

**SECOND CONFERENCE OF THE GLOBAL
ELECTORAL ORGANIZATION (GEO) NETWORK**

Mexico City, March 24 – 28, 2003

**The Association Of Caribbean
Electoral Organization (ACEO)**

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March 2003*

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Caribbean Election Network Conference saw Election Officials from 22 countries and territories come together in Kingston, Jamaica in January 1977. The Officials agreed to plan for the first Pan-Caribbean Association on Electoral Administration. This started the process of establishing the Association of Caribbean Electoral Organization (ACEO).

The ACEO was formally established at a Founding General Assembly held in San Juan Puerto Rico on March 5, 1998. Some sixteen founding members were present namely, Antigua & Barbuda, Belize, Jamaica, Monsterrat, Puerto Rico, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & The Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago, Turks & Caicos Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Later five other members joined increasing the total membership to twenty-one. These are Aruba, Barbados, Curacao, Dominican Republic and Guyana. Discussions were also held on the accessibility of the electoral process by voters with disabilities. Members unanimously adopted the San Juan Declaration on the political rights for persons with disabilities.

The primary objective of the ACEO is to “promote cooperation and mutual assistance among electoral organizations in the Caribbean in the pursuit of democracy by processes that ensure free, fair and peaceful elections”. This is to be realized through networking, information exchange and training.

Second General Assembly

In keeping with goals of the ACEO, a proposed WORK PLAN was submitted to the Executive Board for the year April 1998 to March 1999. Activities outlined in the Plan included:

- Workshops on Registration and the Electoral Process
- Internet Access Project
- Compendium of Caribbean Election Law
- Preparation of a Newsletter
- Regional election exchange

Two Executive Board Meetings were held to further discuss the ACEO Work Plan abovementioned, as well as other activities. The ACEO newsletter called the ACEO Report was published in January 2001. A needs assessment via a questionnaire instrument was circulated to determine Hardware and Software needs for the Internet Access Project.

Two primary objectives of the Second General Assembly were the election of new Executive Board Members and identifying future activities. The following members were elected as Members of the Board:

1. Mr. Owen Estwick, Deputy Chairman of the Elections and Boundaries Commission of Barbados
2. Mrs. I. Myrtle Palacio, Chief Elections Officer, Elections and Boundaries Department, Belize
3. Mr. Gooool Boodoo, Chief Elections Officer, Guyana
4. Danville Walker, Director of Elections of Jamaica
5. Howard Fergus, Supervisor of Elections of Monsterrat

The members agreed to relocate the Secretariat to Barbados with some assistance from IFES, and identified the following activities for the year 2002:

- Continuation of the ACEO Newsletter

- Creation of an ACEO Website with election information and a regional electoral calendar
- Yearly Annual General Meeting
- Sharing of resources, legal information, strategies on voter registration and civic education

Other topical discussions included: the Role of Civil Society Organizations in Elections, Strategies to Produce an Accurate Voter Registry, and a Presentation on the Association of African Election Authorities (AAEA).

GOALS AND STRUCTURE

Goals

The Goals of the ACEO are:

- to strengthen the legal and constitutional basis for independent and impartial electoral organizations and administrators throughout the Caribbean
- to promote public confidence in the Caribbean through open and transparent electoral procedures
- to develop civic education programs and systems designed to motivate citizen involvement and electoral participation
- to develop simple and functional voter registration procedures which will encourage maximum voter participation, and promote the development of accurate and complete voter registries
- to develop professional election officials with high integrity, a strong sense of public service and a commitment to democracy
- to develop model training programs and manuals for poll workers, political parties, journalists, and observers
- to provide a forum for the exchange of experiences, information, technology and literature pertaining to elections among Caribbean election administrators
- to exchange views on methods of investigation and resolution of complaints and objections to election procedures and results
- to seek ways to facilitate the production and procurement of electoral equipment and materials
- to establish a Caribbean resource center for research and information
- to cooperate in the development of systems for conducting efficient but low-cost elections
- to promote the welfare of its members in the pursuit of their professional duties
- to facilitate an accessible voting environment for all citizens

Structure

The ACEO consists of three organs namely:

- The General Assembly
- The Executive Board
- The Secretariat

The General Assembly comprises of all members, and the Executive Board has five members who are elected by the General Assembly. The Chairperson of the Executive Board is chosen from

among its members. The Secretariat is accountable to the Executive Board and the Board is accountable to the General Assembly. Board members are elected every three years and can serve for a maximum of two terms. Should a vacancy arise, Board Members can appoint a full member of the ACEO to the Board until the next meeting of the General Assembly. An Executive Secretary, who has a voice but no vote, is appointed by the Board. In the absence of the Executive Secretary, the Chairperson may designate another member to perform the duties of the Executive Secretary. The International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) and the Organization of American States (OAS) are Co-Secretariats in the interim.

MEMBERSHIP AND FUNCTIONS

Membership

Members of the ACEO consist of; Full Members, Associate Members and Honorary Members. Full Members are electoral organizations of the Caribbean Community that are officially established as bodies responsible for electoral administration. Honorary Members are individuals who have distinguished themselves. These are not limited to the Caribbean and are selected by vote of the Full Members. Associate Members may be from one of three areas:

- Individuals from electoral organizations qualified for full membership—current, former election officers, commissioners
- Caribbean organizations—non-governmental and non-partisan that share the objects of the ACEO
- Electoral organizations—not qualified for full membership, but identify with the objects of the ACEO

Membership is sought through the Board or the General Assembly, as in the case of Honorary Members, via the Secretariat. Dues as determined by the General Assembly is \$500.00US per annum. This is presently the main source of funding for the Association.

Functions

The General Assembly meets once every three years and have a quorum of 50% plus one full member. Decisions made are by the majority votes of those present. The General Assembly considers issues and interests placed before the members, in particular:

- consider proposals or questions of common interest submitted by its members, the Executive Board or the Secretariat
- establish the policies and the program of work of the Association
- receive and consider the Executive Secretary's report on the work and the finances of the Association

The Executive Board meets once a year or at meetings convened by the chairperson or by three members and is responsible for:

- acting on any matter referred to it by the General Assembly and for making recommendations to the General Assembly in conformity with the present Charter
- preparing and submitting bylaws to the General Assembly for its review and approval
- considering proposals from members and the Secretariat regarding the implementation of the decisions of the General Assembly
- approving a budget for the Association
- determining control and reporting mechanisms in respect of the financial activity of the Association

- overseeing the work of the Secretariat
- acting on matters which need to be addressed between meetings of the General Assembly, and reporting periodically to the members
- performing any other functions arising from the present Charter and from the recommendations and decisions of the General Assembly

The Secretariat is responsible to:

- submit an annual report on the Association's activity and its financial condition to the Executive Board
- be responsible for the preparation and arrangements of meetings of the General Assembly and the Executive Board
- prepare recommendations concerning the work of the Association for consideration by the appropriate organs of the Association
- prepare the budget of the Association for submission to the Executive Board
- serve as the custodian of the Association's documents, including this Charter
- establish relations of cooperation, in accordance with decisions reached by the General Assembly and the Executive Board, with other regional and international electoral organizations or any other organizations which are concerned with electoral processes
- notify members of the dates of meetings of the General Assembly
- prepare minutes of the meetings of the Board
- prepare a report on each meeting of the General Assembly and submit same to the Members
- facilitate and encourage the cooperation of the members of the Association with each other

WHEREFORTH ACEO—LESSONS LEARNED

Surveying the Activities

The Executive Board has held two post-inauguration meetings so far. The first one in Florida on September 25, 1998 was deprived of a quorum due to the threat of hurricane Georges to the region. There were however, fruitful discussions focusing on funding for the organization and the related issue of membership dues. Payment of dues is important not just because of the inevitable administrative costs but it symbolizes commitment to the association. And this quality of commitment is necessary if donor agents are to take our projects and us seriously.

The Florida meeting provisionally agreed to the Caribbean Registry Initiative Project (CARI), which would embrace civil registries as well as voter registries. This gave recognition to the 'interdisciplinary' nature of elections and the need for supportive and ancillary studies and skills to enhance the competence of electoral organizations. An envisaged follow-up registration workshop would have exemplified the point but CARI has so far foundered on the familiar shoal of funding.

In pursuant of one of ACEO's mandates to centralize information and make it readily accessible, a decision taken was to complete the collection of Caribbean Election Laws initiated by IFES. These would be made available on the already existing internet page jointly maintained by the Organization of American States (OAS) and Georgetown University.

The 1999 Executive Board meeting in Washington, which, while having a quorum did not benefit from full attendance, gave further thought to programming. The Caribbean Registrar Initiative was again discussed and endorsed as well as the Internet Access project. Election monitoring received some consideration generally and a possible observation mission to Cuba specifically, but this was

not deemed an immediate priority. Preliminary work has been done by way of a survey for the Internet Access project. This meeting also had the laudable objective of having the members meet and make presentations to potential project donors. Ostensibly the exchanges with donor agents went well and hopes were justifiably positive. Therefore, there is a need to analyze and diagnose the apparent failure so far, so that projects and sponsorship work in concert with and in the interest of the goals of the organization.

The publication of the ACEO newsletter is one project that definitely got off the ground. Following final discussions at the Washington Board meeting, the first issue was published in November 1999 with a useful mix of articles on regional and international election matters and one, which presented an interesting perspective on Election Observation.

The Lessons

Having recapped the experiences, we can look forward to a more promising future, drawing on the lessons of the last two years.

- Outside funding has been a major implementational hurdle, so this area requires concerted and systematic effort on the part of the Board and the Secretariat. The skill of project writing and presentation is closely related to funding so ACEO needs to either develop these skills or have access to them. We have to market the goals of our organization and present it undoubtedly as a critical infrastructure for democratic governance. (The lesson of the Florida elections must not be lost on all of us).
- Allied to outside funding, we must aim at prompt payment of dues as a symbol of our internal seriousness. Donors will respond more readily to a serious organization.
- We need an executive board with the energy, enthusiasm and resources to provide the necessary co-ordination and leadership. Where the Chairman provided decisive leadership as in determining the agenda of the 1999 Washington Executive Board meeting, something useful resulted. The secretariat can execute, but the programmes must emanate from the deliberations of the Board.
- On the other hand, ACEO needs a more active membership that will supply the Executive with a mandate. The Chairman and the Executive should act and speak on behalf of a vibrant regional organization. This in itself can have a salutary effect on fund-raising efforts.
- With a more active membership, it may be necessary for the executive to report generally to members on an annual basis at least. The imperative of inter-General Assembly accountability could be a stimulus to purposeful activity.
- The Newsletter should be published on a regular basis. It is both a means of communication and a means of information exchange, which is a prime objective of ACEO.
- Perhaps we need to entrench the principle of prioritising activities within the total programme, which we collaboratively decide on. We need to put concerted effort into the most achievable ones in the early stages. We need to begin to establish a track-record of success.

- With the miracle of modern communication technology, no place is really far but the geographical location of the secretariat in the region should provide a greater sense of ownership to the members of the ACEO. This should be achieved without losing the very valuable support of IFES and OAS who played such a vital role not only in birthing the organization but in helping to keep it alive in its early struggles to become.

BEHIND THE SCENES WORK

The behind the scenes work of the joint secretariats - IFES and OAS needs to be factored. Both organizations played a pivotal role in ensuring the survival of the ACEO, as well as in taking programmatic initiatives. The continuity was critical because a number of persons and organizations were able to join ACEO. And it is with the guidance of the secretariat that the Chairman and Executive Board member Mr. Raymond Richards attended the Global Election Organization Conference in Ottawa Canada in 1999 and Myrtle Palacio in 2003. They were both exposed to international aid agencies and chairpersons of election administrator associations from around the world.

The ACEO has not only been kept alive but has experienced and even exhibited exciting possibilities of what might be achieved given the appropriate human and financial resources. Presently, the ACEO is dormant and the transfer of the Secretariat to the Caribbean did not materialise. About eight members met at a Conference in Mauritius in June 2002, and have reiterated their interest to move the organization forward. The method and scope of such a move is currently being investigated. On behalf of all members of the ACEO, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to IFES and OAS for holding our hands along the pathway. Thanks for your guidance and assistance.