



## PRESS STATEMENT

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### Centre For Research and Policy (CRPD) Hosts National and Grassroots Civil Society To Discuss Election Preparedness

The Centre for Research And Policy Development (CRPD) convened a meeting of civil society representatives operating at national and grassroots levels to assess the level of preparedness of all electoral stakeholders for the December 2021 presidential election. This meeting held under the theme, '*Connecting the Ground*,' took place at Metzy Hotel, from June 26 to 27, 2021 and is the first of a series of monthly meetings that civil society organizations (CSOs) in The Gambia will hold to discuss political developments as well as threats to the upcoming elections and proffer solutions.

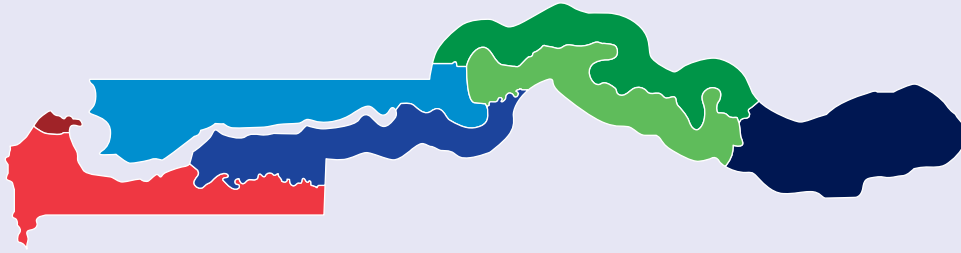
The objective of the June 2021 CSO meeting was to:

- Connect national with regional civil society to maximize resources as well as solidify coordination and collaboration with the grassroots, thereby fostering CSOs speaking with one voice;
- Assess the level of preparedness for the upcoming elections;
- Identify gaps, challenges and threats to the upcoming elections, and strategies to address and mitigate them.

Participants in this meeting were drawn from community radio journalists, youth, and women activists, Kanyelenges, persons living with disabilities (PWDs) and at least one civil society member from each of the 53-national assembly constituencies.

The two-day event kicked off on Saturday 26 June 2021 with an opening session, marked by a keynote speech and a welcoming remark. Anna Jones (Commissioner, Truth and Reparations, Reconciliation Commission) and member of the Civil Society Coalition on Elections shared her experience both locally and internationally on the role of civil society in ensuring credible elections. This was followed by group presentations on the level of preparedness for the presidential elections in each of the seven regions of The Gambia and participants shared as follows:

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**CENTRAL RIVER REGION SOUTH** – On the factors that might affect peaceful election in the area, the group pointed out that expressions of tribal sentiments remain major concern and could inhibit the peaceful conduct of election in the region and country at large. Another issue observed is related to the use of inflammatory languages. Other issues include the spread of false information on social media such as fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. Women participation impressive, however, youth participation still a concern.

**CENTRAL RIVER REGION NORTH** – Factors to influence voter turnout include the existence of insufficient polling station, bad road networks, lack of national documents to possess voter's cards, lack of awareness among the populace on the importance of elections. The determination of people to change government was also noted as a determinant factor to influence voter turnout.

**WEST COAST REGION** – While accessibility of voting centers for physically challenged and older persons was good, peaceful elections will be constrained by hate speech and bad political rhetoric, problems of demography and population (tribal politics), bribing of voters and law enforcement officers, inadequate voter education, improper or lack of well-co-ordinated campaign schedule/itinerary, cross-border registration and voting, absence of agents/representatives of some political parties in the registration centers and inadequate presence of physical security.

**NORTH BANK REGION** – The National Council on Civic Education was doing a good job of mobilizing citizens to participate in the registration exercise as well as the Kerewan Youth Development Association. However, factors that could influence voter turnout include violence, lack of public awareness among the populace, emergence of more political parties, misconception about voter registration and elections, influence from diaspora on electorates and inappropriate messages during campaign.

**LOWER RIVER REGION** – Noted that accessibility of voter registration centers, the centers are accessible and highly decentralized. However, voter turnout might be influenced by change in political environment, anchored on democratization and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, radio talk shows, effective overall sensitization by CSOs on the importance of elections.

**UPPER RIVER REGION** – People tend to take the law into their hands, and this is likely to affect peaceful elections. Equally, personal grievances, political parties not sensitizing their followers correctly, free, and fair election, political maturity. On women and youth participation, it was stated that the region is experiencing high level of participation of women and youth in the electoral process, and they serve as party agents in the current registration.

**KANIFING AND BANJUL** – Noted that there is has been an increase of first-time voters, increase in youth and women participation and awareness raising campaigns by all relevant stakeholders by CSOs, political parties, media, etc. in the region. However, hate speech, tribal politics, and party agents interfering in the electoral process, will likely impact negatively on the electoral process. The group also noted that media platforms can sometimes spread misinformation; therefore, journalists need training on election reporting. Equally, interference of foreign nationals in the election can inhibit the electoral process.

## The meeting also identified threats to the presidential election as follows:

**Election Administration challenges:** The number of political parties and presidential candidates might result in logistical challenges as the IEC does not have previous experience of handling an election with such number of candidates. The meeting also noted that a high number of drums in each polling station might confuse voters.

**Misinformation:** There is a lot of misinformation on social media that is likely to affect the information on candidates, political parties, and the election in general. This misinformation is likely to inflame tribal and other sentiments that lead to divisions, hate speech, etc. If this is not controlled, it might affect voter turnout and disrupt the environment.

**COVID-19 pandemic:** The election will be adversely affected if there is a surge in the COVID-19 spread and it is not clear how prepared the government and IEC are.

The meeting ended with a strategy session on the next steps and identify solutions to the challenges and threats to the upcoming elections. Here below is a summary of the recommendations from the two-meeting:

1. Civil society should continue to hold monthly strategy meeting at both national and regional level. In addition, election networks of civil society should be formed at regional level to allow for sharing of information and joint planning.
2. Civil society organizations should develop and communicate uniform key messages and these messages translated into local languages.
3. Due to the tense political atmosphere, it was recommended for CSOs to engage politicians on how to conduct themselves, especially during political campaigns, in ensuring a peaceful election.

This meeting was funded by the International Republican Institute (IRI) as part of its election project, which seeks to support civil society *to strategize and build consensus and implement citizen election observation activities to effectively carry out their mandate as electoral watchdogs around the upcoming 2021 presidential and 2022 legislative elections.*

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