



Electoral Commission of Namibia

## CONCEPT NOTE

### CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOP

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#### 1. Introduction

The proposed civil society engagement workshop is an initiative of the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) specifically designed to create a platform for the ECN to engage civil society organizations (CSOs) representatives through consultations on matters of mutual interest.

This consultative workshop with civil society has three main objectives, namely, *(1) to present the election calendar with the view of updating the civil society on the ECN's preparedness to conduct the 2019 Presidential and National Assembly elections, (2) to present the civic and voter education program and most importantly, (3) to solicit inputs from civil society in order to strengthen our partnership between ECN and civil society in order to ensure full participation of all members of society in the upcoming general elections.*

In pursuit of the above objectives, the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) is organizing the civil society engagement workshop under the theme: *"Promoting Inclusive Participation"*, focusing on achieving full participation of every individual in society, in the electoral process. Specifically, this theme focuses on the promotion of inclusive participation in the upcoming 2019 Presidential & National Assembly elections scheduled to take place on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2019.

#### Background

It is generally recognized that civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have the power to influence individual behavior and the institution that are involved in implementation of government policies and programs. In this regard, CSOs can play an important role in enhancing transparency and good governance by contributing to the increased

public debate on issues related to the formulation and implementation of government policies and programs. Civil society role includes:

- **Service provider** – for example, running primary schools and providing basic community healthcare services;
- **Advocate/campaigner** – For example, lobbying governments or businesses on issues including indigenous rights or the environment;
- **Watchdog** – for example, monitoring government compliance with human rights treaties;
- **Building active citizenship** – for example, motivating civil engagement at local, regional and national levels of governance;
- **Participation in global processes**, for example CSOs serve on the advisory boards of national and international institutions;
- Lead grassroots mobilization;
- Support the wide dissemination of information;
- Form networks and action groups;
- Contribute to putting knowledge and evidence into practice.

The Guide to the Civil Society in Namibia (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) published by the Namibia Institute of Democracy earlier this year indicates that there is an estimated number of seventeen (17) civil society organizations in Namibia that work within the sphere of human rights/democracy amongst a number of other civil society organization in the country that work on varied areas such as agriculture, education, environment, health and gender amongst others. The diversity of the CSOs means that they offer varied perspectives and needs of various sectors of society through participatory citizen engagement, a critical enabling factor for creating inclusive, accountable and representative political systems.

One of the major obstacle encountered by many institutions to engage civil society is the fact that it is extremely difficult to **define civil society** because the definition keeps changing over time. In the past, the term “civil society” was identified with the non-state movements in authoritarian regimes. However, there have been significant changes over time in the civil society landscape and the concept has evolved from associational platforms to comprise a wide range of organized groups of different forms, functions, and sizes.

The **World Bank** defines civil society as: “the wide array of non-governmental and not for profit organizations that have a presence in public life, express the interests and values of their

members and others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations.” Civil society organizations therefore, refer to a wide array of organizations; community groups, NGOs, labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.

In contrast, the **African Development Bank’s** definition of civil society includes references to CSOs comprising “the full range of formal and informal organizations within society.

**CIVICUS**, a global alliance of civil society organizations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world, defines civil society broadly in order to capture the wide range of actors: “non-government organizations, activists, civil society coalitions and networks, protest and social movements, voluntary bodies, campaigning organizations, charities, faith-based groups, trade unions, and philanthropic foundations. New actors in civil society include social movements, online activists, bloggers and others.

It can therefore safely stated that civil society is today recognized as encompassing more than just a sector dominated by NGO community. Information and communication technologies have opened up spaces for action. For example there has been significant growth in online civil society activity, which has enabled the growth of networks across geographical, social and physical divides. Small groups have acquired the ability to rapidly mobilize significant online activity and command media attention around a topic that had previously been relatively unknown. The nature of civil society, what it is and what it does is evolving in response to both technological developments and changes within society.

It is against this background that the ECN is hosting a **Civil Society Engagement Workshop** on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019 in Windhoek at the SAFARI Hotel.

## **2. Purpose and specific objectives of the civil society engagement workshop**

The overall aim of the workshop is to update the civil society organizations on the ECNs preparedness for the 2019 Presidential and National Assembly elections to provide an opportunity for CSOs to raise pertinent issues with relation to the forthcoming elections. The specific objectives are to:

- Promote public confidence in electoral process/systems;
- Create a space for dialogue and exchange between the CSOs and the ECN; and

- Reflect on the current voter and civic education strategies of the ECN.

The most important objective of any election campaign, and the key criteria against which its success will be measured, is an increase in voter turnout, the delivery of the latter will depend highly on ensuring that the electorate are provided with sufficient voter and civic education programs and encouraging civic organizations, the media and political parties to support the voter and civic education program of the Commission.

To this end, the workshop will follow a participatory approach and it is hoped that the different CSOs will raise pertinent issues and provide recommendations in relation to the forthcoming elections.

### **3. Expected Outcomes**

- Civil society fully updated on the important dates on 2019 election calendar ;
  - The ECN civic and voter education programs and strategies shared with CSOs;
  - Input by civil society received by the ECN
  - CSOs confidence in the electoral process enhanced
  - Improved stakeholder relations between ECN and civil society achieved.
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