

# Impact of Election Support Interventions to Prevent Violent Political Instability, Conflict or Atrocities

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**What evidence is there of election support interventions contributing to preventing elections from leading to (further) violent political instability, conflict or atrocities?**

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# 1. Summary

**This review examines the impact of electoral support interventions in preventing elections from leading to (further) violent political instability, conflict and atrocities. Drawing on a range of quantitative studies, it finds that security sector engagement and strengthening of election management bodies are most effective in reducing violence. There is some evidence that voter education and election monitoring prevent electoral violence. However, peace messaging and youth programming – despite being key approaches to election violence prevention in some case studies – did not appear to have much impact on violence reduction. The review findings highlight the primary role of the state in ensuring elections are peaceful, with civil society groups and local and international development organizations playing a supporting role.**

Elections can play an important role in legitimizing governments, strengthening democracy, preventing conflict and building peace. However, because elections are often critical in deciding balance of power, allocation of resources, etc. they can be highly competitive, and even become a catalyst for violence and conflict. The potential for elections to lead to/fuel conflict and violence is greater in countries with underlying drivers of conflict, (especially those emerging from civil war) and/or where electoral processes are flawed.

Prevention of election violence entails provision of ‘technical’ assistance as well as political engagement. The main approaches are: security sector engagement; strengthening election management bodies; election monitoring; civic and peace education (building social cohesion); voter education; and effective election dispute resolution. In recent years international development organizations have provided increasing assistance for election support, and specifically for prevention of electoral violence.

This review assesses the impact of election support interventions on preventing elections from leading to (further) violent political instability, conflict and atrocities. It prioritises rigorous quantitative assessments. The primary source of literature for this review is the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s (FCDO’s) Evidence Gap Map (EGM) on Conflict and Atrocity Prevention Strategies for Violence Reduction and Sustainable Peace, but it also gives evidence from other studies not included in the EGM.

Key findings for impact of the various approaches to election violence prevention are as follows:

- **Security sector engagement** – Two studies by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), one into the 2017 elections in Liberia and Kenya, and a separate five-country evaluation (Bangladesh, Malawi, Honduras, Moldova, Thailand) both found that security forces, when acting appropriately, had the greatest ability to prevent/mitigate election violence.
- **Election management bodies** – The two USIP studies found strengthening of election management bodies to be the other most effective approach to violence prevention. A study of UNDP interventions between 2003 and 2015, with 46 involving capacity building, also found these led to reduced violence. The effect was most pronounced on non-state initiated violence, suggesting that such interventions increase confidence in the integrity of elections.

- **Election monitoring** – A study of 230 national elections in 43 African countries looked at the impact of international observers on post-election violence. It found that international monitoring contributed to reduced government-sponsored violence, but incentivized opposition-sponsored violence. The reverse effects were seen in elections with massive fraud. A study of community (social) monitoring of the 2009 elections in Afghanistan, using cell phones to file complaints, found that access to cell phones (and awareness-raising about reporting mechanisms) did have a deterrent effect on corrupt behaviour in elections. A study of the impact of domestic election observers in 2012 elections in Ghana found their presence significantly reduced electoral violence and electoral fraud. However, there could be spillover effects depending on the context: in single-party dominant constituencies, fraud shifted to polling stations with no observers; while in multi-party competitive constituencies, violence shifted to polling stations without observers.
- **Civic engagement and voter education** – Election education campaigns by UN peacekeepers in Cote d'Ivoire were found to have reduced violence in four elections held between 2010 and 2016. But the success of such an approach is dependent on trust in peacekeepers. A study of the effect of a community-based anti-violence campaign by ActionAid in the Nigerian elections of 2007 found the campaign increased people's sense of security and empowered them to counteract local electoral violence. The study of UNDP interventions between 2003 and 2015 also looked at attitude transforming approaches, e.g. peace messaging, mediation and dialogue. These were found to reduce election violence, but the effect was most pronounced on government (state)-initiated violence: this could be due to such strategies publicly binding state actors to peaceful strategies. The two USIP studies found that, overall, peace messaging, voter consultations and youth programming had little impact.
- **Electoral dispute resolution** – One study looked at the role of the courts in preventing post-election violence in Nigeria. It focused on election petition tribunals (EPTs), courts specially set up to resolve election disputes. It found some evidence that where EPTs had nullified/overturned results in previous elections, in succeeding elections, violence was reduced. It also found a link between high levels of trust in courts, and reduced incidence of pre-election violence.

The review shows there are limited rigorous assessments of impact of electoral support interventions on violence prevention. Moreover, all the studies identified only impact on election violence, i.e. short-term effects, and did not describe long-term effects (post-election) on preventing violent political instability, conflict or atrocities. This is an area for further research; so too the pathways by which specific interventions lead to election violence reduction; and the impact (particularly in cases where electoral violence is reduced) on other illicit election activities (e.g. vote tampering, pre-poll intimidation). The literature included some reference to gender, but made negligible reference to persons with disabilities.

## 2. Elections and conflict/political violence/atrocities

### 2.1 Potential of elections to fuel conflict, political violence or atrocities

Elections can play an important role in legitimizing governments, strengthening democracy, preventing conflict and building peace. ‘When people have the opportunity to participate freely in public life and to choose their leaders through a free and open process, they are less likely to feel the need to resort to violence to resolve their differences or to make their voices heard’ (UNDP, 2017: iv). This can even apply in post-conflict countries/those vulnerable to violence. Elections in Mozambique in 1994 and Sierra Leone in 2002 are examples ‘hailed as promoting conflict resolution [...] where successful elections were viewed as the linchpin of post-conflict peace processes’ (Donno et al, 2022: 134).

However, elections can be critical in deciding a whole range of issues ‘including competing viewpoints and priorities, balance of power and decision making, and allocations of resources’ (UNDP, 2017: iv). This makes them highly competitive and means ‘they can sometimes be a catalyst or accelerator of conflict’ (UNDP, 2017: iv). The potential for elections to lead to/fuel conflict and violence is greater in countries with underlying drivers of conflict, and/or where electoral processes are flawed (UNDP, 2017: iv). ‘This risk is particularly high in countries with systemic, longstanding and unresolved grievances, combined with a “winner takes all” approach to competitive politics’ (UN Dept. of Political Affairs or DPA, 2016: 3). ‘Countries emerging from civil war have an especially high potential for conflict during electoral processes’ (UNDP, 2017: iv).

Donno et al (2022: 135) carried out a time-series cross-sectional analysis covering 134 developing countries from 1950 to 2012, and focusing on presidential elections ‘which are high-stakes winner-takes-all contests’. They found that ‘elections of low integrity are associated with a significantly higher risk of civil conflict. There is also evidence that this effect is stronger in countries with a history of civil conflict, where low-quality elections are even more dangerous’ (Donno et al, 2022: 135). They cite the example of the 2010 Cote d’Ivoire election, which ‘was brazenly falsified by incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo, who used his control of state institutions to manipulate the outcome despite initial counts reporting his loss by a wide margin. Deadlock, militarization, and violence soon followed, as supporters of the opposition candidate Alassane Ouattara fought to take control of the capital’ (Donno et al, 2022: 134). Similarly, flawed elections in El Salvador (1972) ‘prompted an attempted coup and brief military conflict between the government and opposition forces’ (Donno et al, 2022: 134).

UNDP (2017: iv) conclude: ‘Elections do not cause violence, but the process of competing for political power often exacerbates existing tensions and stimulates the escalation of these tensions into violence’. Donno et al (2022: 135) echo this: ‘Elections are, by nature, conflictual events in which competing parties vie for power. Yet [...] they do not inherently contribute to the outbreak of violence; rather, it is contests with severe flaws that exacerbate commitment problems and legitimacy crises that can lead to conflict’.

## Relevant election support interventions

Approaches to prevent elections from leading to/exacerbating violent political instability, conflict or atrocities entail addressing the factors which could bring these about, e.g. weak election management, lack of security around elections, and underlying drivers such as social divisions. A holistic approach therefore entails not just provision of 'technical' assistance, but political engagement as well (UN DPA, 2016: 3).

Before listing the range of election support interventions that would be relevant, it is important to stress that elections are not a one-off event; rather they should be seen as a continuous process with different phases. 'At the most general level, the electoral cycle is divided into three main parts: the pre-electoral period, the electoral period, and the post-electoral period, with different stakeholders interacting and influencing each other in each period' (Fath-Lihic & Brancati, 2017: 6). Interventions to prevent violence need to follow the same timeframe.

International interventions frequently start when the election cycle is well underway, or after violence already erupted. To address the underlying causes of election violence, as well as the frustrations, financial incentives, or fears of its perpetrators and enablers, sustained interventions across election cycles are needed (USIP, 2017: 1).

Continuity of both election cycles and election support helps bring about sustained strengthening of electoral processes, progressively reducing the risk of elections fuelling violence and conflict (UNDP, 2017: 29).

Key relevant election support interventions are:

- Building social cohesion (civic and peace education);
- Supporting development of inclusive election systems, and design of political institutions to prevent monopoly of power (if needed, through constitutional or legislative reforms);
- Strengthening and building capacity of election management bodies;
- Engagement with civil society groups for conflict prevention;
- Voter education;
- Strengthening security around elections;
- Election monitoring (domestic and international);
- Ensuring transparent processes for election results, and effective election dispute resolution.

## Assessment of impact

In recent years, and particularly in the wake of the very high violence following the 2007 Kenyan elections, international development organizations have provided increasing assistance for election support, and specifically for prevention of electoral violence (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017: 385). This review seeks to assess the impact of election support interventions on prevention of violent political instability, conflict or atrocities. It prioritises rigorous quantitative assessments, which give clear evidence of impact. The primary source of literature for this review is the FCDO's Evidence Gap Map (EGM) on Conflict and Atrocity Prevention Strategies for Violence Reduction and Sustainable Peace. This lists 18 studies under election support interventions, but not all of these are relevant to conflict/violence prevention. Hence this review also gives evidence

from other studies not included in the EGM. The review was intended to focus on long-term impact of electoral support interventions on preventing violence, conflict, etc., but all the studies identified only immediate impact on reducing electoral violence.

## 3. Evidence Gap Map (EGM) studies

### 3.1 Civil society and public engagement

**Smidt (2020) examined the role of peacekeepers in Cote d'Ivoire in preventing election violence through election education campaigns.** Disinformation (false information, rumours, hate speech, divisive messaging) during elections can fuel grievances and incite violence. This is particularly the case in 'non-consolidated democracies' where voters can lack access to independent information and be hampered by low literacy rates and lack of education, and in divided and war-torn countries. 'To counter such disinformation, United Nations peacekeeping operations (PKOs) routinely organize election-education events' (Smidt, 2020: 199). Smidt (2020: 199) identifies three ways in which this can reduce rioting and violent protests by civilians during electoral periods:

- 'First, learning about PKOs' electoral security assistance during election-education events may convince people that political opponents cannot violently disturb elections, thereby mitigating fears of election violence.
- 'Second, election-education events provide politically relevant information that can strengthen political efficacy and people's ability to make use of peaceful political channels.
- Finally, peace messages during election-education events can change people's calculus about the utility and appropriateness of violent behaviour.'

Smidt studied the effect of local-level election-education events carried out by the UN Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI) before four elections held between 2010 and 2016.

The analyses provide evidence that election education sponsored by the PKO in Cote d'Ivoire helped support the peacefulness of election processes in the war-torn country. Across subnational locations, election education is associated with fewer events of violent protests and riots. On the individual level, election education correlates with less fear of election violence, greater political efficacy and a reduced propensity to use political violence (Smidt, 2020: 212).

However, Smidt found that UNOCI's election education was less effective in opposition areas, where people tended to mistrust peacekeepers. With regard to policy implications, Smidt (2020: 212-3) suggests that election education by peacekeepers could be useful, but there are three caveats: 'first, only if people trust the PKO can election education fulfil its full potential. Second, election education targets civilians who are usually not the main perpetrators of election violence. Third, election education mitigates election-related protests and riots but not election violence in other forms such as repression and intimidation by security forces'.

**Collier and Vicente (2014) assess the effects of community campaigning against electoral violence in the 2007 Nigerian national and state-level elections.** The study was carried out in neighbourhoods and villages across six states of Nigeria, which represent the main

socioeconomic regions of the country (Collier & Vicente, 2014: F328). ActionAid (a major international NGO) had carried out a campaign against political violence in half the locations included in the study. The campaign 'included town meetings, popular theatre and the distribution of campaign material, standardised across all locations. It was aimed at empowering citizens to counteract local violence' (Collier & Vicente, 2014: F328). It also appealed to citizens to vote against violent politicians.

The methodology for the study included: representative surveys; compilation of violence-events; interviews with a panel of respondents before the campaign and after the elections; and additional post-election interviews with individuals in treatment areas not directly approached by the campaign (Collier & Vicente, 2014: F328). Finally, all survey respondents were asked 'to mail a postcard if they wanted to flag the problem of electoral violence in the media' (Collier & Vicente, 2014: F328).

Overall, the study found that 'the anti-violence campaign was able to increase the sense of security to the general population' (Collier & Vicente, 2014: F329). Key findings of the study are as follows:

- 'Our measure of perceived local electoral violence induced by politicians decreased by 0.23 standard deviation units';
- 'The campaign also boosted empowerment to counteract electoral violence - the likelihood that the postcard was mailed was 8 percentage points higher for treated respondents';
- '(T)he intervention increased voter turnout by 11 percentage points (gubernatorial elections) and that political intimidation was a strategy predominantly linked to non-incumbent political groups';
- The study found 'a clear decrease in actual violence as reported in the journalists' diaries [...] we detect a 47 percentage point effect on the likelihood that physical violence occurs. This is evidence that the campaign was able to influence the behaviour of violent politicians'.
- The study also found 'effects on untargeted individuals within treated locations, which may include spillovers of the campaign, specifically in terms of decreased perceptions of violence'.

Collier and Vicente (2014: F349) explain the increased use of political intimidation by non-incumbents compared to incumbents as follows: 'violence may be a strategy of weaker political groups. This is consistent with the idea that the incumbent may have an advantage in using other more effective illicit strategies such as fraud and vote buying when needed. Weak political groups may be restricted to the use of electoral intimidation of opponents to maximise their vote share'. They conclude that community-based campaigning to counteract electoral violence could be an especially effective form of voter education. However, given the possibility that elected politicians resort to other forms of illicit behaviour, e.g. vote miscounting and vote buying, 'an anti-violence campaign cannot be the sole remedy for problematic elections; attention should be devoted to politic accountability and to all illicit strategies in an integrated manner' (Collier & Vicente, 2014: F353).



## 3.2 Support to election management bodies

**Birch and Muchlinski (2017) assess the effectiveness of two common types of intervention to prevent electoral violence: a) capacity building through training and education, and b) attitude transformation through ‘peace messaging’, pacting, dialogue and mediation.** The logic of the former approach is that shortcomings in electoral processes can undermine the credibility of elections and thus government legitimacy, leading to violence. ‘Bolstering confidence in electoral institutions is thus a powerful means of ensuring that electoral procedures remain the sole mechanism for resolving political differences’ (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017: 388). This can be done both by increasing ‘the technical skills and capacity of electoral actors to run credible elections and to cope with potentially conflictual situation’ and ‘by building popular capacity to participate in the electoral process meaningfully’, e.g. engaging with civil society groups to raise awareness of voting procedures. The logic of attitude transformation strategies is that technical assistance is not ‘sufficient to address underlying grievances based on power relations in society’. Through activities such as peace messaging, forming pacts (e.g. peace pledges, codes of conduct), dialogue and mediation, perceptions about the usefulness and feasibility of violence as an election strategy can be changed. This, in turn, can deter actors from opting for violence to address their grievances.

For their study, Birch and Muchlinski (2017: 392) examined relevant electoral support interventions by UNDP between 2003 and 2015; they identified 99 elections, in which 46 involved capacity building programming, and 26 programming involving attitude transformation strategies. They used two different indicators to assess impact: a) government (state) intimidation; and b) non-state violence. They found that, while both capacity building and attitude transformation interventions led to reduced violence, capacity building approaches were associated with lower levels of non-state initiated violence, while attitude transformation approaches were linked to lower rates of state-initiated violence. Moreover, there was some evidence that attitude transformation interventions could increase non-state initiated violence.

Birch and Muchlinski (2017) offer explanations for their findings. The role of capacity building of electoral management bodies and voter education in reducing non-state violence could be due to increased confidence in the integrity of elections. Attitude transforming interventions could ‘publicly and credibly [...] bind state actors morally to peaceful strategies’ (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017: 396).

## 3.3 Election monitoring

**Smidt (2016) examines the impact of international observers on post-election violence in Africa.** She differentiates between government-sponsored and opposition-sponsored violence after elections. Her study was based on analysis of 230 national elections (either for a national executive figure, e.g. president, or for a national legislative body) held in 43 African countries between 1990 and 2009 (Smidt, 2016: 231). The two variables it measures, both in the post-election period, are the number of events of repression organized by the government, and the number of events of violence by opposition groups (Smidt, 2016: 231-2). The key findings of the study are that international election monitoring (Smidt, 2016: 237-238):

- Contributes to ‘reducing government-sponsored violence after elections which were not marred by massive fraud. Observers can easily identify and blame governments when



their uniformed security forces are engaged in violent abuse and governments anticipate high costs upon international exposure’.

- However, it ‘incentivizes opposition-sponsored violence. Opposition leaders can avoid blame for violent deeds of their militants and standard international punishment tools do not usually target the opposition. Instead opposition groups benefit from new mobilization opportunities, for example protection from repression and increased media coverage, and seek to gain observers’ attention and international support for their cause’.
- But in cases of elections with massive fraud, which is exposed by observers, the effects are reversed. ‘Because governments already expect international observers’ criticism for fraud, they do not have much more to lose from employing repression in response’. Conversely, ‘election monitoring in highly fraudulent elections no longer incites opposition-sponsored violence. Major fraud makes observers alert to opposition groups’ grievances, which in turn alleviates opposition groups’ need for violence to catch international attention’.

The results point to areas for further research, notably whether the reduction in government-sponsored repression is restricted to official security forces (i.e. if governments were using hired militias/unidentifiable agents of violence to evade exposure). However, they highlight the importance of distinguishing between perpetrators of electoral violence: government and opposition groups.

**Gonzales (2021) explores the impact of cell phone coverage on election fraud in Afghanistan.** During the 2009 election the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) (created with UN support) introduced a citizen-monitoring initiative: it set up two election fraud hotlines, where people could file reports, as well as get information about how to do so (deadlines, etc.). The hotlines were widely publicized, including through TV and radio advertisements in local languages. Private entities, in particular media organizations, also encouraged reporting of fraud in the weeks running up to the election; one media agency ‘deployed around 80 reporters throughout the country who were instructed to use their mobile phones to text and call in incidents of violence and fraud’ (Gonzales, 2021: 37). Reporting of electoral fraud by citizens was also facilitated by wide cell phone access. People could also call the 199 corruption hotline in Afghanistan, set up by the EU Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL), which was relatively well known by the population (Gonzales, 2021: 37).

The study compared fraud levels for polling stations within a close distance of the two-dimensional boundary formed between areas with cell phone coverage and those with non-coverage. It found that for ‘polling centres within a six to seven km bandwidth around the coverage boundary, the share of fraudulent votes in centres inside coverage areas drops by about 4 percentage points, while the likelihood of a fraudulent station goes down by about 8 percentage points’ (Gonzales, 2021: 2). This shows that widespread access to cell phones does deter corrupt behaviour in elections. However, there were regional differences: drops in fraud were mostly restricted to the southern and eastern regions of the country (Gonzales, 2021: 2).

Gonzales suggests that the drop in electoral fraud could be due to increased citizen participation via social monitoring. This is supported by the increased complaints filed in polling stations in cell phone coverage areas, including by females. Gonzales (2021: 5) stresses that the 2009 election was accompanied by Taliban warnings that they would target polling stations and voters in the run up, and saw greatly increased attacks on election day (exceeding the 2009 daily average by

a factor of eight). He notes that usually 'election-related violence hampers collective action incentives, as individuals fear retaliation or are simply unable to witness fraud if not present at the polling centres'. Hence, the finding that reporting increased and fraud dropped 'suggests that monitoring technologies that rely on cell phone access may offer some degree of plausible deniability to potential whistleblowers and can be effective even in settings characterized by extreme political violence' (Gonzales, 2021: 4).

While not directly looking at impact on election violence, Gonzales' findings have relevance for prevention of such violence. Reducing electoral fraud increases citizens' confidence in the election process, and can thus deter actors from resorting to violence.

### 3.4 Electoral dispute resolution

**Burchard and Simati (2019) assess the role of the courts in preventing post-election violence in Nigeria.** The link between having courts or tribunals where election results can be challenged, and violence prevention, is as follows (Burchard & Simati, 2019: 126):

If electoral actors believe that irregularities can be fairly challenged in an impartial venue, they may be less likely to resort to violence to win. In situations where electoral actors believe that there are no viable venues to resolve problematic elections, political actors may be more likely to turn to intimidation, harassment, and physical attacks to win elections. Furthermore, if political actors believe that an independent court system will hold them accountable for electoral infractions, they may be less likely to engage in fraud and violence. If no such judicial avenue exists, the inverse may be true.

Burchard and Simati (2019) examine the role of election petition tribunals (EPTs) in Nigeria: these are courts specially set up to resolve disputes after an election. Their study focuses on the effects of the EPTs on pre-electoral violence (in the six week period before polls) in the 2015 and 2019 Nigerian elections (Burchard & Simati, 2019: 127). They look at whether trust in the courts, and the extent to which EPTs overturn election results in response to petitions, influence the level of pre-election violence in the next round of elections. The key findings are as follows (Burchard & Simati, 2019: 139-140):

- For every election result that was overturned by an EPT in 2011, the incidence of pre-election violence in 2015 was reduced by a factor of 0.60 (holding other variables constant). However, successful nullification of election results by EPTs in 2015 did not have any significant effect on pre-election violence in 2019.
- In 2015, high levels of trust in courts reduced the incidence of pre-election violence by a factor of 0.46 compared to where there was low trust. In 2019, having some trust and having a lot of trust in the courts reduced pre-election violence by 0.47 and 0.42 respectively.
- The number of petitions submitted to EPTs in 2015 was significantly related to how petitions filed in the 2011 election were dealt with: many more petitions were filed in states where a tribunal had overturned previous election results, than in states where no elections were overturned in 2011.

From the results, Burchard and Simati (2019: 141) conclude that the courts and election tribunals can be critical in alleviating pre-election violence: '(R)ulings that nullify election results and trust in the judicial system constrain the prevalence of electoral violence'. The policy implications of

their findings are that 'there might be value in setting up ad hoc election petition tribunals and building capacity in domestic judiciaries to be efficient in adjudicating election-related disputes in a shorter time frame' and in building citizens' trust in the courts (Burchard & Simati, 2019: 141).

## 4. Evidence from other studies

### 4.1 2017 elections in Liberia and Kenya

**The United States Institute of Peace (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018) carried out research during the 2017 general elections in Liberia and Kenya to assess the effectiveness of election violence prevention practices.** The study focused on seven approaches to violence prevention (see below). The methodology entailed careful selection of 'nine counties across Liberia and Kenya that were rich in votes and varied in geography and political party preference', and within these, random selection of a total of 300 towns or neighbourhoods, all 'at risk of experiencing election violence and prevention' (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 7). In each location two rounds of surveys were conducted with the same 2,100 respondents, once before and once after the election. As well as examining if prevention strategies led to reduced violence, the study looked at 'whether attitudes and behaviours changed in line with the logic, or theory of change, of the prevention instruments' (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 7).

The seven approaches and the key results for each were as follows:

- Security Sector Engagement – this was found to be one of the two most promising approaches to reduce election violence. In Liberia, the [Liberia National Police] LNP helped prevent tensions from escalating into violence, but in Kenya the [National Police Service] NPS 'had a stabilizing influence when it operated in a close relationship with local communities and had sufficient resources. However, when confronted with an increasingly tense election climate, the Kenyan police force further tainted its reputation and became the leading source of election violence' (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 27).
- Election Administration – this was found to be the other promising approach, albeit more so in Liberia. 'In Kenya, the poor [Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission] IEBC performance triggered several violent incidents, whereas the [National Election Commission, Liberia] NEC and the Supreme Court in Liberia helped overcome severe tensions' (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 28).
- Youth Programming; and Civic and Voter Education – these approaches appeared to make a difference in Liberia but not Kenya. 'In Liberia, civic and voter education and youth programming were consistently associated with less election violence [but] these instruments were not associated with changes in violence in Kenya' (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 31). The difference could be due to programming having broader reach and being more inclusive in Liberia compared to Kenya.
- Peace Messaging – this approach was not associated with reduced violence in either country, nor did it 'systematically influence the attitudes of respondents', which was 'remarkable given that it was one of the most widely used prevention mechanisms in both Kenya and Liberia' (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 30). Some influence on attitudes, but not violence, was seen in Liberia, where respondents expressed a greater likelihood of discussing political differences peacefully, but not Kenya. This could be due to lower quality of programme implementation in Kenya than Liberia.

- Voter Consultations – these did not appear to reduce violence. ‘Certainly the frequency of communication between locals and political candidates is not linked to less election violence’ (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 30)
- Election Monitoring – this approach was not associated with reduced violence in either country, but in Liberia ‘greater exposure to election monitoring was associated across the board with more positive attitudes about observers’ efforts and higher trust in observers’ abilities to reduce fraud and violence’ (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 30).

From these findings, the USIP (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 32) study concludes ‘that effective prevention starts at home, and that domestic institutions are the heart of election processes [...] it is the state that creates the legal structure that permits law enforcement agencies, the court system, and electoral commissions to function independently and effectively’. Civil society groups, local and international development organizations can ‘play an important role in complementing or supporting government efforts through training, technical assistance, and by funding outreach and education programs’. In particular, the study confirms ‘the value of police training, community outreach, and dialogue involving security actors, as well as efforts to strengthen election commissions for violence prevention purposes’ (Claes & Borzyskowski, 2018: 32).

## 4.2 USIP five-country study

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) carried out a similar comparative evaluation of approaches to reduce election violence in five countries: Bangladesh, Malawi, Honduras, Moldova, and Thailand (USIP, 2017: 1). They were selected based on three criteria: ‘the presence of a partial electoral democracy; “middle range risk” of political instability during the election period; and a recent election’ (USIP, 2018: 1). The impact of eight approaches was assessed: those listed above in the Liberia-Kenya study as well as preventive diplomacy.

Overall, the study found ‘compelling evidence that prevention works. But all prevention models are not equally impactful’ (USIP, 2017: 1) In addition, ‘success remains highly contextual’ (USIP, 2017: 1). Findings for each of the eight election violence prevention approaches are as follows:

- Security Sector Engagement; and Election Administration – these ‘demonstrate the greatest ability to mitigate violence or preventing it all together. [...] When acting appropriately, across the election cycle, security forces and election administrators effectively manage the incentive structure of potential perpetrators, and overcome those challenges that frequently give rise to election violence. Adequate domestic consideration of election security and the quality of the electoral process also boosts the likely effectiveness of grassroots or international prevention’ (USIP, 2017: 1).
- Civic Education – ‘Long-term civic education stands out as a promising prevention tool as well. The quality and scope of these prevention efforts often correspond with lower levels of election violence, while the attitudes and behaviour of political elite, voters, and perpetrators tend to shift in line with the theorized impact of these instruments’ (USIP, 2017: 2).
- Election Monitoring/mapping; and Preventive Diplomacy – these are both common in elections at risk but have widely differing impacts on election violence. ‘Election monitoring and mapping is the most impactful instrument available to international

prevention actors. Preventive diplomacy is unable to demonstrate the same level of impact. The instrument is commonly used as a last resort option for crisis management, when violence appears imminent or already ongoing' (USIP, 2017: 2).

- Peace Messaging; Voter Consultations; and Youth Programming – these instruments are theoretically compelling, but this does not translate into practice. '(T)he measurable impact of [these approaches] remains small or unclear. The utility and impact of these citizen-oriented instruments that are commonly led by domestic NGOs are either secondary or inconsistent, and merit further research' (USIP, 2017: 2).

The study concludes by stressing the primary role of the state: 'Even with the best of intentions or practices, both domestic NGO and international efforts can only help realize the peaceful conduct of elections in the presence of at least minimal quality standards, effort and buy-in from the national government organizing elections at risk' (USIP, 2017: 2).

### 4.3 Election observers in Ghana

**Asunka et al (2017) look at the effect of domestic election observers on electoral fraud and violence in the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana.** With regard to fraud, they focus on election day fraud at the level of the polling station, e.g. unregistered voters casting ballots, multiple voting, stuffing of ballot boxes, and tampering with results at the close of polls (Asunka et al, 2017: 26). Their study is based on the premise that electoral fraud and violence are 'shaped by the capacity and incentives of [local] party activists'. Election observers reduce capacity and incentives at the polling stations they monitor, but the response of party activists will vary across local contexts, in particular between single-party dominant areas, and competitive (multi-party areas). In the former, it is easier for activists to shift fraud to polling stations without observers, but in the latter this is harder, creating 'greater incentive to engage in violence and intimidation' (Asunka et al, 2017: 22).

The study was carried out in four of Ghana's ten regions, chosen because they varied in their degree of electoral competitiveness. An election observer was randomly assigned to each of over 1,000 polling stations (out of a total of 2,310 polling stations) and was present from the opening of polls to the conclusion of the vote count at the end of the day (Asunka et al, 2017: 23). Various indicators were used for electoral fraud and violence: a key proxy for fraud was voter turnout (this should not vary with the presence of a randomly assigned observer), while data on violence was collected from election observers, officials and party representatives at polling stations.

The results of the study are consistent with the theoretical framework described above (Asunka et al, 2017: 24 & 56):

- The presence of a domestic election observer at a polling station significantly reduces electoral fraud and violence at the polling stations that they monitor.
- Regarding spillover effects, there is 'suggestive evidence that parties shift fraud to stations without observers in single-party dominant constituencies'. No such displacement effect was found in competitive constituencies.

- By contrast, there is 'statistically strong evidence that parties move electoral violence to stations without observers in electorally competitive constituencies, while there is no evidence of this in single-party dominant areas'.

Asunka et al (2017: 58-59), while conceding the need for further research, claim their study provides 'empirical evidence that domestic election observers in a low-income democracy are capable of limiting multiple forms of electoral malfeasance. These findings highlight the important role of local civil society in advancing democratic consolidation'.

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## 6. About this review

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This review is based on six days of desk-based research. The K4DD research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development.

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