

# LESSONS FROM NAMFREL AND GONG

No. 6

**Sustaining the Fight for Democracy:  
Lessons from Citizen Election Monitoring  
Organizations Around the World**

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*This paper is part of the series **Sustaining the Fight for Democracy: Lessons from Citizen Election Monitoring<sup>1</sup> Organizations around the World**. This research was conducted by the National Democratic Institute’s Elections and Political Processes Team as part of their support to citizen election observation and the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM).*

*The series highlights trends, best practices, and common challenges faced by citizen election monitoring organizations as they sustain and fortify democracy in their countries. Findings in this study are based on interviews conducted with 19 citizen monitoring organizations around the world. This set of case studies is based on interviews with two long-standing organizations: NAMFREL, a citizen election group in the Philippines founded in 1983, and Gong, a citizen election group from Croatia founded in 1997. NDI would like to express its thanks to all participants in this research for sharing their experience, challenges, and wisdom.*

To learn more about different trends in sustainability, see the other papers in this series, including: [Trends in Strategic Approaches](#); [Trends in Internal Governance and Direction](#); [Trends in Responsiveness and Agility](#); [Trends in Fundraising and Sustainability](#); and [Trends in Alternative Funding](#).

## **Introduction**

Around the world, citizens are gathering together to form nonpartisan election organizations to make elections more inclusive, transparent and accountable and to build a stronger democracy in their countries. Given the nature of this work, citizen election groups face particular challenges in their long term organizational sustainability and in the ultimate impact of their work. This paired case study features two long-standing election monitoring organizations – the National Citizens Movement for Free and Fair Elections (NAMFREL) of the Philippines, and Gong of Croatia – and shares their reflections on the evolution of their organizations, their long-term role in the democratic path of their countries, and the sustainability lessons they learned along the way.

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1. NDI uses monitor and observer synonymously. We prefer the term monitor for citizen organizations reflecting their inherent right to scrutinize their own elections.

## *National Citizens Movement for Free and Fair Elections (NAMFREL)*

Philippines - Founded in 1983

### *What is the goal of NAMFREL and how has it evolved over time?*

NAMFREL was founded in an effort to reclaim citizen engagement and confidence in elections after two decades of rule by Ferdinand Marcos. Their goal was to ensure honest and fair elections and build public confidence in elections through observation. In 1986, NAMFREL conducted the world's first Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT),<sup>2</sup> demonstrating election fraud and showing that Marcos had, in fact, lost the election. After the fall of the Marcos regime and with the new political opening, NAMFREL saw an opportunity to rebuild citizen engagement in the process through voter education, engaging in local governance, and mobilizing citizen volunteers.

NAMFREL continues its work to monitor elections, but shifted its focus as the electoral process changed. In 2010, the Philippines adopted electronic voting, rendering the counting process unobservable. After decades of conducting PRVTs, NAMFREL shifted their oversight of tabulation processes to conduct post-election audits, while they continue to advocate for a more transparent process.

Over time, NAMFREL also expanded its work beyond the immediate election process to look not only at how politicians were elected, but how those elected actually governed. NAMFREL monitors governance processes, like the distribution of texts and medicine. Due to concerns about corruption, they also monitor budget expenditures, like the use of infrastructure funds. NAMFREL's local chapters organize directly to engage and observe processes important to their region and their volunteers.

### *How has NAMFREL contributed to the democratic path of the Philippines?*

NAMFREL's mobilization of 500,000 citizens to guard the electoral count in 1986 directly contributed to the Philippines's democratic breakthrough. Through that

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2. Visit [ndi.org/prvt](http://ndi.org/prvt) for more information on the PRVT methodology for election day.

NAMFREL's mobilization of 500,000 citizens to guard the electoral count in 1986 directly contributed to the Philippines's democratic breakthrough. Through that action, NAMFREL demonstrated that citizen involvement and engagement can ensure and sustain democracy. Through decades of work, they have learned there is no 'quick fix' or short cut toward sustaining democracy; the only way to do so is citizen engagement, in elections and other democratic institutions.

At the same time, NAMFREL said they should have invested even more in rebuilding the institutions that were weakened during decades of dictatorship by promoting more citizen engagement and accountability in those democratic institutions.

### *What are key sustainability lessons NAMFREL has learned along the way?*

**Drawing from citizens' aspirations to guide the work:** NAMFREL has learned the importance of retaining a close link to citizens and involving them in program strategies, rather than unilaterally determining program priorities. One key to NAMFREL's success is their empowerment of local chapters. Local chapters self-organize around local issues most relevant to their communities and their volunteers – whether it is peace talks or development projects. At the same time, NAMFREL's national body facilitates support, training and government accreditation, while local chapters retain close links to citizens around the country. This balance has allowed NAMFREL to continue, not just as an election monitoring organization, but as a community empowerment and citizen accountability organization.

**Growing to the next generation:** NAMFREL recognizes the value of expanding the movement and the mobilization of citizens to new generations. While most of NAMFREL's volunteers are the same they had in 1986, they acknowledge the need to work further to build the demand and desire to safeguard elections and democratic processes with younger generations.

**Being responsive to remain relevant:** NAMFREL's experience has shown that it is important to respond to the trigger or conditions in the country and craft an organization's role accordingly. Over the past four decades, NAMFREL has endured a number of different conditions and environments, adjusting throughout. In the present day, NAMFREL's role remains relevant as problems in elections and governance continue and the need for citizens to hold their government accountable remains.

## Gong

Croatia - Founded in 1997

### *What is the goal of Gong and how has it evolved over time?*

Gong was originally founded to ensure credible elections through citizen oversight. At the time of its founding, Croatia was coming out of a period of war and closed democratic space, where citizen rights were limited and electoral processes were politically captured. Nonpartisan citizen election observation was not legally permitted, so much of Gong's initial work involved an advocacy campaign to win the right of independent, nonpartisan citizen observation. Starting in 2000, Gong deployed observers around the country and conducted their first PRVT.

Overtime, as Croatia's election processes grew stronger (with Croatia ultimately joining the European Union), Gong shifted focus to other pillars of democracy, including anti-corruption and good governance, democratic culture and media freedom, and civil society strengthening.<sup>3</sup> Presently, Gong remains active in elections, including advocating for electoral reforms and innovations and providing citizens with information and assistance. However, Gong no longer deploys observers to polling stations – in part due to a lack of funding support for observation.

### *How does Gong contribute to the democratic path of Croatia?*

Throughout two decades of work, Gong made significant strides in broadening transparency and citizen oversight in Croatia. After establishing the right to observe elections, Gong initially expanded their focus to build other foundational transparency pillars in the country. That included strengthening transparency among political parties and successfully advocating for strong political financing laws. They also successfully advocated for broader transparency measures, including a Right to Information law. Gong also saw progress in civic education, working beyond voter information to broader themes related to democratic culture and citizen engagement. This work built informed and educated citizens ready to participate fully in the country's democracy.

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3. In 2018, Gong officially changed its name to reflect its new strategic focus beyond elections. Originally, GONG was an acronym that stood for “Gradjani Organizirano Nagledaju Glasanje,” or Citizens Organized to Observe Elections. As GONG moved beyond elections, they dropped the acronym and changed to the name ‘Gong’ to reflect their broader mission.

Looking back, Gong believes they could have had additional impact working at a sub-national level. Most of Gong's advocacy and civic education work was focused at the national level. Upon reflection, they see they could have had a better impact on local government around the country and build stronger democratic practices and foundations at a decentralized level.

### *What are key sustainability lessons Gong has learned along the way?*

**Build democratic culture alongside institutions.** Gong notes that the defense of liberal democracy requires not just institution building (including elections), but broader work to fortify democratic mindsets among the public. Based on Gong's experience, laws, even good ones, are not sufficient to hold democracies together; strong watch-dogs and resilient democratic culture are equally as important. Gong now works along those two pillars of institutions and culture to guard democracy in Croatia.

**Create a strong organizational reputation, culture and foundation.** Looking back, Gong attributes much of its past and current success to the organization's long history of dedicated staff that built a strong reputation and internal culture. Gong's early achievements and national and transnational networks of allies provided a basis from which to build their future work.

**Relying on project-based funding is difficult.** Gong noted the challenge to working with project-based funding, especially that it produces fatigue and burnout within organizations. Project-based funding forces many organizations to the brink of existence, without providing for organizational strengthening, or for tool development or maintenance. Most importantly, it doesn't allow for longer-term work needed to achieve positive social change. For Gong, after a shift to institutional funding, they have been able to more effectively play a watch-dog role and better fortify the organization.