



# **CIVIC AND VOTER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19**



## **Table of Contents**

1	Background.....	2
2	Purpose.....	2
3	Scope.....	2
4	Guiding Principles .....	3
5	Recommendations.....	3
6	Resources .....	6
7	Conclusion .....	6

## **1 Background**

The onset of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has changed virtually all aspects of everyday life. This includes the activities that are carried out to ensure the effective running and functioning of society. In this context, it is inevitable that elections would be conducted in a vastly different way than usual. This applies to not just voting on election day, but also pre-election activities such as civic and voter education. With the requirements for social distancing to reduce the spread of the virus, it would be impossible to gather large crowds of voters to sensitise them on their civic rights and responsibilities, and educate them on voting processes and procedures. Civic and voter education is important in fostering democratic culture, and promoting electoral inclusion and participation. It is therefore necessary to find suitable alternatives to ensure that voters do not lose out on necessary electoral information due to the pandemic.

Furthermore, civic and voter education will necessarily include a new dimension due to the pandemic. This involves public health guidelines to reduce transmission of the virus. In order to reduce the risk of catching the virus, voters need to know what protective measures to take. This makes it more important than ever to conduct voter education to encourage people to not just vote, but vote safely.

## **2 Purpose**

The purpose of this policy document is to outline the ways in which civic and voter education can be conducted in the context of COVID-19, drawing lessons from other countries such as Malawi and South Korea. It aims to ensure that voters do not miss out on valuable information regarding elections and voting safely due to the pandemic.

## **3 Scope**

This policy document applies to all election stakeholders in Nigeria, including voters, officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the media. It should serve as a stakeholder's guide to conducting civic and voter education in the context of COVID-19.

#### 4 Guiding Principles

The following principles should guide the conduct of voter education during COVID-19:

- **Equality:** All voters should be treated equally. Regardless of age, race, sex, disability, and so on, each voter should receive the same quality of education.
- **Inclusion:** All segments of society, from the elite to the grassroots, should be involved in voter education. In particular, women, persons with disabilities, and rural/marginalised communities must not be left out.
- **Innovation:** Given the unprecedented context, it is important to develop innovative methods of conducting education to ensure that voters do not miss out as a result of the pandemic. These might include hosting virtual events and passing messages through social media.
- **Transparency:** The public should be informed of every change to the voter education process due to the pandemic, to encourage effective participation.

#### 5 Recommendations

The following are recommendations for conducting voter education during COVID-19:

- **Virtual alternatives** should be favoured over physical contact wherever possible. Health experts have suggested that confined and poorly ventilated spaces pose a high risk of the virus being spread.<sup>1</sup> This makes it paramount to prevent overcrowding and reduce physical contact to the barest minimum. Online platforms such as Zoom, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp can be used to conduct voter education virtually. Stakeholders can use innovative measures to encourage participation, such as hosting a live virtual event where participants can ask questions.
- **Telephones** should be used by key agencies such as INEC to transmit bulk information. For example, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) periodically sent out bulk SMS messages to Nigerians, advising them to

---

<sup>1</sup> Aylin Woodward, “You’re most likely to catch the coronavirus in a poorly ventilated space. That makes offices very risky”, *Business Insider Africa* (6 May 2020). Available at: <https://africa.businessinsider.com/tech/youre-most-likely-to-catch-the-coronavirus-in-a-poorly-ventilated-space-that-makes/cbdclxm>

follow COVID-19 protocols including self-isolation for people who had recently travelled, wearing face masks, washing hands frequently, and maintaining social distancing. The bulk messages were also used to disseminate the dedicated number to call for COVID-19 emergencies. This is an effective way to disseminate information that can be emulated by INEC in relation to voting safely during the pandemic.

- Where physical meetings are required, **public health guidelines** should be strictly observed. The Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) recently published guidelines for conducting elections during COVID-19, recommending things such as hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, and social distancing.<sup>2</sup> These guidelines should be studied, followed, and shared with others.
- **Traditional and digital media** should be used to pass information to voters about elections and protective measures to take. Messages can be printed on posters, newspapers, magazines, and billboards, and they can also be transmitted through radio jingles, TV ads, and social media channels. This was done effectively in South Korea, where the National Election Commission (NEC) released a voter code of conduct containing information about wearing masks, sanitising hands, and maintaining social distancing.<sup>3</sup> This code of conduct was published on the NEC website, placed on banners and posters around the country, and transmitted on TV ads. Similarly, election stakeholders in Nigeria can help to increase voter education by publicising the voter code of conduct released by INEC.<sup>4</sup> These are effective ways to quickly pass messages across to voters.
- The **messages should be translated** into Pidgin English and the three major languages – Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. This will ensure that they reach a wider range of Nigerians, including those who do not have a good understanding of English Language. This is particularly important for people in rural communities who might only speak or understand their native language or Pidgin English.

---

<sup>2</sup> NCDC, *Guidelines for Conducting Elections During the COVID-19 Outbreak in Nigeria*. Available at: <https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/media/files/ElectionsDuringCOVID-19July2020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> NEC, COVID-19 Response Measures Ahead of the 21st National Assembly Elections (11 May 2020). Available at: [https://m.nec.go.kr/engvote\\_2013/04\\_news/01\\_02.jsp?num=213&pg=1&col=&sw](https://m.nec.go.kr/engvote_2013/04_news/01_02.jsp?num=213&pg=1&col=&sw)

<sup>4</sup> INEC, *Voting in Safety: Voters Code of Conduct (VCC) for Elections During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

- **Community outreach** should also be carried out in rural and marginalised communities. This is important because people in these communities might not have easy access to virtual alternatives such as the media. In order for them not to miss out on important information, mass community outreach should be provided. This is subject to the condition that all persons going on community outreach wear full personal protective equipment (PPE).

We can understand the importance of community outreach in rural communities by examining Malawi's experience. During their recently conducted presidential election, the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) engaged in voter education through a series of videos titled "My Country, My Choice".<sup>5</sup> This encouraged voters to follow public health guidelines including using hand hygiene, social distancing, and wearing face masks. However, Mr Boniface Chibwana explains that this voter education was concentrated in urban areas; therefore, people in rural areas were either unwilling or unable to follow the guidelines for safe voting.<sup>6</sup> As a result, there was a spike in coronavirus cases following the election on 23 June 2020, from 592 cases on 18 June, to 1,038 cases on 27 June. Malawi's experience demonstrates that for voter education to be effective, all segments of society, including rural communities must be included.

- Opportunities should be made for **step-down training** in communities. Given the requirements for social distancing and preventing overcrowding due to COVID-19, it would be useful to educate groups of people who can then educate others especially at the grassroots level. This will help to create a ripple effect and ensure that wider groups of people are educated, albeit at different times. It will also prevent overcrowding and thus minimise the risk of the virus being spread. The process of step-down training has already been started by INEC with regard to education of persons with disabilities in some communities in Edo and Ondo States.<sup>7</sup> It would be desirable for this process to be replicated in other communities.

---

<sup>5</sup> "My Country, My Choice: Voting Procedures during COVID-19", *Election Access* (updated July 2020). Available at: <http://www.electionaccess.org/en/resources/voter-education/voter-education/643/>

<sup>6</sup> Boniface Chibwana, "Malawi Fresh Election: Exploring the Election Reform Agenda", *Election Resource Centre Zimbabwe* (19 August 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Ms Benny Ogueji, "Public Presentation of Findings of Assessment of INEC Preparations for the 2020 Governorship Election in Edo State", *Centre for Citizens with Disabilities* (10 September 2020)

## **6 Resources**

The following resources can be used by stakeholders in conducting civic and voter education:

- *Guidelines for Conducting Elections During the COVID-19 Outbreak in Nigeria*: A document published by the NCDC to provide recommendations and actions that should be taken to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19. It applies to election stakeholders including voters, electoral officers, and candidates.
- *Policy on Conducting Elections in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic*: A policy document published by INEC to enable its officials to understand and respond adequately to the challenges of conducting elections during COVID-19.
- *Voting in Safety: Voters Code of Conduct (VCC) for Elections During the COVID-19 Pandemic*: An infographic published by INEC to enable voters understand how to vote safely and know what protective measures they can take to reduce the risk of spreading the virus.

## **7 Conclusion**

In the context of COVID-19, all election stakeholders have a role to play in conducting civic and voter education. INEC officials, CSOs, and NGOs can conduct voter education virtually, transmit messages in different languages through telephones and the media, engage in community outreach, and make provisions for step-down training. Voters who are informed can also educate other voters on how to vote safely. If all stakeholders take the required actions, we will have an informed electorate who can participate safely in elections throughout the country.



©2020 Initiative for Research, Innovation and Advocacy in Development

### **About the Electoral Hub**

The Electoral Hub, an organ of the Initiative for Research, Innovation and Advocacy in Development (**IRIAD**), is a multidisciplinary strategic think-tank which seeks to provide solutions to improve the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. It is conceptualized to complement the roles and activities of the different institutions, stakeholders and drivers of the electoral process and governance. The Electoral Hub's aim is to strengthen electoral governance and accountability in Nigeria through the provision of data and critical analysis supporting the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. We believe that the integrity of the electoral process is crucial in improving the electoral governance architecture and democracy in Nigeria. We also believe in contextual analysis for solutions rooted in the principles of justice and equity

Our core values are knowledge-exchange, inclusion, justice, equity, transparency and accountability.

### **Contact**

IRIAD-The Electoral Hub

C/O 1 Sankuru Close, Maitama

Phone: +234 8077222801 and +234 9092068680;

Email: [info@iriadev.org](mailto:info@iriadev.org) and [electoralhub@gmail.com](mailto:electoralhub@gmail.com)

Social Media Channels

Twitter: @electoralhub; Instagram: @electoralhub

Facebook: Electoral Hub

Website: <https://electoralhub.iriadev.org>

### **Acknowledgement**

This Policy Brief is part of IRIAD-The Electoral Hub's programme on Safeguarding the Integrity and Credibility of the Electoral Process in the Context of Covid-19 Pandemic funded by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (**OSIWA**)

