

Guide on electoral advocacy in fragile contexts



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ÉCOLE DE FORMATION ÉLECTORALE
EN AFRIQUE CENTRALE



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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Abbreviations

AU	African Union
CENI	Independent National Electoral Commission / Commission électorale nationale indépendante
CIME	Commission for Electoral Integrity and Mediation / Commission d'Intégrité et de Médiation Électorale
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CoP	Community of Practice
EAC	East African Community
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EFEAC	Electoral Training School in Central Africa / École de Formation et d'Expertise en Afrique Centrale
EMB	Electoral Management Body (EMB)
EU	European Union
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICGLR	International Conference on the Great Lakes Region
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
SADC	Southern African Development Community
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Introduction

This practical guide has been developed to support civil society actors in carrying out structured, relevant and effective advocacy throughout the entire electoral cycle. Aware of the crucial importance of free, transparent, inclusive and peaceful elections for strengthening democracy in so-called “fragile” countries, the guide aims to provide a comprehensive methodological framework, enriched with thematic expertise and concrete case studies drawn from several African countries. Its purpose is to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to act at different levels — local, national, regional and international — in order to positively influence electoral processes and help ensure their credibility.

The methodology used to develop this guide is based on a **participatory and collaborative approach grounded in the co-construction of knowledge**. This approach took shape through an intensive week of interregional exchanges held in Nairobi in April 2025, bringing together experts, representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs), and practitioners of electoral advocacy from five countries involved in the Just Future Alliance (Mali, Niger, DRC, Burundi and South Sudan). These experience-sharing sessions made it possible to build on good practices, identify common challenges, and compare approaches across diverse political and social contexts. They also supported the creation of a Community of Practice (CoP) – a space for mutual learning in which each participant could benefit from the expertise of others while contributing to the development of a shared framework. The lessons drawn from these exchanges, Cordaid’s multi-level advocacy expertise, and the technical contributions of experts from the Electoral Training School in Central Africa (EFEAC) have all been integrated into this guide to ensure its relevance, rigour and adaptability.

This guide is designed to support civil society actors committed to promoting democracy and free, transparent and inclusive elections. It offers practical reference points, flexible tools and a common framework to enhance the impact of their actions on the ground, while remaining adaptable to the specific context of each country.

In summary, this document brings together:

- A clear methodology for coordinating advocacy throughout the entire electoral cycle;
- Key insights drawn from the electoral expertise sessions conducted with EFEAC specialists;
- Lessons learned from exchanges and experience-sharing among civil society actors;
- Case studies illustrating concrete situations from several countries in the Just Future programme.

The Just Future programme, in brief:

The Just Future programme, coordinated by Cordaid, is an alliance of international, regional and national NGOs, as well as research centres, operating in six countries: Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Niger and South Sudan. Through multi-level advocacy, from local to international, Just Future works towards more accessible, responsive and accountable security and justice institutions, together with inclusive political governance that supports sustainable peace. The inclusion of women, young people and displaced persons is a core commitment of the programme, which is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

Just Future's approach connects local action to national, regional and global policy frameworks, amplifying the voices of marginalised groups in international agendas while ensuring that global commitments are adapted to local needs. The programme relies on adaptive programming, conflict sensitivity, Southern leadership and mutual learning to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to advocate effectively for their interests. Its interventions focus on three interlinked outcomes: people-centred security, inclusive and responsive access to justice, and inclusive decision-making and peace processes — ensuring that the most excluded groups can make their priorities heard in decision-making spaces.

Poster

This poster summarises the key messages and practical takeaways of the guide. It is designed as a visual roadmap and reminder to support partners as they develop, structure and refine their electoral advocacy strategies throughout the electoral cycle.



Chapter 1

Advocacy



1.1 What is advocacy?

Advocacy consists of placing a societal issue on the public agenda and carrying it forward until concrete change is achieved, whether through a reform, a new measure or an institutional practice. It is a strategic, often long-term process aimed at influencing public decision-makers in the service of the public interest. It is therefore distinct from lobbying, which is primarily focused on defending private interests.

Advocacy can be carried out at multiple levels — local, national, regional and international — and draws on a variety of approaches, whether direct (dialogue and negotiation with decision-makers) or indirect (mobilising public opinion, campaigns, and other forms of engagement).

The success of any advocacy action relies on **three essential and inseparable elements**: the right message, at the right moment, addressed to the right person.

- **The right message:** even if you reach the right person at the right time, advocacy cannot succeed if your message or argument is unclear, irrelevant or poorly framed, or if it lacks a concrete request capable of triggering action or change.
- **The right moment:** a well-crafted and relevant message is ineffective if its timing does not align with the decision-making cycle or political opportunities of the moment, particularly in volatile or restrictive environments.
- **The right person:** a clear and well-timed message will have no impact if it is directed at someone without the authority or influence to act especially where decision-making systems are complex or hybrid.



In fragile and restrictive contexts, these three principles become even more critical: speaking out publicly is often difficult, the safety of advocates may be at risk, the legitimacy of civil society actors is not always recognised, and coordination between different local or exiled groups may be constrained by tensions or competition.

The classic structure of an **advocacy strategy** includes:

1. Context analysis
2. Defining advocacy objectives
3. Stakeholder analysis and identification of targets
4. Developing an action plan and selecting appropriate advocacy tools
5. Implementation
6. Monitoring and evaluation

1.2 Advocacy strategy



1.2.1 Context analysis and advocacy issues

The first step is to analyse the context and set clear, concrete and achievable objectives. A thorough understanding of the political, social and security environment is essential to determine what change is possible, at what pace, and how ambitions should be adjusted. Without this foundation, it is difficult to design realistic advocacy.

In countries where socio-political dynamics evolve rapidly and sometimes unpredictably, civil society organisations must develop **strategic agility**: regularly assessing how the context is shifting, identifying new opportunities or constraints, and adjusting their approaches and tactics accordingly. In such environments, the ability to adapt continuously becomes a key condition for success. This does not mean changing the message with every fluctuation, but rather ensuring it is adjusted when necessary, so that it remains relevant.

When advocacy is carried out within a coalition, it is crucial for organisations to share a common understanding of the context. They do not need to agree on everything, but they must align on:

- the priority issues,
- the obstacles to change,
- the potential windows of opportunity, and
- what is, or is not, realistic to influence.

To achieve this, it is recommended that coalition members meet regularly to update their reading of the context. Each organisation holds different information, experiences and levels of access which, when combined, enable:

- a more comprehensive understanding of a shifting environment,
- better anticipation of risks, and
- a more strategic selection of advocacy tactics.

This complementarity is one of the major strengths of coalition work:

it enriches the analysis, strengthens the ability to adapt, and increases the likelihood of identifying the most realistic pathway to change. However, it can only reach its full potential if organisations operate within a **framework of trust**, where each actor feels able to share their information, perceptions and constraints. Building this trust gradually is a cornerstone of collective advocacy, as it creates the conditions for developing coherent, robust and sustainable strategies together.

A shared understanding of the context forms the foundation on which relevant advocacy objectives can be defined. Once a joint diagnosis is established — even if it is not perfectly uniform — it becomes possible to move to the next stage: clarifying what change is being pursued, why it is a priority, and how far it is realistic to go within the current context.

1.2.2 Defining advocacy objectives

The advocacy objective forms part of a broader strategy that articulates the long-term vision for change collectively pursued within the organisation or coalition. It is essential for all actors involved to align around these objectives — including how they are prioritised — in order to maintain a shared and coherent direction.

A well-formulated advocacy objective should answer four key questions:

- **What?** – The change being pursued
- **Who?** – The decision-maker or institution to be influenced
- **How?** – The type of decision or action expected
- **When?** – The intended timeframe, usually ranging from a few months to several years depending on the level of ambition

This objective must also be **SMART**: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound.



The prioritisation of objectives depends on several factors, including:

- the clarity and scope of the issue,
- the expertise and resources available,
- the risks involved,
- opportunities for collaboration,
- the political or institutional calendar,
- political will and the likelihood of achieving impact.

The advocacy strategy is, above all, an internal document. It serves as a shared point of reference, but it must be reviewed regularly to reflect political, social or security developments. A strategy that remains static quickly loses relevance and may lead to actions that are disconnected from realities on the ground. As with messaging, advocacy objectives must be adjusted in line with the evolving context.

Finally, having clear objectives is not enough. They must be translated into concrete actions, guided by realistic assumptions about what can change, at what pace, and through which levers. Operationalising the strategy and continuously adapting it are essential to remain effective, seize windows of opportunity and avoid approaches that are out of step with reality.

1.2.3 Strategic monitoring and windows of opportunity



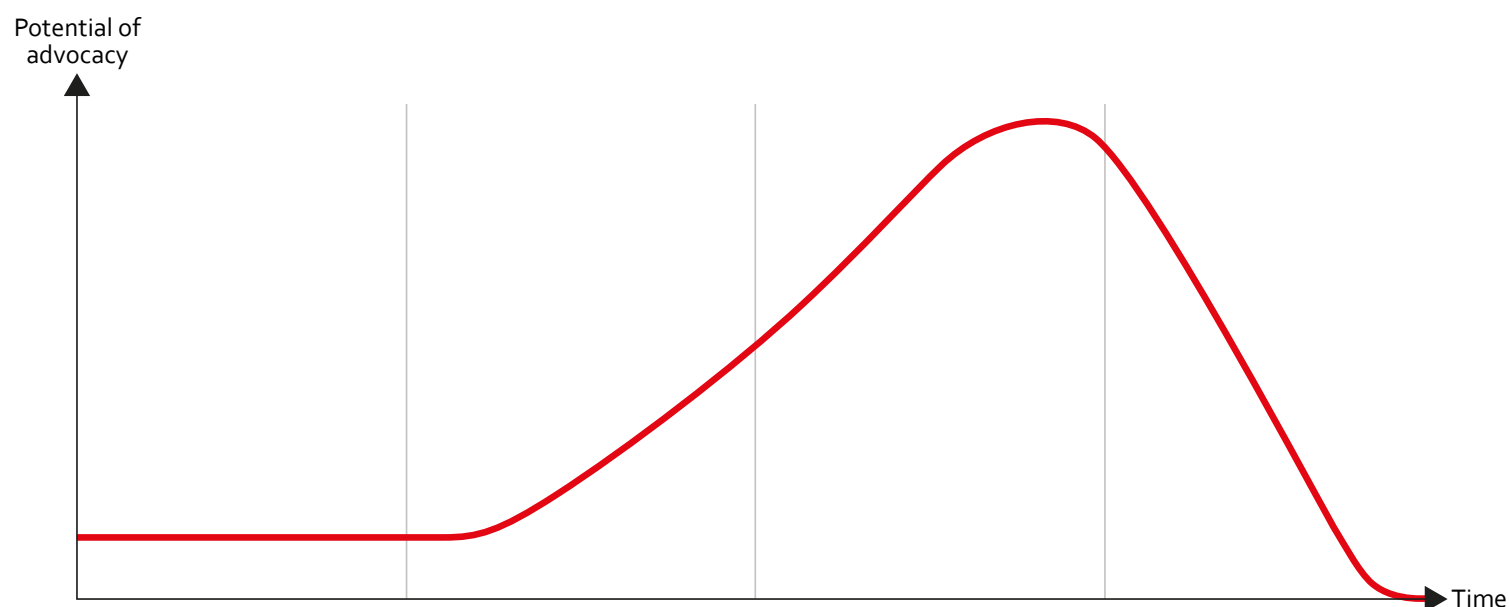
Strategic monitoring makes it possible to identify and anticipate “windows of opportunity”¹ — those moments when a political shift, a public debate or a crisis creates the possibility of influencing the agenda. Recognising these moments, framing the debate quickly and acting at the right time is crucial, as such windows often close rapidly. Seizing a window of opportunity requires two key capacities: identifying the right moment and framing the debate in a way that adjusts and strengthens the relevance of one’s messages and recommendations. These windows can close just as quickly, highlighting the need for a certain level of responsiveness.

In practice, it is not always possible to react immediately. This is why **anticipation** plays an essential role. Regular, structured and shared monitoring makes it possible to detect early warning signs, prepare key messages in advance, and be ready to act as soon as the context becomes favourable.

In the context of electoral advocacy, this means civil society actors need to prepare early, for example by analysing the electoral roadmap and anticipating the issues that may arise at different stages of the electoral cycle. Events that require early anticipation include: the election and appointment of the leadership of the electoral commission; the deployment of electoral observers; and the opening of electoral campaigns. Advocacy therefore requires constant monitoring to seize these “windows of opportunity”.

1. Some of the ideas presented in this chapter, particularly those relating to the identification of windows of opportunity, draw on the analyses developed by Elsa Foucaut in *Guide du plaidoyer: Bâtir sa stratégie d’influence pour faire évoluer la loi* (2023).

Windows of opportunity



Status quo

The issue is not on the agenda

What to do:

- ✓ Maintain legitimacy and expertise
- ✓ Stay in defensive monitoring mode
- ✓ Do not abandon the topic

Opening phase

The issue is emerging

What to do:

- ✓ Make use of media and political attention
- ✓ Frame the debate from your organisation's perspective and turn interest into prospects for reform

Window of opportunity

The issue is on the agenda

What to do:

- ✓ Act quickly and push your key messages
- ✓ Mobilise allies
- ✓ Call out political instrumentalization
- ✓ Keep the window of opportunity open for as long as possible.

Closing phase

Slowdown

What to do:

- ✓ Ensure that reforms (the desired changes) are properly implemented
- ✓ Avoid backsliding
- ✓ Stay alert to opponents' strategies

In summary

- **Constant monitoring:** Throughout the electoral cycle strategic monitoring is essential to detect early signals and seize windows of opportunity.
- **Responsiveness:** A window of opportunity is temporary and may close quickly making rapid and coordinated action crucial.
- **Anticipation:** Fast and coordinated advocacy is more effective when prepared in advance highlighting the importance of solid context analysis and awareness of key upcoming moments.
- **Iterative cycle:** After the closing phase the cycle restarts with strategic monitoring during the status quo phase preparing for the next opportunity.

1.2.4 Stakeholder analysis

Stakeholder analysis is essential for guiding advocacy effectively, but it must be carried out with caution, particularly in fragile contexts where decision-making systems are often hybrid. The aim is not to produce an exhaustive and detailed mapping — a heavy exercise that is often overtaken by the speed of change — but rather to develop a general and reliable understanding that can serve as a foundation throughout the electoral cycle.

This analysis makes it possible to distinguish:

- **Primary targets:** those who hold decision-making power (e.g. a ministry, parliament, the electoral commission).
- **Secondary or intermediary targets:** those who can influence the primary targets (e.g. the media, NGOs, traditional or religious leaders).

Key questions for understanding your targets

1. **Who has the power to change the rules?**
 - Identify the individual(s) within the institution who can take action.
 - Assess whether power is concentrated or shared.
2. **What roles do they play?**
 - Determine who can drive change and who may act as obstacles or remain indifferent.
3. **How do they interact with one another?**
 - Do the actors collaborate, or are they fragmented?
 - Understanding the decision-making structure helps you know how to move an issue up to the highest level.
4. **What motivates their decisions?**
 - What are their priorities and influences?
 - What are their backgrounds and experiences?
 - Are they aware of the issue, and to what extent do they support it?

Practical tips for analysing targets

- Work with your allies to design strategies tailored to each target.
- Familiarise yourself with your opponents' arguments and existing debates; advocacy never starts from a blank page.
- Take a pragmatic approach: the context changes quickly, and detailed mapping is often impossible. The aim is to maintain a general overview that supports your work throughout the electoral cycle or decision-making process.
- Knowledge of the context and political awareness develop over time; reassess your targets regularly and adjust your priorities accordingly.

This concise overview enables informed decision-making and helps maintain agility in shifting contexts, while reducing the risks associated with incomplete or outdated information.



1.2.5 Multi-level advocacy

Advocacy operates at different levels, each offering specific levers of influence. Cordaid and the Just Future programme have adopted a **multi-level approach**, enabling action across various actors simultaneously, particularly when opportunities at the national level are limited.²

Three main levels can be distinguished:

1. **National level:** this includes central institutions as well as provincial and local entities.
2. **Regional level:** made up primarily of regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) or sub-regional economic communities like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the East African Community (EAC).
3. **International level:** including multilateral bodies such as the UN (Human Rights Council, Security Council), the European Union (EU) and its Member States, and other global actors.

This approach requires a nuanced analysis of power dynamics and interactions across levels. In some contexts, the influence of regional or international bodies can strengthen national advocacy; in others, it may generate local frustration or resistance.

Countries are often signatories to regional or international treaties, conventions and agreements that can serve as “**advocacy hooks**” — leverage points or arguments used to support a demand by invoking existing formal commitments.

It is therefore essential to adopt a conflict-sensitive approach that takes account of each country’s specific dynamics, in order to tailor messages and actions to the local political and social reality. These frameworks should be used as strategic entry points to reinforce the credibility and impact of advocacy efforts.

Reminder

- **General and flexible overview:** do not aim for an exhaustive mapping. A broad understanding of the actors is sufficient to guide action. Power and interests shift with the context; reassess your targets regularly.
- **Multi-level advocacy:** combining national, regional and international levels creates additional levers when certain pathways are blocked. To advocate effectively across multiple levels, alliance-building — or working in consortium — becomes essential.
- **Coalition action:** working together enriches context analysis, multiplies entry points and strengthens the legitimacy of advocacy.

2. See Cordaid’s [Lobby and Advocacy Guide](#), available in French and English.

1.2.6 Messages and recommendations: turning expertise into action

Being right is not enough: even with solid expertise and a deep understanding of the political context, advocacy depends on clear and compelling messages. Without them, a meeting with a decision-maker risks remaining purely courteous. Moreover, it is not always necessary to formulate a precise request immediately. An initial exchange can simply serve to establish first contact and understand how the decision-maker interprets the situation and what room for manoeuvre they have. This exploratory approach is entirely valid, as long as it is solution-oriented and helps prepare the ground for formulating concrete recommendations at the appropriate moment.

A message is the clear and concise expression of the central idea you wish to convey. It may remain general at first, and then be adjusted depending on the target audience, taking into account their interests, motivations, and level of influence. A good message aligns with the priorities of the recipient so as to capture their attention and prompt a reaction.



Recommendations translate the message into practical actions: they specify what the decision-maker can do, how, and within what timeframe, and they lie at the heart of an advocate's work. While the message captures attention and generates buy-in, the recommendations provide the operational roadmap needed to turn that buy-in into real change.



Principles for effective messages and recommendations

- **Formulate a key message:** take into account the target's interests, priorities and motivations, and present your idea in a clear, concrete and accessible way, so that it is immediately actionable and can be understood even when read quickly.
- **Work as a team:** develop messages and recommendations collectively to ensure coherence and relevance.
- **Support the message with concrete recommendations:** propose a limited number of precise, realistic actions, prioritised according to feasibility and importance. Avoid "pick-and-choose" lists that allow the decision-maker to select only what suits them.
- **Adjust continuously:** engage regularly with decision-makers to test feasibility, learn from unmet results, and adapt messages and recommendations to evolving contexts and local dynamics.

The message draws attention and builds buy-in → exploratory dialogue helps understand perceptions and refine the strategy → the recommendations translate that buy-in into concrete, achievable action.

1.2.7 Advocacy Tools

Choosing the right advocacy tools is the step that gives concrete form to your messages and recommendations. Depending on the objective, the target and the context, different formats can be used to inform, persuade, mobilise, or open up space for dialogue. For example, advocacy for greater transparency within the electoral management body (EMB) can draw on several complementary tools:

- **A detailed report** can document the shortcomings observed in previous electoral cycles, analyse the EMB's current practices, and present comparisons with other countries. This format allows for an in-depth justification of why improved publication of decisions, electoral data or budgets is necessary.
- **A concise policy brief** can be sent directly to the EMB or the supervising ministry to propose concrete measures, for instance, the systematic publication of minutes or the creation of consultation frameworks with civil society. This format targets decision-makers and highlights realistic, priority actions.
- **A public statement or press release** can be issued at a key moment in the electoral cycle — such as just before the official launch of the process — to emphasise the importance of transparency and encourage the EMB to adopt practices that strengthen voter confidence. This format also helps mobilise the media and create constructive public pressure.
- **An event, roundtable or multi-stakeholder meeting** can bring together the EMB, political parties, civil society and experts to discuss obstacles to transparency and assess the feasibility of proposed reforms. This type of exchange facilitates direct dialogue, clarifies each actor's room for manoeuvre and helps refine recommendations.

*For sensitive meetings, a closed format is often preferable. Applying the Chatham House Rule — which allows information shared to be used without attributing it to specific speakers — helps create an **environment of trust** and encourages open discussion. A summary can then be prepared to capture the key points without naming participants. This type of format is particularly appreciated at the international level, especially by diplomats. It facilitates the flow of information across different levels of the decision-making chain without exposing the identity of the decision-makers involved.*

Examples of advocacy tools

- **Report:** an in-depth reference document with an executive summary, recommendations, visuals and reliable sources.
- **Policy brief:** a short, concise document aimed at decision-makers, containing analysis and urgent recommendations.
- **Public statement/letter:** a short and direct format used to take a position quickly when immediate reaction is needed.
- **Press release:** designed to attract the attention of the media and the public.
- **Events/meetings:** roundtables or conferences that enable direct dialogue.
- **Data production:** strengthening credibility through solid evidence.

Chapter 2

Focus on electoral advocacy and its specificities



2.1 Methodology for advocacy throughout the electoral cycle

Electoral advocacy must be aligned with the entire electoral cycle, not only with the voting period. The electoral cycle covers all the phases that precede, accompany and follow an election: reform of the legal framework, planning, voter registration, campaigning, polling, the announcement of results, disputes, post-electoral evaluation, and so on. Each stage represents a specific opportunity for civil society organisations to convey tailored messages, formulate targeted recommendations, or engage the authorities.

Within this cycle, **the official electoral calendar**, generally published by the electoral commission, sets out the key procedural milestones of a given process: the deadline for submitting candidacies, the campaign period, polling day, appeal deadlines, and so on. It serves as an essential reference point for anticipating and planning advocacy actions at the right moment. Acting without taking it into account can lead to poorly timed interventions either too late to influence decisions or too early to resonate politically or in the media.

For example, the period devoted to **electoral reforms**, which takes place well before the official calendar, is strategic for influencing key elements such as eligibility criteria, representation quotas, conditions for standing as a candidate, or the organisation of electoral bodies. Once this legal and institutional framework has been established, the subsequent phases — such as candidate registration, the campaign or polling day — make it possible to monitor the effective implementation of the rules, identify persistent obstacles, and advocate for adjustments or corrective measures.

Moreover, this implementation phase is **a key moment for gathering information**. By documenting observed practices, shortcomings, good practices and any injustices encountered, civil society organisations prepare evidence-based recommendations that will feed into advocacy for the next electoral cycle. Electoral advocacy is therefore a **continuous process**, relying both on immediate action and on a longer-term strategy.

A well-anchored advocacy approach within the electoral cycle enables CSOs to organise themselves more effectively, coordinate their interventions, and increase the reach and credibility of their actions with authorities, partners and the public.

2.1.1 Overview of the electoral cycle

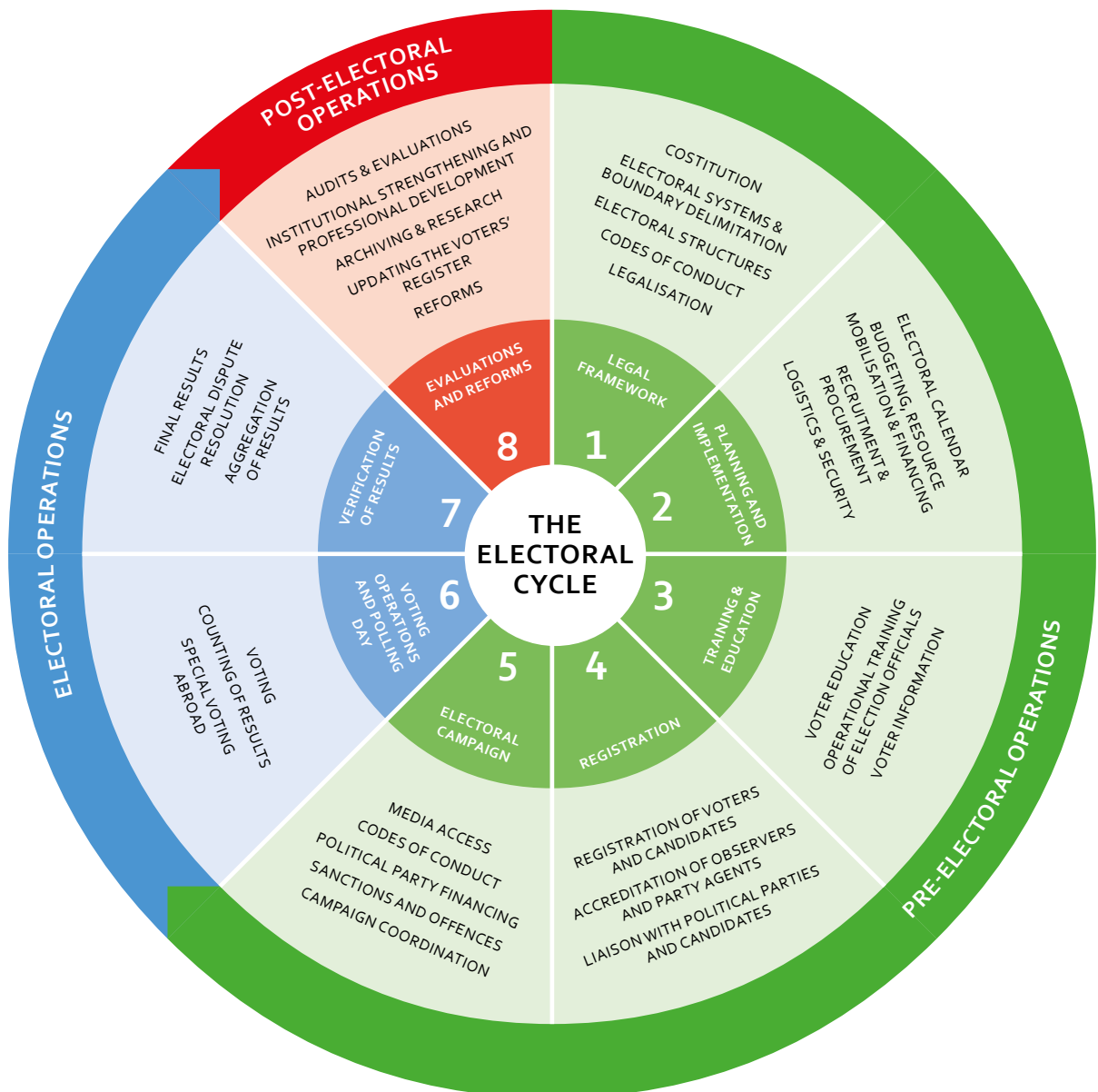
Electoral advocacy is structured around the different phases of the electoral cycle:

Before the elections: The focus is on reforming the legal framework, raising awareness among stakeholders, preparing observers, and mobilising civil society. This is the stage at which advocacy has the greatest impact.

During the elections: The priority is to monitor the conduct of the vote, document irregularities, and relay concerns in real time. Access to decision-makers may be limited, and rapid reaction is crucial.

After the elections: Advocacy concentrates on the publication of results, the handling of disputes, and the implementation of recommendations for future cycles. The window of opportunity may close quickly after polling day.

It is essential to maintain **constant monitoring** and to adjust the strategy in line with changes in the political context.



2.1.2 Targets of electoral advocacy

The targets of electoral advocacy vary according to the level of intervention, whether local and national, regional or international.

Local and national level

National actors are often the primary targets of electoral advocacy, particularly during the design, implementation and evaluation phases of the process. They include:

- **National Electoral Commission (CENI or equivalent):** This is generally the central institution responsible for organising elections. It may be independent or under ministerial supervision, but it plays a key role in developing the electoral calendar, managing the voter register, registering candidates and announcing results.
- **Territorial administration:** Prefects, sub-prefects, governors and mayors often play a role in electoral logistics, security, or the local registration of voters and candidates.
- **Parliament:** Responsible for adopting electoral laws or constitutional reforms that govern elections. It is a key target, particularly during legal and institutional reform processes.
- **Political parties:** They may be allies or targets of advocacy depending on their stance on inclusion, transparency or electoral violence. It can be strategic to engage with both ruling and opposition parties.
- **Religious and traditional authorities:** Their social influence can lend legitimacy to advocacy efforts or facilitate dialogue between stakeholders, especially in contexts of tension or mistrust towards state institutions.

Regional level

Regional organisations play an increasingly active role in **preventing electoral conflict, monitoring democratic commitments, and coordinating observation missions.**

- **ECOWAS, the AU, the ICGLR, SADC, COMESA,** among others, have normative and operational mechanisms to promote transparent and inclusive elections.
- Several have adopted **specific protocols** on democracy and elections, which can be used as leverage in advocacy efforts.
- They are often receptive to early warning signals transmitted by civil society, especially when civil society is organised in networks or regional coalitions.

International level

International advocacy plays an important role in electoral processes in fragile contexts. It helps amplify alerts coming from the field, generate diplomatic attention, and mobilise allies who can influence the behaviour of national actors. International NGOs or transnational human rights networks can amplify messages initiated locally, extend their reach to influential international stakeholders, and create useful echo effects when national civic space is restricted.

At this level, several levers can be activated:

- **Mobilising technical and financial support from bilateral and multilateral donors** to back electoral reforms or to support awareness-raising activities carried out by local organisations. In such cases, development cooperation officers should be prioritised as the main interlocutors.
- **Raising awareness among embassies and the EU Delegation** about local issues so that they integrate these concerns into their political dialogue, support strategies, and public statements at key moments of the electoral cycle. For this type of analysis and strategic engagement, it is preferable to speak with political officers.
- **Engaging United Nations agencies (UNDP, OHCHR, UN Women)** to highlight barriers to inclusion, participation and transparency. These agencies cannot take direct public positions, but they can relay your analysis to bodies such as the Human Rights Council or the Security Council and provide technical and political support to local actions.

Overall, **international action does not replace national dynamics**, but it can reinforce them when it is aligned with, informed by, and coordinated with local actors.

Understanding decision-making and institutional dynamics

It is not enough to target an organisation; it is also essential to identify the right entry points. Each institution has its own decision-making architecture, sometimes with informal channels of influence. An electoral commission, for example, may be influenced by its executive bureau, its regional commissioners, or by donors who fund its activities.

Multilateral organisations, meanwhile, often operate through consensus or internal deliberation. This makes it necessary to find allies within different departments or Member States in order to convey a message effectively.

The legitimacy of advocacy actors: a key factor

In contexts where civic space is restricted or polarised, the **perceived legitimacy of the actor conducting the advocacy** has a significant impact:

- **CSOs recognised for their neutrality** or technical expertise are more likely to be granted an audience
- **Coalitions** help pool expertise, operate across several levels (local, regional, international), and strengthen the reach of the message.
- **Working with internal allies (sympathetic parliamentarians, former electoral commissioners, academics, journalists)** can reinforce the effectiveness of advocacy while ensuring neutrality and avoiding political instrumentalization that could undermine credibility.

2.2 The normative and legal framework for electoral advocacy

2.2.1 International norms

Electoral advocacy is grounded first and foremost in a solid foundation of international norms that guarantee human rights, political participation, transparency and fairness in the electoral process. These fundamental standards are set out in universal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as in regional commitments such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

For example, Article 21 of the UDHR affirms that everyone has the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives, and that the will of the people, expressed in genuine, periodic elections held by universal and equal suffrage and by secret ballot, is the basis of the authority of government. Similarly, Article 25 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to vote and to be elected in periodic and genuine elections, held by universal and equal suffrage, ensuring the free expression of the will of the electors.

These international norms form an essential point of reference for electoral advocacy. They enable the formulation of clear recommendations, the assessment of electoral processes against democratic standards, and the denunciation of irregularities.



2.2.2 International instruments

International instruments are the legal and political tools that formalise these norms. They fall into two main categories according to their degree of legal force:

Legally binding instruments

These are primarily international treaties or covenants adopted and ratified by States. Once ratified, these instruments legally commit States Parties to adapt their domestic legislation and to implement the rights and principles they contain.

→ These texts may be invoked before national or international courts, and non-compliance may lead to sanctions or monitoring procedures. For example, the ICCPR or the European Convention on Human Rights impose specific obligations on States regarding electoral matters.

Non-binding instruments

These include declarations, guidelines, commitments and good-practice documents that express political or moral commitments but do not create formal legal obligations.

→ Although they are not legally enforceable, these instruments carry significant political and moral weight. They are often used as references when drafting or reforming national legislation and constitute powerful levers in advocacy by reminding States of their international commitments. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a typical example.

The distinction between these two types of instruments is crucial in electoral advocacy strategy. It helps tailor arguments and recommendations according to the nature of the commitments invoked and adapt the approach depending on whether one is relying on a binding legal obligation or a political and moral commitment. This nuance strengthens the credibility and effectiveness of advocacy by contextualising expectations in line with the levels of responsibility of States.

2.2.3 The national legal framework

Beyond international norms and instruments, electoral advocacy must rely on the **national legal framework** that governs elections in each country. This framework includes the Constitution, electoral laws, regulations issued by electoral commissions, and legislation relating to civil and political rights. It defines the rules of the electoral game, the mandates of institutions, the rights and duties of voters and candidates, as well as the mechanisms for oversight and appeal.

A solid understanding of this national framework is essential for formulating recommendations that are relevant, credible and adapted to the local context. Advocacy often seeks to promote reforms that guarantee the independence and neutrality of electoral institutions, the inclusiveness of processes, the transparency of operations, and the effective protection of the rights of voters and candidates. It also aims to ensure consistency between international commitments and their concrete translation into domestic law.

Thus, electoral advocacy is built at the intersection of these three levels: international norms that set out universal principles; international instruments that formalise these norms and create obligations or commitments; and the national legal framework that gives concrete shape to the electoral process. Bringing these elements together makes it possible to develop strong advocacy strategies that are adapted to local realities while remaining anchored in a normative framework recognised worldwide.

This combined legal framework forms the essential foundation for electoral advocacy that is effective, legitimate and aligned with international democratic standards, while remaining rooted in national realities and specificities.

The Burundian experience in electoral advocacy: challenges, strategies and lessons learned

Burundi operates in a highly polarised political environment, where internal tensions and regional dynamics reinforce instability. Since 2015, civic space has gradually narrowed, marked by intimidation, mass exile and restrictions on freedom of expression. In this context, civil society actors must navigate an electoral process in which advocacy remains tightly controlled. Political competition is strongly asymmetrical, and despite some appearances of openness, the room for manoeuvre available to CSOs remains extremely limited.

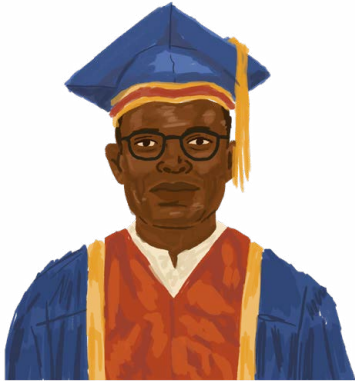
Advocacy strategies implemented

- **Continuous capacity strengthening of organisations** to better understand the political and electoral context and the mechanisms of influence.
- **Strategic planning and management of the electoral cycle:** Developing structured and adapted advocacy plans combined with rigorous management of the electoral calendar. This includes coordinated actions, building informal relationships with key decision-makers (Ministries of Interior, Justice, Gender), and focusing on precise and achievable objectives, with legal experts supporting the work to maximise impact.
- **Concrete advocacy objectives:** Some organisations put forward a constitutional amendment, working through national alliances (for example, with the National Women's Forum) and seeking the support of the relevant ministry. To maximise their chances within a tight timeframe, they worked with legal specialists to focus the proposal on a specific article and to formulate well-argued recommendations.
- **Confidentiality and security:** Sensitive activities were conducted in closed formats to protect actors, secure exchanges and maintain neutrality.
- **Strategic alliances:** Coordinated mobilisation of 29 national organisations and the use of recognised international spokespeople in sectors such as health, education and justice, thereby strengthening the credibility of recommendations and broadening their reach.

Key lessons for electoral advocacy in fragile contexts

- **Strategic patience and adaptation:** Building relationships gradually and adjusting to local dynamics is essential to operate within restricted civic space and influence decision-makers.
- **Precise and achievable objectives:** Focusing on concrete, particularly legal, actions increase the likelihood of success.
- **Alliances and coordination:** Working with strategic allies, within institutions as well as across networks and coalitions, strengthens credibility and amplifies advocacy impact.
- **Strategic and informal approaches:** Combining planned actions with discreet or targeted initiatives helps maximise impact in sensitive and security-constrained contexts.

2.3 Securing elections: issues, stakeholders, advocacy and lessons learned



Why is security management central to elections?

In many so-called fragile countries, elections are both a matter of stability and a source of security risks. Electoral periods are often marked by tension, violence, political manipulation, and the instrumentalization of vulnerable groups (notably young people). The absence of a secure environment can undermine the credibility of the vote, discourage citizen participation, and deepen social or political divisions.

A safe electoral environment is essential to guarantee citizen participation, the credibility of the ballot, and the acceptance of the results. Securing the electoral process therefore aims to ensure that elections take place in a calm and peaceful climate, where every citizen can exercise their right to vote freely, without intimidation or violence, and where the results are accepted by all stakeholders.

The recurring challenges in securing elections include:

- **Mistrust between political parties** and a tense political climate.
- **Proliferation of weapons and the presence of militias**, often exacerbated by the absence of a unified army or the fragmentation of national armed forces (e.g. South Sudan, DRC).
- **Institutional weakness**: underfunded or influenced electoral bodies, lack of reliable population data or census, restrictive laws.
- **Insecurity and political control of civic space**: arbitrary arrests, national security laws used to restrict civic space

Actors and mechanisms for securing elections

National and Regional Institutions

- Electoral management bodies responsible for organising and supervising elections.
- Security forces (police, army, gendarmerie, etc.) mobilised to ensure the security of voters, candidates and electoral infrastructure.
- Regional institutions (AU, IGAD, ECOWAS) acting as mediators, observers and supporters in preventing electoral conflict.

Conflict Management Mechanisms

- Electoral mediation commissions (e.g. the Electoral Mediation Commission in the DRC), bringing together political actors, civil society and religious institutions to prevent and resolve conflicts.
- Electoral justice mechanisms (specialised courts, constitutional councils, supreme courts) responsible for adjudicating disputes and reinforcing the legitimacy of results.

- Use of customary arrangements, serving as complementary traditional mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of electoral disputes.

Civil Society

- Establishing monitoring and early warning mechanisms (e.g. electoral situation rooms) to collect and transmit information on risks and incidents.
- Playing an active role in mediation between stakeholders and in advocacy for an inclusive approach to securing elections.
- Mobilising young people as actors for peace through awareness-raising campaigns, inter-community dialogue and peace-building initiatives.

Practical examples of advocacy for securing elections

Mali: Advocacy for securing the vote in high-risk areas

In response to insecurity in the north and centre of the country, local organisations advocated for a strengthened deployment of security forces, the protection of polling stations, and safe access for electoral observers.

→ *Advocacy contributed to improved coordination between the authorities and local actors, even though significant challenges remain.*

Niger: Advocacy for the prevention of electoral violence

Nigerien CSOs carried out awareness-raising campaigns and inter-community dialogue to prevent violence, particularly among young people. They advocated for the integration of early-warning and mediation mechanisms within the electoral framework.

→ *Preventive action and community mobilisation helped to reduce major incidents during recent elections.*

South Sudan: Advocacy for securing the electoral process

Civil society organisations conducted advocacy towards national authorities and international partners to demand the establishment of a secure environment prior to the holding of elections. They stressed the need for effective disarmament, the reform of security forces, and the inclusion of community-based mediation mechanisms to prevent electoral violence.

→ *The advocacy helped open dialogue with security institutions and led to commitments to train law enforcement personnel in non-violent crowd management.*

DRC: Advocacy for electoral mediation and an independent judiciary

Civil society coalitions advocated for the creation of the *Commission for Electoral Integrity and Mediation* (CIME), bringing together political actors, civil society and religious institutions to anticipate and resolve electoral disputes. They also stressed the importance of an independent Constitutional Court for adjudicating electoral challenges.

→ Civil society engagement in mediation helped defuse several post-electoral crises and increased trust in the process

In summary, securing elections relies on prevention, inclusion, mediation and the mobilisation of all actors. The advocacy examples from different countries show that civil society, through coordinated and strategic action, can play a decisive role in ensuring peaceful and credible elections, even in fragile contexts.

Lessons learned

- Securing elections requires an inclusive approach involving all actors, supported by prevention and conflict-management mechanisms that are adapted to the local context.
- Civil society advocacy can open spaces for dialogue and influence the establishment of innovative mechanisms (mediation, training of security forces, disarmament).
- Community mobilisation and prevention are more effective than post-crisis responses.
- Grounding advocacy in national and international legal frameworks strengthens its legitimacy.

Advocacy recommendations

- Advocate for the independence and adequate funding of electoral management bodies.
- Raise awareness among, and train, security forces in neutrality and in the non-violent management of the electoral process.
- Promote electoral mediation and an independent judiciary for resolving disputes.
- Encourage the engagement of regional and international institutions in the prevention and management of crises.
- Mobilise civil society for monitoring, early warning, and community-level mediation.

2.4 Electoral advocacy and women's Inclusion: strategies, experiences and lessons learned

Women's leadership and advocacy for inclusion

Advocacy for the inclusion of women in electoral processes is grounded in women's leadership and in the ability to mobilise communities and strategic allies. Many networks have emerged in response to the low participation of women – and young people – in democratic governance. These organisations focus on awareness-raising and the analysis of public policies in order to influence the position of women on electoral lists.

The role of the leader is central: it involves identifying the real agents of change, targeting the message, choosing the right moment (for example, during parliamentary budget sessions), and securing the support of parliamentarians, sometimes by involving them in activities outside formal institutional settings to turn them into genuine allies. Effective advocacy relies on the ability to build consensus around a common agenda, influence decision-makers, and maintain steady pressure until the desired change is achieved.

Concrete examples of advocacy for inclusion

Burundi: advocacy for the representation of women in the council of elders (2022)

When a new conflict-management structure was created, the law made no mention of women's representation. Civil society organisations identified the authorities to be approached, drafted a note to the President of the Republic and to the Minister of the Interior, and advocated for the inclusion of women. Result: a requirement of at least 30% women was incorporated into the composition of the council, demonstrating the effectiveness of structured and targeted advocacy.

DRC: Advocacy for gender parity on electoral lists

Petition campaigns led by women leaders succeeded in collecting tens of thousands of signatures in support of a law on gender parity. The mobilisation brought together civil society, the media, embassies and parliamentary institutions, resulting in the rapid promulgation of the law. However, the process highlighted the importance of engaging all actors, including the Constitutional Court, whose opinion ultimately limited the scope of the law. Advocacy must therefore never stop at a single institutional step: it must anticipate potential obstacles.

Mali: Advocacy on the family code and security

In Mali, advocacy for the adoption of the family code faced resistance from religious organisations, which succeeded in having several progressive articles removed. The experience highlighted the importance of anticipating strategic alliances, particularly with religious denominations, and of understanding the

political and social environment at the time. Likewise, in the reform of the security sector, the low representation of women in consultative committees required internal advocacy with women's CSOs to strengthen their involvement and avoid the collective effort being undermined from within.

South Sudan: implementing the quota

In South Sudan, the Transitional Constitution established a quota of 35% women's representation in political and military life. Despite this legal progress, the reality still falls short: most women lack access to education and confidence, and gender stereotypes persist. NGOs are working to strengthen women's capacities and promote women's leadership, but changing mindsets remains a persistent challenge.

Obstacles encountered

- **Discrimination and gender stereotypes:** Prejudices and violence against women leaders remain major barriers to their political participation and legitimacy.
- **Weak synergy among women leaders:** A lack of coordination and strong alliances between women reduces the reach and impact of advocacy efforts.
- **Weight of customary norms and discriminatory practices:** The law is often ahead of social attitudes. Traditional socio-cultural norms can hinder the effective implementation of women's rights.
- **Importance of sustained advocacy:** Advocacy must be carried out throughout the entire process, adapting the message to each actor, including constitutional judges and traditional leaders.
- **The need for an effective legal framework:** customary practices must not take precedence over the law, but it is essential to ensure that the law is effectively implemented and upheld.



Lessons learned and recommendations for advocacy in favour of inclusion

Context analysis and adaptation

Taking into account the type of electoral system (majoritarian, proportional with quotas, or parity lists) is essential, as it strongly influences the representation of women. Advocacy efforts must be adapted to the specific political, institutional and cultural context, adjusting strategies according to the obstacles encountered.

Identification and mobilisation of key actors

It is essential to identify all influential actors, including those sometimes overlooked such as the Constitutional Court, in order to ensure continuity in the advocacy effort and to avoid institutional deadlock.

Building capacities and alliances

Strengthen the skills of women and women's organisations throughout the electoral cycle, while promoting the creation and consolidation of networks, collaboration platforms and alliances among women leaders to amplify their voice and impact.

Awareness-raising and social norm change

Implement targeted campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and prevent violence against women, while engaging in long-term dialogue with traditional and religious leaders and communities to shift discriminatory practices and foster an enabling environment.

Promotion of positive masculinity and the inclusion of men

Engage men and influential leaders in driving change, as illustrated by the example of "positive masculinity" groups in the DRC, which successfully mobilised members of parliament to support gender parity

Documentation, learning and follow-up

Document and share experiences to strengthen the collective effectiveness of advocacy efforts, while reinforcing implementation and legal oversight mechanisms to ensure that legal advances translate into tangible change on the ground.

Capitalisation and adaptation

It is essential to build on achievements, adjust strategies in response to obstacles encountered, and document both successes and failures in order to improve future actions.

Electoral advocacy for women's inclusion requires determined leadership, perseverance, and continuous adaptation to the political, institutional and cultural context. It also calls for strategic alliances to ensure long-term impact. The African experiences of the Just Future community of practice show that, despite significant obstacles, progress is possible through collective mobilisation, targeted strategies, and the ability to turn resistance into opportunities for a more just and equal society.

Conclusion



The specificities of electoral advocacy in fragile contexts

Electoral advocacy in fragile contexts follows a more complex dynamic than traditional advocacy.

Indeed, the electoral context itself can act as a catalyst for volatility.

The rules of the game are often unclear, contested, or unevenly applied. The institutions responsible for organising elections — such as electoral commissions, constitutional courts and ministries — may lack independence, resources or legitimacy. Working on electoral processes therefore means operating in a space where public decision-making is sometimes informal, shifted towards hybrid actors, or even contested between official authorities, community leaders or security forces. This makes continuous analysis essential, one that is sensitive to local dynamics, and focused on understanding “who truly holds decision-making power” at each stage of the electoral cycle.

Furthermore, risks are also higher, and messages must be carefully calibrated. In fragile contexts, calling for electoral reforms, demanding greater transparency or challenging an electoral commission can expose organisations to reprisals, surveillance or stigmatisation. Security — physical, digital and reputational — thus becomes a structuring element of advocacy. In some cases, this means prioritising informal dialogue, closed formats or collective messaging, in order to share responsibility and reduce individual exposure. Managing risk therefore becomes a strategic skill, on a par with substantive expertise.

Time also plays a particular role. In fragile contexts, opportunities to influence processes can appear and disappear rapidly. Political calendars shift, appointments are made suddenly, alliances change, and key decisions may be taken without prior notice. Advocacy must therefore be prepared well in advance of the electoral cycle, with adaptable messages, ready-to-use recommendations and clear advocacy objectives to guide action despite uncertainty. This ability to remain prepared — before, during and between electoral cycles — is one of the main factors of success.

Coalition work takes on a particular character. Organisations often operate with fragmented information, varying levels of access, and sometimes diverging priorities. Yet it is precisely this diversity that makes it possible to develop a more nuanced reading of the context and to strengthen the legitimacy of advocacy demands. In environments where trust between actors can be fragile, electoral advocacy requires the consolidation of internal coordination spaces, the development of secure methods for information-sharing, and the establishment of collective processes that enable the formulation of shared

messages. Coherence becomes a strategic issue: a poorly aligned coalition can undermine the credibility of advocacy efforts, whereas a cohesive coalition can offset the individual limitations of its members.

Finally, the multi-level nature of electoral advocacy becomes even more critical in fragile contexts. When national civic space shrinks, regional and international leverage points become essential. Conventions, treaties, continental commitments and multilateral resolutions offer anchors to reinforce advocacy messages without confronting local actors head-on in tense contexts. However, this external engagement must be handled with care: advocacy that is perceived as overly externally driven may be seen as interference or expose civil society organisations to additional risks. The challenge is therefore to use external leverage as support, without replacing the local anchoring that gives advocacy its legitimacy.



In sum, electoral advocacy in fragile contexts involves navigating an environment where rules are fluid, risks are high, alliances are uncertain and room for manoeuvre is sometimes limited. Its specificity lies in this combination of constant vigilance and strategic agility. It requires a proactive posture, continuous preparation and the ability to adapt tactics in step with unfolding events. This is advocacy that advances gradually, yet each step contributes to strengthening trust in an often contested electoral process — and, by extension, in the possibility of peaceful and sustainable change.

Final note

This guide was developed with the support of a teaching team of four experts in electoral management, in collaboration with Cordaid and the Just Future Community of Practice. It provides reference points and practical tools for electoral advocacy, drawing both on participants' concrete experiences and on proven field-based practices.

In a field where sociopolitical dynamics evolve rapidly, advocacy requires a nuanced understanding of power relations and a constant capacity for adaptation. This guide is therefore conceived as a living document, intended to be used, tested, adjusted and enriched across different contexts. While it offers practical guidance, it deliberately leaves space for each organisation to adapt it to its own reality, resources and strategic approach.

Contributions and feedback are essential to its continued improvement. Anyone wishing to share a practice, suggest an adjustment or reflect on lessons learned is invited to contact Teodora Nguen, Security and Justice Expert at Cordaid, at tnu@cordaid.org.



Just Future is driven by Southern leadership and the promotion of democratic, inclusive societies. It enables its partners' voices to travel from local realities to national, regional and international decision-making spaces.