any new or technological aspects of the electoral system. However, more effort is needed to **increase public awareness of digital tools and their uses and to disincentivise those who abuse them**. Gilbert Sendugwa mentions a tool that AFIC

designed. "AFIC developed and deployed a tool to track electoral violence in terms of location, date of incident, perpetrators, victims, etc. The use of this tool is integrated with verification data collection, verification and reporting," wrote Sendugwa.

4. Osama al Jaber mentioned the UNDP 'eMonitor+' platform that has been deployed in Tunisia, Libya and Lebanon. "It relies on machine learning to track and analyse the content on digital media, including utilizing various algorithms to, for example, conduct sentiment analysis, topic classification, hate speech analysis, and reversing image and video sources. The platform also allows manual analysis done by trained monitors working daily on the platform to explore and analyse content." While this big data offers numerous possibilities, Osama also warns of limitations as **"it could enable invasions of privacy, decrease civil freedoms, and significantly increase state and corporate control when states are using such a tool for surveillance"**. Osama also notes that this monitoring needs to start well before an election cycle begins and deploying it in tandem with **research based on participation in disinformation and hate speech and targeted groups and individuals**.
5. Jonathan Tanner reiterated the need for **interventions to start well ahead of any electoral cycle to allow for preparations for prebunking false information that could affect trust in institutions** and, therefore, pose challenges to the integrity of an election. "By monitoring influential social platforms for accounts and wider networks that are known to produce false information it is possible to play an 'early warning' function that limits the impact malicious actors can have in the information space," said Tanner. Jiore Craig reinforced the need to move on from short-term solutions. She noted **"There seems to be a lack of emphasis on building trust on messengers/institutions** etc. despite how important the strategy of tearing down trust in those entities is for bad actors".
6. Discussion also focussed on how responses to disinformation are particularly challenging as social media platforms aren't investing enough in most of the world and synthetic content is increasingly hard to spot. **Regulations and digital literacy are good ways to start but are long term solutions**. "The willingness of social media companies to invest in protecting citizens appears - through product design or content moderation - appears limited in the global north and practically non-existent in the global south," wrote Jonathan Tanner. However, Jasmin Gilera points out that **"any attempt to regulate online content should balance the rights to freedom of expression and access to information** with the protection of other civil and political rights such as the right to political participation, privacy and freedom from discrimination".
7. **Trust-building in government institutions and EMBS could be enhanced by better strategic communications**, according to Tanner. "For independent institutions with an important role to play in democratic governance - such as electoral bodies - the question of how to win trust is essential. In traditional information ecosystems semiotic power was helpful but in modern digital information ecosystems this power is much weaker. In countries like mine (*the UK*) the factors which create and maintain trust amongst citizens have changed, they are less about deference and expertise and more about authenticity and personality. Better strategic communications can undoubtedly play a role in helping institutions react to this shift, but it will remain challenging. Many organisations are recognising the need to invest in building and sustaining the trust of their audiences by building communities that provide useful information and frequent engagement to their members."
8. Jiore Craig highlighted **some promising "re-thinking" and subsequent programmatic design using technology and social media tools**. For example, "tech tools like messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram themselves or bespoke apps meant to connect civil society groups or help voters access information about the polls can be used for relational organizing or 'warm' organizing that focuses on building relationships over pushing content and calls to action. This

approach requires investment over time and people power to be successful, but promising examples are presently working well in places like Brazil,” she noted.

FOLLOWING THE E-DISCUSSION, HERE ARE THE NEXT STEPS:

- **In-Depth Consultations:** Consultations have been conducted with individual UNDP teams, other United Nations entities, partners, donors, and thematic experts to further sharpen the guidance paper on how the Action Coalition can best respond to enhance information integrity in elections
- **Validate the findings:** A virtual event took place in January to go through the findings of the guidance paper and ensure that the final paper is consensus-led guidance.
- By early 2023, an outcome paper on addressing information integrity in elections will be completed. We hope to share this with contributors to this consultation before promoting during early 2023.