Global Evaluation of ACE: The Electoral Knowledge Network

Terms of Reference

Introduction

The original ACE project (Administration and Cost of Elections) dates from the mid-1990s and took the form of an online and CD-Rom database of key election-related topic areas. This represented a knowledge depository and was translated into English, French and Spanish. In 2006, however, the partners to the ACE initiative launched a new, more dynamic version of ACE that still included the core 'encyclopedia' per se, but included many more dynamic and living elements including knowledge services, knowledge networking, regional centres and capacity development projects. After four years of implementing the new model of the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, the ACE partners[1] have decided to undertake a global evaluation to assess progress made over the past several years in terms of ACE's expansion and evolution, and to chart a strategy for the future including management arrangements, membership issues and other aspects related to sustainability.

Background

The original ACE project served an important purpose in making available to a broad-based, worldwide audience, comprehensive, up-to-date and reliable information on the "state of the art" in election policy, planning, organization and management. The extensive use made of the ACE website – reaching one million hits per months – in its English, French and Spanish versions – testified to the fact that ACE fulfilled an important need.

Yet, ACE faced a number of challenges. These included keeping materials up to date; keeping abreast of innovations in the field of electoral administration; taking advantage of how the internet can be used in terms of promoting interactivity; and addressing a language gap in the material and the ability of the users to access it. The partners in ACE realized that unless something were done to address these issues, the tremendous investment made in ACE was in danger of being lost and that no other website was likely to fill the vacuum that would be created if the ACE project were to be disbanded.

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[1] The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network is a joint endeavor of the original three ACE partners – the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) – as well as of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD), the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) of Mexico, Elections Canada and EISA. The European Commission became a funder and ex officio partner in 2006.

Given the above, the Steering Committee of the ACE Project agreed in early 2004 to undertake an exercise to review the overall vision and existing service lines of ACE with a view to transforming the project into a more active force. Between January 2004 and February 2005, the ACE partners held a series of consultations in New York, Säby-Stockholm, Pretoria, Manila and Calgary to define the new vision, strategy and service lines of the project, which were then captured in the ACE Umbrella project document approved by the Steering Committee in April 2005 in Mexico City. Significantly, these discussions included in-depth consultations with relevant existing as well as potential stakeholders of the project. In terms of the knowledge services and the practitioners' network, these stakeholders included current and potential users of the knowledge services and products of ACE, potential members of communities of practice, and potential clients of the practitioners' network. For the capacity development component, these consultations included in-depth discussions during the Pretoria meeting with stakeholders in the Southern Africa region (considered in the project as the pilot region). These consultations collectively culminated in the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, which was formally launched in Ottawa in May 2006.

The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network represents a continuation yet transformation of the original ACE project which dated from the mid-1990s. Both the original ACE and the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network were designed to contribute to the development of democratic electoral systems and processes that ultimately enhance voters' ability to exercise an informed choice and electoral institutions' capacity to administer well-run democratic elections that are also popularly perceived as such.

Although the current version of ACE is much more than just a website, the website remains a core backbone of the project as it houses the encyclopedia and other knowledge resources. The table below summarizes the website evolution of ACE from 1998 to 2006:

Summary Table of ACE Website/CD Rom Versions

ACE Version 0	Published 1998	9 topic areas in English
ACE Version 1	Published 2002-3	Addition of 3 topic areas, full translation to French and Spanish
ACE Version 2	Published 2006	12 completely updated topics, fully in English, partially in Spanish and French; dynamic, interactive features added

The website of ACE is currently undergoing another revision in terms of improving the layout, look and functionality. This revision does not include a new version of the encyclopedia per se but rather completion of the translations in English, Spanish and French of ACE Version 2.

The ACE partners also decided in March 2008 in New York to task IDEA with developing a transitional secretariat. During the Steering Board[2] meeting in Mexico City in April 2009, the partners formally

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[2] The 'Steering Committee' became the 'Steering Board' in the 2005 ACE Umbrella Project Document.

endorsed the concept of a centralized permanent secretariat structure for ACE to be temporarily hosted by IDEA, and to be supported by full-time dedicated programme personnel and by a unified, multi-year operational budget. This proposal is under review by the Steering Board. One issue that will need to be dealt with fairly soon, however, is the impending expiration of the ACE Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in June 2010. This expiration date could be extended upon agreement of all the partners until the results of this Global Evaluation are known.

Objectives

The objectives of the ACE Global Evaluation are three fold: first, to assess the progress ACE has made in contributing to the key results it has set for itself (these key results were mostly articulated in the ACE Umbrella Project Document); second, to codify lessons learned; and three, to provide a strategic look into the future and offer recommendations for how ACE should further evolve.

The guiding questions that the evaluation will answer include:

- Has ACE accomplished what it set out to accomplish in 2006? Has it accomplished more and different things? Has it fallen short? Why?
- What are the lessons and good practices that can be identified?
- Looking into the future, what is the strategic assessment of where ACE can/should go from here in terms of substantive focus and areas of work?
- How should ACE operate in the future in terms of management arrangements, resource mobilization, sustainability, permanent secretariat[3], etc.)?

Scope

The ACE Global Evaluation will address both the *what* and *how* of ACE. In other words, what the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network set out to do; what it has accomplished; and what it should do in the future, as well as how it has succeeded or fallen short and how it should proceed to evolve in the future. While the evaluation will refer to the ACE Umbrella Project Document as guide, this is *not* a project evaluation. In UNDP terminology, the ACE Global Evaluation resembles more of an outcome evaluation, which looks into the past and the future.

The outcome that the ACE Umbrella Project Document sought to promote was: "Enhanced knowledge services to promote a ready environment for election-related professionals to exchange information, solve problems and help build a common language, methods and models around specific competencies; and improved professionalism of those engaged in electoral activities related to the conduct of free and fair (and credible, sustainable, peaceful, cost-effective) elections."

More specifically, the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network sought to achieve the following intermediary results: 1) update and consolidate the core ACE knowledge depository and expand it into related knowledge-based services; 2) develop a global network of practitioners that operates on both regional and topical bases; and 3) leverage and go beyond the first two elements to offer capacity development tools and services.

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[3] Key lessons learned, together with the findings and recommendations resulting from this evaluation are expected to shape, guide, inform and complete a permanent ACE Secretariat structure.

The evaluation will therefore examine in-depth the following elements of the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network and determine whether and how activities in these areas affected the outcome and intermediary results:

- Knowledge services
- Knowledge networking
- Regional Centres
- Capacity Development
- Partnership building
- Management arrangements
- Membership arrangements
- IT issues

The evaluation will also look into the future and provide analysis that will guide the ACE partners in deciding what areas ACE should remain engaged in/move into, and how it should do so. Included in this aspect of the scope should be an analysis of whether ACE is still responding to relevant needs within the electoral community; whether it is the best positioned and capacitated entity to meet these needs; and what the governance/permanent secretariat structure of the initiative should look like.

The evaluation will cover the timeframe of the last five years (from 2004 to the present) and provide a forward looking view over the next five to 10 years.

Methodology

The evaluators will use an evaluation methodology known as triangulation. This includes documentation (review of key documentation), perception (conducting stakeholder interviews), and validation (rechecking information visa additional data sources, third-party interviews, surveys, etc.).

The ACE Umbrella Project Document will provide a starting point for the evaluators but other documentation will be provided, including subsequent project documents for the Practitioners' Network, Regional Centres and Capacity Development Facility; ACE progress reports and reports to donors; Records of Decisions and Minutes from ACE Steering Committee/Board meetings; ACE publications, etc.

Stakeholder interviews will include all of the ACE partners as well as the Regional Centres, selected electoral management bodies in target countries, donors to the initiative; and members of the Practitioners' network.

Specific Tasks and Deliverables

The evaluators will be responsible for two deliverables, namely:

1. An evaluation report that details the findings and recommendations of the team; and

2. Availability to discuss the findings with the ACE partners between the first draft and the final draft of the report, including by presenting to and discussing with the Steering Board the report's findings and recommendations.[4]

Evaluation Team Composition and Qualifications

The evaluation will be conducted by a team of two (2) experienced consultants. At least one of the consultants must have a strong background in evaluation methodology and strategic assessment. At least one of the consultants must have a strong electoral background. Both consultants should have considerable experience in institutional development analysis; organizational management and planning; risk assessment; and/or project and programme design.

It is advantageous if both consultants are familiar with the United Nations System, the work of partners such as IFES, IDEA, EISA and elections commissions such as IFE-Mexico and Elections Canada and have a minimal understanding of how programme management units and other management arrangements function.

This will be an independent evaluation, meaning that the consultants engaged for the task will have had no role in the design or implementation of the ACE initiative in the period under review.

Duration and Duty Station

The consultants will be contracted for a period of 80 days, which will be extended over the course of 2010. The consultants can work from their home duty station, but will be expected to undertake some mission travel.

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[4] A UNDP Global Practice Meeting is planned for the second or third quarter of 2010, to coincide with the next GEO meeting in Southern Africa. This would be a good opportunity for the ACE partners to convene a Steering Board meeting and also for the evaluators to either interview partners or present initial findings, depending upon the timing of the evaluation and the timing of the meeting.