Mitigating risk of violence during elections in an ecosystem with multi-stakeholder engagement

[00:00:18] **Speaker 1** Hello. My name is Eric Malcolm, and I'm happy to be here with you today. I'm an electoral assistance analyst working for the United Nations Development Program at the ESI, UNDP Joint Task Force on Electoral Systems based in Brussels. In today's session, I will build upon some of the previous sessions and introduce you to some of the dynamics that lead to violence during an electoral process. Also, looking at some of the activities that can help mitigate the risk of violence around elections contributing to an ecosystem with multi-stakeholder engagement. Election processes are ultimately exercises to determine political competition and to make collective decisions. As such, the stakes are considerable and tensions can be high. These tensions can spill over into election related violence. And for election practitioners in many countries, this concern warrants the utmost of attention. The information ecosystem is in many ways like a mirror reflecting and magnifying the societal, the political and the normative conditions in a particular country. The advent of the Internet has added a new dimension to traditional dynamics. It has created novel and evolving ways for citizens to engage with the news, with public figures, and with each other. Now, while this has fostered a new level of openness and connectivity, it has also removed some very important safeguards. New opportunities have thus opened to undermine the electoral process and to erode trust in institutions. Grievances can be amplified even with dubious foundations and channels have been created. This created for citizens and politicians to directly abuse one another. Now porous digits, which borders even allow foreign entities to stoke division around elections. For many years, a key track in the fight against election related violence was to improve election administration and to work around dispute resolution to build trust in the institutions and to reduce trigger points. However, if information promotion undermines these experts by inventing or inflating stories of technical failures or political bias, new measures are called for. Through to sustaining peace. During the election project, UNDP has embarked upon an exercise to identify and assess different types of activities implemented by different actors or consortium of actors to promote information integrity as a means to prevent and mitigate electoral violence both in the offline as well as the online sphere. We will discuss some of these later. No single entity can resolve the myriads of challenges. Certainly not in an action management body alone. It requires a multi-stakeholder approach and the ability to creatively craft solutions. There are choices and actions that can be taken by the various actors in an electoral process, including citizens, civil society, state actors, private sector platforms, traditional media, and perhaps most importantly, political figures. Together, they can build a strong information ecosystem to aid peaceful and credible elections. Having a diverse range of organizations working on the issue is important, but how they work together is absolutely key. Different models of partnerships are being developed. An action war rooms can provide joined up crisis response. Social media councils allow for coordination on advocacy. Information. Integrity. Coalitions such as the Georgian coalition. Bringing together government. Non-governmental actors, private sector, political parties and ordinary citizens to create effective tools for mapping, monitoring and countering disinformation. The types of coalitions and their composition should be guided by the strength of relationships, vested interests and the goals in each country. It goes without saying, but attention should be paid to ensure that the communities adequately reflect the communities in the particular country, especially those who might be the targets of marginalization or violence. I will now hand over to my colleague AJ, who will tell us more about the insights retrieved from the Sustaining Peace during Elections Project. What can be done to mitigate the risk of electoral violence? Thank you.

[00:05:48] **Speaker 2** Hello. My name's Ajay Patel, lead expert on the Information Integrity Workstream of the Sustaining Peace during Elections Project. Now a summary so the activities that can be employed to mitigate the risk of electoral related violence and in turn attempt to illustrate why we need a diversity of actors to be involved. First and foremost, environments where extreme polarization exists provide fertile ground for disinformation narratives. Polarized media is not necessarily the root of the problem, but rather a symptom of political polarization. Consequently, programs and activities are aimed at addressing the polarization of society a key, for example, grassroots initiatives, fostering communal interaction and dialog online and offline. Secondly, if it's accepted, the political actors are most likely to resist precipitate election related violence. It is appropriate to build a framework to help constrain the misuse of social media. Digital agreements or ceasefires can be used, and these may be brokered through local civil society organizations. The state may see fit to introduce a legal provisions some countries have found is necessary. However, there's often some apprehension about how these can be fashioned to also resist political misuse and ensure the primacy of human rights and express freedom of expression and provide for a secure and open Internet. As with any legislative reform around elections, broad consultations with the stakeholders are vital. The electoral management, body or other appropriate groups may attempt to convene voluntary a mandatory code of contacts to establish commitments and guardrails around the use of social media. These may cover candidates, political parties, campaign managers, media agents, supporters, but also engaged influencers or bloggers who are in a position to be supportive. Social media companies have a core responsibility and potentially have significant control over what is hosted on their sites. Many have assumed a content moderation role, as emphasized by previous speakers. Depending upon how a platform assesses, the risks are analyzed and they may determine the level of engagement and the investment to support information integrity. Monitoring of a media being by civil society or by the government can help to identify interference in the election process and ensure that everyone sticking to the rules. Fact checking is a foundational activity and cooperation between media entities as well. Society has had great results. However, the limitations underline the need to bring together actors working on these two common platforms to enhance, reach and foster cooperation. In addition, building partnerships with the fact checkers and journalists serves the purpose of increasing the use and spread of verified information. Moreover, fact checking initiatives are best complemented by other activities of build up the resilience of the public to information pollution before they're exposed. Media literacy, voter education information are key as raised by previous speakers. This requires efforts from a range of actors, and their efforts will be more impactful. Would affect coordination. MPAs often work with CSOs in the media to multiply their own for their own voter information campaigns. Targeted debunking has been found to be an especially effective mechanism for proactively combating information pollution by preparing citizens to the types of narratives they may later face. It helps prevent information from being shared rather than requiring a reactive response. For this, the message matters. In some cases, civil society or grassroots organizations, we may thereby be best placed to convey messages reflecting on the above. Civil society has an important role to play where there is skepticism as to whether the state or companies are best suited to combat information pollution. For example, where there are fears about the authorities use of regulations that are in ends or concerns, the platforms may not be incentivized to combat information pollution. We can see society initiatives have a core contribution to make. Having highlighted a number of actions and measures that can be taken and could or should be driven by different actors depending upon their mandates, trust and level of capacity is clear that no single measure is sufficient and no single actor can do all these roles. Further, the various responses need to be implemented, some as heinously and and in a coordinated manner. Thank you very much.