Theme: The increasing role of technology in election administration: Implications for election observer groups

Remarks by Dr. K Afari-Gyan, Former EC Chair, at the WAEON Conference
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Why technology?

It is a fact that in recent times many African countries have come to use technology to assist in election administration. In fact, any country today that doesn't do so risks being considered to be out of tune. The reasons for the increasing use of technology are not far to see. Technology can be used for several purposes in election administration, including:

- managing large-scale data: particularly relating to voter registration, the production of ballots, and logistical planning
- conducting voter education
- directing voters to the polling stations
- collecting complaints from stakeholders
- voting
- compiling election results
- transmitting election results
- providing stakeholders with copies of data in a convenient form
- making information available to interested on a website

So, we can see that, generally speaking, there are good reasons for the resort to the use of technology in election administration. Even so, I think an Election Management Body should not rush to introduce technology. Before my retirement, some fellow election administrators would say to me: "Ghana started introducing technology before we did, but we have now overtaken you." Only to hear later that they had serious problems with their new technologies. It is not helpful to view the introduction of technology as a race of honours.

For what it is worth, I have said time and again that my personal take on the issue of introducing technology into election administration is the seemingly contradictory dictum of making haste slowly. Be that as it may, I suppose that we will agree that a cardinal principle of democracy is that legitimate leaders are chosen by the people through their votes in a genuine election. Particularly in our electoral contexts, which are inundated with suspicion and mistrust, for technology to advance this cardinal principle it is important that the processes associated with it have four features:

1. They are easy for all concerned to use.
2. They are accessible, secure, and sustainable.
3. They contain sufficient safeguards to ensure transparency, fairness and accuracy.
4. Their outputs are auditable in case of controversy.

Technology can be used to solve problems of efficiency, but it should not be acceptable for technology to promote efficiency at the expense of these features.
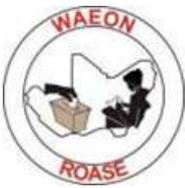
Consider for the choice of technology

Usually, an EMB will do a number of things before it introduces new technology.

- It will carefully consider what it wants the technology to do
- It will review the track record of the technology if it has been used elsewhere for the same purposes
- It will assess the sustainability of the technology to the local social and environmental conditions
- It will evaluate the cost implications for sustaining the technology
- It will ascertain the level of trust of the political parties and the electorate in the new technology
- It will consider security issues related to the new technology
- It will adequately test the operational capacity and the accuracy of the outcomes of the technology before it is used in an election

Up to this point I have been speaking about technology generally. I now want to say a few words specifically about the use of biometric technology at two stages in election administration – during the registration of voters and at the point of the ballot.

Registration of voters

We all know that a good voters register is critical to a genuine election. Biometric technology can be of immense help in making a good voters register. Of course, biometric technology cannot tell us a person's age and whether the person is a citizen or a foreigner or qualified by law to register as a voter. We have to ascertain such matter by other means.

But once we are satisfied that a person is qualified to register as a voter, biometric technology is of critical importance in capturing two pieces of data - the person's fingerprints and photograph. The data can be captured correctly and quickly and stored securely, such that we can readily and faithfully retrieve it when the need arises.

De-duplication

Based on my experience in Ghana, at the end of the registration period, there is a process of de-duplication which is intended to remove possible multiple registrations, so that a person's name occurs only once in the entire voter registration database. De-duplication is made necessary because during the registration period the thousands of registration devices that are used in the field are not interactive, so it is possible for a person to register at more than one point.

At the point of the ballot

Since the winner of a democratic election is decided by the voters, it stands to reason that a person is properly identified before being allowed to vote. For this purpose, the biometric data captured during the registration period can be used to answer the question: Is the person who registered to vote the same person who has come to vote?

In the chain of identification between registering and voting, the problem lies in a de-duplication process. In doing de-duplication, if you find that the fingerprints and the photos of the person are the same, then you have a true duplicate and the appropriate remedies can be applied. Trouble comes when photos and fingerprints don't match. Then you have to take other measures to ascertain the true situation, because EMB has a duty not to disenfranchise a genuine voter.

As I see it, if biometric devices used in taking fingerprints and photographs fine-tuned such that de-duplication becomes a smooth and straightforward process, biometric technology would have, so to speak, done its duty towards genuine elections. With a clean voter register and firm identification of the voter, there will be no ghost-voting and no impersonation, because you cannot use a dead person's biometric feature or another person's biometric features to identify yourself. For me, these

would be great contributions indeed, because they cover key areas that have formed the bases of much controversy in elections in many countries.

If I am correct in view, there might be no need to collect additional biometric data from voters at considerable cost attended with the possibility of the invasion of privacy, as biometric data are personal to the individual. I dare say that the overwhelming majority of voters are ordinary, plain people and not criminals.

Concerns of Observers

I now wish to speak briefly about issues that might concern election observers more directly. In all likelihood, your various groups use technologies in doing your work. I am not going to talk about these technologies for the simple reason that you know more about them than I do. I am also aware of your concern of limited, if any, access to technology systems of EMBs. On this issue, I believe that the degree of access will differ from country to country depending on two factors:

1. Whether the relationship between the observer group and the EMB is cooperative or adversarial
2. The kind of information about the EMB's technology system that the observer group wants

Irrespective of the degree of access to an EMB's technology system during an election, party agents, observers, and the media can still scrutinize the operational aspects of the system by finding answers to the questions like:

- Is the technology user-friendly?
  Are the officials comfortable of struggling in using the technology?
  Are the voters able to use the technology without difficulty?
- Does the technology promote efficiency in the delivery of the vote?
  The time it takes to process a voter
- Does the technology promote verifiability?
  Can an independent person take steps to verify the outputs of the technology?
- Did the EMB anticipate problems and plan possible responses to them?
  Were sufficient reserves of key materials available at short notice?
  Was there a contingency plan in case of technology failure, malfunction, or breakdown?

The questions are by no means intended to be exhaustive but illustrative of the kinds of questions that can tell us quite a bit about an EMB's technology system and its performance in the field.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that you may have the best election technology available and still not be able to deliver a credible election. This underscores the singular importance of the human factor in elections. Technology is used to assist election officials to do their work, So, beyond technology, an EMB has a responsibility to put its house in order for elections. At minimum it must build checks into the electoral process, such that genuine mistakes and deliberate wrongdoing can be detected. It must also train all categories of election officials well to be able to deliver services in a transparent and efficient manner. Where election officials are ill-prepared, biased, or corrupt, technology cannot be used to achieve credible elections.

The human factor that impinges on the delivery of genuine elections is not to be found only in the EMB. For example, the unwillingness of political parties to exhibit democratic behaviour and play by the laid down rules is a huge and negative factor in election. This is only one example. In the course of the proceeding of the conference I hope you will explore other such impacts on our elections, because they are relevant for purposes of election observation. I also wish to entreat you to, as far as possible, observe the voter registration period, being the building block of an election. Finally, I hope you will keep in mind that election observation is not a fault-finding but a fact-finding activity. The stance facilities collaboration between observer groups and EMBs for the common purpose of achieving genuine democratic elections. I wish you very fruitful deliberations.
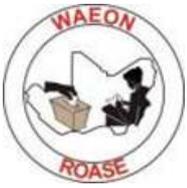
West Africa Election Observers' Network (WAEON)

About the WAEON Conference

The address was delivered at the West African Election Observers Network (WAEON) Conference in Accra, where scores of election observer groups and election experts in West Africa gathered to strategize on how to navigate challenges associated with technology-driven elections in a bid to inject credibility into electoral processes.

Themed "The increasing role of technology in election administration: Implications for election observer groups in West Africa," the two-day conference is aimed at bringing together election observer groups and other electoral stakeholders in the West-Africa sub-region to deliberate on emerging issues from technology-driven elections and election observation. The conference also serves as a platform for WAEON members to discuss pragmatic strategies to guide the work of election observers in contributing to transparent, credible and peaceful elections.

About WAEON

The West Africa Election Observers Network (WAEON) was formed in 2010. It is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental, and non-religious network of election observation/monitoring citizen organizations in West Africa dedicated to the promotion of free, fair, transparent and peaceful elections in the sub-region. The Network currently consists of 13 member organizations respectively representing Burkina Faso, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. WAEON has its headquarters in Accra, Ghana, under the auspices of Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) which serves as the Secretariat and manages its operations.