

A Field Guide for Domestic Election  
Monitoring Groups in the  
Southern African Development Community

# REPORTING OBSERVATION FINDINGS




## **REPORTING OBSERVATION FINDINGS**

This field guide is designed as an easy-reference tool for domestic non-partisan election observers. Field guides are intended to complement other reference tools available on domestic election observation, and in particular the NDI Handbooks, *How Domestic Organizations Monitor Elections: An A to Z Guide* and *The Quick Count and Election Observation*. These handbooks and other materials are available on the NDI website: [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org).

The “Reporting Observation Findings” field guide explains how to effectively communicate the findings of your observation effort to the public.

This field guide was inspired by the proceedings of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Regional Election Monitoring Workshop, “Recruitment and Training of Election Observers and Drafting of Election Statements” held October 30 - November 1, 2007 in Lusaka, Zambia. The 15 domestic observer groups represented at the meeting lent their ideas, expertise and enthusiasm, which are the basis for this field guides.



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## **1. Public Information Strategy**

Reporting accurate findings in a timely manner is one of the key indicators of a successful observation effort. Without effective reporting, an observer group does not meet its commitment to provide an impartial assessment of the election process to the public. Only by providing this critical information does a group meet its responsibility to citizens.

When planning your observation effort, it is important to consider your public information strategy. In particular, how will your group communicate its findings to the outside world? Designing a public information strategy from the beginning will help to ensure that your group has a consistent approach for reporting throughout its project activities. Here are some key issues to consider:

### **Define your audience**

Who is your main audience for reporting? Are you most interested in communicating with citizens, or are you targeting government officials and policymakers in an advocacy effort? Or both? The structure of a statement depends on its intended audience - it should be aimed at the stakeholders who the group would like to influence.

### **Assign a Public Information Officer(s)**

Who in your organization will be responsible for reporting to the public? It is good practice to appoint a Public Information Officer to oversee the reporting process, as well as any contacts with the media.



### **Issue Media Guidelines**

The information your group collects is politically sensitive, and should be treated carefully by all those involved. If information is leaked to the public or taken out of context, it could have negative implications for your group and possibly for the political situation. Media Guidelines should be issued to all employees and volunteers, explaining how sensitive information should be treated and who is designated to talk to the media.

### **Decide on timing and frequency of reports**

The timing and frequency of reporting will depend on your group's objectives, what activities you conduct and the political context of the country. While you should define in approximate terms when and how often you expect to make public reports, this may change during the course of observation due to external circumstances.

### **Organize a drafting committee**

While the Public Information Officer is responsible for overseeing public information, including reporting, that person will not be able to write all the reports. For the actual drafting of reports, you might organize a report-writing committee, and assign tasks within the committee for the collection and analysis of data, as well as writing different segments of the reports.

## 2. Data Collection System

The quality and accuracy of your reporting relies on the data that is collected by observers around the country. While data collection is often associated with Election Day observation, it is just as necessary for pre-election observation and reporting. It is important to have a clear system in place for the collection of data that quickly and accurately transmits information to the central office. The design of your system will have to take many factors into account including the size of the country, quality of infrastructure and number of observers, etc. Building and maintaining a system will be one of the main challenges of your observation effort and an indicator of the efficiency of your organization. What are the **necessary components** of an effective data collection system?

### **Clear nationwide structure**

A clear structure is necessary so that every observer knows to whom they are reporting. Often domestic observer groups build a hierarchical reporting structure for the country so that observers report to regional coordinators, who report to the central office. In other cases, mobile teams circulate to collect information from observers on Election Day.

### **Simple data collection tools**

Checklists are typically used to collect information from observers on Election Day, and sometimes for pre-election observation. Checklists should be as concise and simple to use as possible, so that information is accurately recorded. Checklists may be collected directly or observers may collate information and transmit it by phone or other means.

### **Motivated volunteers**

Motivated observers are more likely to submit information quickly and accurately, despite any obstacles. Consider creative ways to provide incentives for your observers and to show gratitude for their efforts.

### **Proper training**

Efficient data collection depends on well-trained observers, who know how to accurately record their direct observations, how to verify information and how to quickly transmit data.

### **Critical incident reporting**

A data collection system should allow for any information of a critical nature to be reported immediately by observers. A critical incident form may be provided, which is immediately transmitted to the central office. A special phone number should also be designated for this purpose.

### **Plan B**

A back-up plan should always be in place, particularly for data collection in remote areas or if adverse security or weather conditions are expected.



#### ***Consider how to apply technology***

Technology can help information to travel faster and may be useful as part of the data collection system. Devices such as cell phones, portable or hand-held computers, satellite phones and fax machines have been used by domestic observer groups around the world to quickly transmit information. However, other factors need to be considered: What is the cost? Are there implications for data security? How reliable is the system? Is there a back-up system? Will additional training be necessary? Will the scope for human error be increased or reduced?

### **3. Types of Statements**

Most observer groups release several different statements and reports over the course of their observation effort. Generally statements focus on a particular phase of the election process, or on the election process as a whole. The following are the most common types of election statements and reports:

#### **Opening statement**

It is good practice to release an initial statement or press release at the beginning of your activities to introduce the election observation project and publicly explain your objectives to the public and the media. This can be a rather brief document.

#### **Pre-election statement**

If your group is conducting observation of pre-election processes (e.g. voter registration, nomination of election commissions, candidate registration, campaign events, etc.), then you will need to report those findings. A report can be issued on each phase of the process that is monitored, or pre-election reports can be issued on a periodic basis, for instance every two weeks. If your group is conducting media monitoring, those findings can also be reported separately on a periodic basis.

#### **Serious incident reports**

Should a serious or violent incident occur, either during the election campaign or on Election Day, you should report on it in order to provide impartial information about what happened. Your group might also be able to call for next steps such as investigation by the authorities or mediation between political parties.



### **Preliminary statement**

Typically observer groups release their overall initial findings Election Day in a preliminary statement. This statement contains findings on aspects of the pre-election period as well as an initial assessment of the conduct of voting and counting on Election Day. Because preliminary statements often are released when the counting and tabulation process is still ongoing, it is important to stress that the findings are preliminary in nature, and that you continue to monitor post-election developments.

### **Interim report**

Should events following Election Day need to be reported, such as an update on the counting and tabulation process, or the resolution of complaints and appeals, an interim report can be released. Depending on the nature of post-election events, such a report may change the initial assessment of the elections.

### **Final report**

Following the official announcement of results and the resolution of complaints and appeals, an observer group should issue their comprehensive findings in a final report. The final report should also include recommendations on how the election process can be improved in the future.



#### ***Make a Press Release***

To get the attention of media it is a good idea to accompany reports with a one-page press release. This short summary of findings can highlight the most important points for journalists and can be sent directly to them.

#### 4. Timing of Statements

When to release statements is an important factor to consider. In general, statements should be released as soon as reliable information is available, to inform the public as soon as possible and avoid the release of “old news”.

Here are some guidelines on timing of statements:

- Ü Release statements at **every stage** of the election process.
- Ü Don't delay the post-election statement – the **public is waiting!** Preliminary statements are typically released one or two days following Election Day.
- Ü Your statement will have greater impact if you speak **before international observers.**
- Ü Preliminary statements can be released **prior to official results** (unless prohibited by law).
- Ü Post-election **political developments** may also affect when statements are released.
- Ü Interim reports issued after elections may play an important role in the resolution of **post-election disputes.**
- Ü **Final reports** should be released no later than 2-3 months following Election Day, to avoid election stakeholders losing interest.


## 5. Main Elements of Statements

The format of an election statement or final report will depend to a degree on the context and conduct of the election observed. At the same time, there are certain elements that are considered standard and should generally appear in all election statements. In some cases certain elements may be combined. Here are the main elements in order:

- Ü Executive Summary
- Ü Background
- Ü Introduction
- Ü Observations
- Ü Analysis of Observations
- Ü Conclusions
- Ü Recommendations

The **Executive Summary** catches interest of decision-makers, and should give a concise overview of findings and conclusions, including an overall assessment of the election process. This section should be able to stand alone, as some people, including those in your target audience, may not take the time to read the entire document. All points in the summary should appear in the text of the statement. It may be useful to organize the summary using bullet points. If possible, keep the summary to one page.

The **Background** section should include brief information on the observer group and its methodology for observation. Be sure to mention whether you have observed elections in the past, when you began your activities for the current election, how many polling stations you covered on Election Day and any other information you feel is relevant for the reader. This should only be one or two paragraphs.




The **Introduction** presents the topic to the reader. It should give basic information on the election being observed and explain its significance. If the election is the result of a political event such as a consultation process or is the first post-conflict election, then mention those issues. The introduction can be quite brief.

The **Observations** will form the main body of the statement. What were the findings of your observers in the field during the course of the election period? Be as concise as possible, but give enough detailed facts to support your analysis and conclusions. You may, for instance, want to name the districts where certain problems or irregularities were observed. It may be useful to organize this section by issue area under sub-headings such as:

- Legal Framework
- Election Administration
- Campaign
- Media
- Complaints and Appeals
- Election Day

The **Analysis of Observations** section gives a critical assessment of the observations and the impact that any problems or issues might have had on the integrity of the election process. This can be a separate section or included in the “Observations” section, particularly if there are sub-headings.

The **Conclusions** section should state your group’s overall assessment of the election process, based on the findings contained in “Observations” and “Analysis of Observations”. Did the elections meet regional and international standards? Were they genuinely democratic and competitive? Was a level playing field ensured for all




stakeholders? Could all eligible voters participate? Your main conclusion should also appear in the Executive Summary.

**Recommendations** to all electoral actors on how the election process can be improved in the future are generally included in the final report. However if an election ends in controversy or a tense situation it may be good to issue short-term recommendations for next steps that those involved may wish to consider.

## 6. Tips for Good Statement Writing

“Do’s:”

- Ü Statements should be **brief**, but should contain necessary **facts** to support conclusions.
- Ü Pay attention to **tone and language**. Be diplomatic in your presentation.
- Ü **Quantify** your findings. Be specific about how many cases or in how many districts a violation was observed. Was this an anomaly or a general pattern? Was it isolated to a particular region, or observed across the country?
- Ü Highlight **positive aspects** and best practices from the election process.
- Ü Reference to **international and regional standards** make statements stronger.
- Ü **Recommendations** can initially be made in a preliminary statement, and elaborated in the final report.
- Ü **Next steps** of the observer group should be announced in the report.



“Don’ts”:

- Ü Do not **exaggerate** - let findings speak for themselves
- Ü Avoid **inflammatory language**, it may undercut your credibility and could incite tensions.
- Ü Do not include any **hearsay** – all findings must be observed and verified by the observer group.
- Ü Avoid presenting observations and conclusions in a manner that could be understood as **biased or unbalanced**. Your credibility rests on objective reporting.
- Ü Do not **jump to conclusions** – ensure that all your assessments and conclusions are based on observed findings and give detailed examples when relevant.
- Ü Do not **distort** statistics. When using statistics in reports, make sure that you are presenting them in a straightforward manner that does not mislead the reader.

## 7. Regional and International Standards

### Why do we need international standards?

An observer group should state clearly what measurement stick it is using to assess an election, so that the public understands the basis for the assessment. While it is important to assess the degree to which an election follows the rules of the country, this only gives one level of analysis, since a country's rules may also be flawed. In order to understand the full picture of an election, it is necessary to consider it also in the context of regional and international standards, particularly those human rights documents that the country has signed and committed to follow. Referring to regional and international standards will strengthen your statement and give credibility to your findings.



### *Free And Fair?*

It is common to hear elections described by media, government officials and others as “free and fair” or “not free and fair.” However, election observation professionals generally agree that this language, meant to convey that elections were free from intimidation, violence and fraud, may not be specific enough to describe the realities of modern elections. It may be more accurate to describe an election as “genuinely democratic” or “undemocratic” and then give specific examples of why it was or was not democratic (e.g. an uneven playing field for candidates, media bias, lack of transparency during the counting and tabulation, etc).

### Universal Declaration

The starting point for election observation is the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document recognized for the first time that the will of the



people should determine who governs. It goes on to say that this should be expressed in periodic and general elections by universal and equal suffrage and through a secret vote (Article 21). These principles set out the basic criteria (or “norms”) against which an election can be judged as genuinely democratic. The Universal Declaration is binding on all UN member states.

### **Other regional and international Standards**

Regional and international organizations have also agreed treaties and other documents outlining standards for elections that should be met by their member states. However, all of these standards derive from the basic principles in the Universal Declaration. Particularly relevant for the Southern African context are the *SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections*. This document can be found online at: [www.sadc.int](http://www.sadc.int).



### **Reference Regional and International Standards**

For a comprehensive set of standards please refer to [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org) or [www.eisa.org.za](http://www.eisa.org.za).

## 8. Getting Your Message Out

Once your statement is written, what should you do with it? With all of the effort that goes into the production of the reports, it is important that they are widely disseminated and read. One of the most effective ways to communicate your findings is through the media.

### Media relations

The time when an observer group has the most relevant information for the media is likely to be immediately after Election Day when the preliminary statement is issued. But don't wait until then to start making media contacts! As part of your group's public information strategy, you should seek to have ongoing contacts with various media outlets, through regular press conferences, briefings and interviews. This serves a dual purpose – you can raise the public profile of your group and its activities prior to Election Day through media appearances and, at the same time, the media outlets will get to know your group, appreciate the value of your work and be ready to help publicize your post-election findings.



### ***Get Their Attention***

Journalists are looking for newsworthy stories to report on. Before having a press conference, consider how your information can be presented in an interesting way that will catch the attention of the media and highlight the most significant findings.



## **Other ways to share findings**

There are many other ways to share your findings – here are a few:

- Ü Discuss findings with the election administration.
- Ü Meet with new parliamentarians after the elections and share your findings.
- Ü Buy advertising space in a newspaper to publish the statement.
- Ü Place the statement on as many websites as possible.
- Ü Use community networks to target rural communities.
- Ü Translate the statement into local languages.
- Ü Mainstream election recommendations into other civil society activities.

## **Follow-up**

Follow-up is the process of ensuring that observer recommendations are implemented following the elections and prior to future elections. Your group's election findings can become the basis of a long-term advocacy effort to improve the legal framework and administrative arrangements for the next elections. At the same time, your group may be able to offer its expertise as a partner with the election administration and lawmakers in the reform process. A good starting point is to conduct a post-election roundtable with a broad range of election stakeholders several months after the elections to highlight your findings and recommendations.

The **SADC Election Support Network (SADC-ESN)** is a loose network of civic organizations from across southern Africa engaged in domestic election monitoring; member groups exist in all 14 SADC countries. Beyond election monitoring, these groups also advocate for electoral reforms, conduct civic and voter education, and observe elections as a body in all SADC countries.

The **National Democratic Institute (NDI)** is a nonprofit organization established in 1983 working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI has worked to form and develop nonpartisan domestic election monitoring groups in more than 60 countries and has helped to develop regional associations of monitors in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East.

The **Electoral Institute of South Africa (EISA)** is a nonprofit organization established in 1996 focusing on promoting credible elections, participatory democracy, human rights culture, and the strengthening of governance institutions for the consolidation of democracy in Africa. EISA serves as the secretariat of SADC-ESN.

