Module 2: Presentation by Dr. Roselyn Akombe

[00:00:18] **Speaker 1** My name is Roslyn Acoma. I UNDP's work on governance and peacebuilding in Africa. Based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I am also a former commissioner with the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission of Kenya. I'm really pleased to be part of these very important successes and to be part of this second model, where we are looking at issues of misinformation, disinformation and their impact on elections. I think what we are seeing is more that because of the digital technologies, because of the expansion of social media, we are seeing that this can really becoming really intense and the volume is very high at very, very quick speeds. And so, you know, doing this means then that's the kind of investment we have to make in the issues of addressing misinformation and disinformation. Manipulation of information online is really important. I'm going to focus really or maybe share price one. What we see is that the level of misinformation, disinformation, manipulation of information has really increased exponentially in the last ten years or so in Africa. Which means that election management holds a lot of election management is what courts have been caught unprepared because these are unconventional ways in issues of undermining the legitimacy of elections are being done because in the past you had incidents of deliberate recklessness to really compromise the integrity of the elections or undermine the things that are organizing the elections. But it was done mostly using traditional media and election management bodies who are prepared in how they handle the media. I look at my example working at the Independent Electoral Commission of Kenya at the time, we were very well prepared on how we were going to address issues of misinformation and disinformation and the delegitimization of the commission based on traditional media. We had meetings and discussions with it because we had appearances in professional media where we would be able to explain what we were doing and address some of the concerns and the legitimacy of the election management body. But then came Cambridge Analytica with its social media abroad, with the videos that it was setting up and support for some of the political actors with this sort of manipulation of information, with kind of, you know, videos that they were putting out that were making it very difficult for us to to respond to the commission quickly, because we relied, again, more on the political approaches that have been tried and tested over time, which is the traditional media approach. Wion And the political players and the young people who are mostly using social media for which many of us, including myself, I do not even have a commission. I did not have any social media accounts. I didn't have. I didn't have an account pretty much. I have a Facebook account, thank God. That wasn't because I wouldn't have known how to use it, but it was at a time when you you're finding yourself enough to determine which manipulated videos are being played of you apparently being in a meeting with police for lack of actually not being there. And it goes viral. And our approach even at that time was issued statements that would lag over time or calling press conferences to respond to some of those things. And so that preparedness is one area that one point that I really wanted to stress and that for that that what we see is a trend in which these issues continued in place. And so the level of preparedness of electoral commission is important. And we are seeing this in this country that we've got that we are getting more and more requests from election management bodies to look at issues of social media, to look at how prepared they need to be and address the issues of misinformation, manipulation of information, online violence that goes on and undermines really the electoral process. And so that is one area that is really important. That is that that is a key focus also of other key, because we recognize that that means and that election management bodies are not necessarily prepared for that from what country we have been. Sierra Leone know when you look at the impact of social media, you're looking at Zimbabwe. We have a country in Africa that is in the north west of the south. The impact is really huge and the level of preparedness that is required for

election management is important. I think secondly, in addition to preparedness is the second important point is response. You know, how do you then respond to these issues? Prepared means understanding what is going on. Being able to monitor really what we want and what is it in a different way. You're monitoring the media, monitoring what's going on with the media in many ways, not just what you see on Facebook, but to WhatsApp, which is really the main way in which in many African countries, misinformation, disinformation and his speech have played that role. Go back to the second point of response, and this is one of the things that we are seeing more and more requests from the country offices, the country offices that Australia has been put on how to get paid and how to also be able to respond. That is why we are working with the IEC, the Commission, South Africa and the African Union on social media guidelines, support election management bodies and guide them in terms of the critical skills that are required to be able to respond to some of these things. I think the other point I would like to make is that this approach that we have seen in many of the countries that I've had the privilege and honor visits in the last one and a half years, we are seeing that there is a different shifted approach that in many cases a lot of the only online only accepts women. I mean, I have been myself as a commissioner where you will find a lot of online abuse, the place language that is used that is really meant to push off from being part of the conversations that are completely online and in many countries. I was in Tanzania and long ago where we were hearing from women politicians telling us that they are moving away from social media so that they can avoid the emotional trauma of really being abused online so that things and that is really an issue because what it does is that it takes away the women from from political participation. So we, the voice of women run could use them because we are seeing more and more that social media is being used to galvanize supporters to be able to speak for us, to be able to speak to the supporters. And so when more and more women are being kept off social media, it means that they are losing opportunities to be able to influence default, to be able to influence and speak with them without with their supporters. I think the third point I would like to make is around also the impact on on young people. I have been to several countries where young people feel victimized for their voices and the positions that they have. And so they moved away from these online space and and really not doing political work online because they feel targeted. And so what does that mean? That the opportunity, the young people as we are, have organized, we have seen in the Columbia, as we have seen in the case of Kenya, where young people have been able to organize online because of The Gambia, where young people have been able to organize online and be a force to reckon with that. You know, when you find young people in countries like Tanzania moving away from politics, focusing on sport because they feel awful pain, then it has an impact on really what role that they can play. And this is really important because if young people, 60% of the population in Africa feel that they cannot continue participating in political processes because of being against it, then it undermines our democracy, it undermines elections. It undermines the African Union, not only on governance, elections in tem and democracy, and the importance that we bring back the young people in countries where they feel that they're being targeted online and have moved up to the fourth points. The fourth point that I like to make is on the role of the diaspora, the role of the diaspora in really creating narratives sometimes because you can be able to see things from the front where they that are difficult maybe to see when you are in the country is really, really useful when you think about democratic space. But we've also seen that in other cases they play an aggressive role whereby they are able to put all of these narratives that end up being viral that might is in fact misinformation and disinformation, as we saw in the cases of Ethiopians and similar cases where they are able to spread disinformation, they spread misinformation, but they are not within the confines or they are not within the legal authority of of governments in Africa. And so they are not able to quote the governments and the bodies are not able to address

some of these issues because they are not within the jurisdiction. But important to stress that any action that is done in in any case has to ensure that. The protection of one rights, the freedoms of speech, the freedoms of observation are not undermined in any way. I think it is important to keep stressing the issues of access to reminds us that even when we speak about technologies and implications and because of technologies, we also have to reckon with the fact that we have very many others. What is advantage because of lack of access is women end up being really disproportionately disproportionately affected in this way. Let me conclude by looking at what is if we can address issues of manipulation of information. What is it that we can address issues of misinformation and disinformation? I actually don't believe that is one solution. We think it's important to have a more active form, a multi-stakeholder approach to it. That includes the work we are doing on ensuring that the management bodies are prepared to be able to address issues of social media, issues of misinformation, disinformation that can leave voter education is include misinformation and disinformation so that people know that not everything that we see on WhatsApp is real that up. The fact that you have received a message from a cousin of yours on WhatsApp does not mean that that that is a fact. That is true. And that you can be manipulated as they were manipulated in my case, and many times as I commission my way would look locals though I will do things that are not political. When I was actually at the boardroom, the commission had the meetings and so that's kind of what I do. You are aware of how politicians or how how businesses or how various actors are using your messages to really inform and also misinform is really important. I think the fourth is around with reflection, with the third way in which we can address issues about legislation again, legislation that still protects the rights of people, that is, to protect the freedom and human rights for all individuals. And I think lastly is really the consciousness raising, the question of companies seeing how their involvement and engagement, making money out of misinformation, disinformation virtually undermines our democracy, how eventually all this undermines the old business model. And so working with the stakeholders and raising awareness. We have seen Facebook respond as a company, respond to some of the things we have seen, addressed some of the ways in which the system because it continues to allow for addressing this. I think there is much more that, you know, mode where media such as WhatsApp, I think there's more that can be done wrong with some of the manipulations and in bringing down some of the content that we have seen. But I think that multi-stakeholder approach stuff, multipronged approach is what we will need if we are for a democracy, if we are to protect the integrity of elections, and if we are to make sure that elections and trust in the election remains because without trust in elections, without best in our democracy, then the options do not look very good. Thank you very much.