

Developing Observation Forms & Manuals

A Field Guide for Election Monitoring Groups



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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, in particular the NDI handbooks:

- ✓ How Domestic Organizations Monitor Elections: An A to Z Guide
- ✓ The Quick Count and Election Observation
- ✓ Building Confidence in the Voter Registration Process
- ✓ Media Monitoring to Promote Democratic Elections
- ✓ Promoting Legal Frameworks for Democratic Elections
- ✓ Monitoring Electronic Technologies in Electoral Processes

These handbooks and other materials are available on the NDI website: www.ndi.org

The Developing Observation Forms & Manuals field guide deals with how to develop effective observation forms and manuals to guide observers and collect useful data.

This field guide is part of an ongoing series of guides to facilitate election observation efforts by domestic monitoring groups in the Middle East and North Africa.

Table of Contents

- 1. Understanding Observation Forms**
- 2. Developing Observation Forms**
- 3. Election Day Checklists**
- 4. Critical Incident Forms**
- 5. Avoiding Common Mistakes**
- 6. Testing Your Questions**
- 7. Developing Observer Manuals**
- 8. Developing Trainer & Supervisor Manuals**

1. Understanding Observation Forms

Observation forms are developed to enable an election observer group to capture raw data about an election process in a systematic manner. Forms guide your observers as they collect the data that your group needs to perform analysis and issue statements on the quality of the election process.

Since no two election processes are the same, there is no such thing as a universal observation form. For each election process, a group must develop observation forms specific to the election it is observing, in order to do the following:

- ✓ Evaluate the extent to which established election procedures are followed
- ✓ Identify weaknesses that may affect the integrity of the election process

For each element of the process that your group is observing, you develop observation forms to facilitate data collection. Elements for which you would create forms may include:

- ✓ Voter Registration
- ✓ Candidate Nomination
- ✓ Campaign Period
- ✓ Election Day
- ✓ Vote Tabulation
- ✓ Media Coverage
- ✓ Complaints & Appeals

Developing good observation forms requires technical knowledge, sound judgment, and due diligence. Prior to

developing your observation forms, your group must have an understanding of the official election procedures, potential shortcomings, and historic weaknesses in the process. You should take the following steps before you begin drafting:

Assign a Drafting Team

A core team of key individuals within your group should be responsible for developing observation forms. You should ensure that individuals who possess technical knowledge of the election procedures as well as those responsible for training observers and collecting, analyzing and presenting observer findings are involved in the process.

Study the Election Procedures

Whether your group is observing Election Day, voter registration, campaigning, or any other component,, it is important that you understand the election process. Your observation forms should be developed to evaluate the process vis-à-vis the official procedures established by election authorities.

Identify Areas of Concern

There are hundreds of questions you could ask on an observation form, but it is neither possible nor practical to ask every question and have useful and timely data. Your list of issues should be narrowed down to those that are most relevant to your group's objectives and that are of most concern to political contestants and the public.

Review Previous Election Statements

You should consider what problems could occur based on your knowledge of the electoral context. If your group has

observed previous elections, it is useful to review your statements to see what problems have previously arisen.

2. Developing Observation Forms

Given all the aspects that make up an election process, there are many questions for which you could ask observers to collect data. However, it is neither possible nor practical to ask observers to collect data on every aspect of the process.

You need to be pragmatic and focus on the most important issues you have identified as areas of concern. When developing observation forms, there are two main points your group needs to take into consideration:

- ✓ What aspects of the process do you specifically want to be able to talk about in your election statements?
- ✓ How quickly do you want to get information back so that you can issue public statements?

The aspects of the process you specifically want to be able to talk about in your election statements should be based on your observation goals. For example, if evaluating the quality of the voters' list is one of your priorities, you will want to ask questions about why (and how many) voters were unable to vote because their names were not on the voters' list and what impact this had on the integrity of the election process.

The timing of your statements will depend as much on the amount of data you collect as it does on your plan for communications and reporting strategy. The more data you collect, the more data you must manage and analyze. If you

want to issue statements in a timely manner, you will need to make hard decisions about what data is most important.

When developing your observation forms, you should remember the following:

Only collect data you will use

You should work backwards from what you want to be able to talk about in your public statements. For each proposed question on your form, you should have an idea about how you will use the data you receive.

Ensure questions are clear and direct

Observation forms should contain questions that are as clear and direct as possible. If observers do not understand the question being asked, they may provide incorrect answers. This will give you bad data that will undermine your ability to issue statements about the quality of the election process.

Minimize the possible variation in responses

When possible, you should try to use “yes / no” or “multi-choice” questions in which observers are asked to tick an answer box from a set range of possible responses. This will help facilitate rapid data analysis, identify isolated mistakes versus systematic errors, and allow you to issue timely statements.

Train observers on how to use the form

Observation forms should be developed before observers are trained so that the questions can be fully explained at the training session. Each observer should be familiar with the election procedures s/he is observing, the rationale for why the question is being asked, and how to record findings.

Remember your communications plan

No observation form can be developed in isolation from your group's communications plan. If you have a communications plan that asks observers to call a data center to report their findings or send their findings in via text message, you will need to design your forms to facilitate such rapid reporting.

3. Election Day Checklists

Observation forms that are used by observers on Election Day are commonly referred to as "Election Day checklists." Election Day checklists generally guide observer data collection efforts on the following aspects of the process:

- ✓ Opening and set-up of polling stations
- ✓ Voting process
- ✓ Closing of polling stations
- ✓ Counting of votes

Your questions should help you collect data to determine the extent to which the election process is credible and transparent. The broad areas that you should consider when developing questions for the checklist include:

- ✓ Professionalism & Impartiality of Polling Officials
- ✓ Consistency in Application of Election Procedures
- ✓ Quality of the Voters' List
- ✓ Secrecy of the Ballot
- ✓ Transparency & Accuracy of Vote Counting
- ✓ Conduciveness of the Electoral Environment
- ✓ Compliance with International Election Standards

Before the election process begins is when you have the luxury of time to spend on developing the most efficient, practical and user-friendly checklist. During the election, you don't have time to waste with data collection and analysis - the public is waiting for you to say something meaningful!

Take the following into consideration when developing your checklists:

Keep Your Checklist Short

Observer groups tend to ask many questions with the goal of keeping observers busy on Election Day. However, the more questions you ask, the more burden you place on data collection, analysis, and statement drafting. Focus on quality not quantity: try to use a single checklist that encompasses no more than 30 questions in total on all aspects of the process. Commonly, most groups only use a fraction of data they collect to make a statement on Election Day.

Be Precise with Your Questions

When developing questions, focus on specific components of the process. If you want to evaluate consistency in the application of procedures, you should not simply ask "did polling officials follow proper procedures?" Instead, you should target your questions in a more direct manner, i.e. Was the ballot box properly sealed? Did polling officials verify the identity of all individuals? How many individuals were not allowed to vote because they were not on the voters' list?

Don't Worry About Precision with Data

Unless you are conducting an exercise that relies on precision, such as a Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT), you do not

need to be concerned with exact precision in your responses. It is more important to collect data that helps you to identify general trends that allow you to make an overall qualitative assessment. You do not need to know the exact time one particular polling station opened, but you should be able to speak about a pattern of polling stations opening late and the effect late openings had on the integrity of the process.

Put Questions in Chronological Order

Questions should be formulated to reflect the real order of events as they are expected to unfold on Election Day. The procedures set by the electoral authorities, in accordance with the law, should guide what will happen from the opening of polls through the counting of votes.

Cluster Questions into Categories

You should cluster questions about opening and set up, voting, closing, and counting processes into separate and logical categories. This will make it easy for the observer to know when s/he is expected to provide answers. It can also be useful for facilitating data collection on each category.

Include Instructions for Observers

Forms should contain instructions for observers on when to record data and transmit findings. While this information should be included in observer manuals, observers may not carry them to polling stations on Election Day.

[Tip] Use an alpha-numeric system for rapid reporting

If you are asking observers to call in their findings or sending their findings via SMS on Election Day, you should use an alpha-numeric system to facilitate rapid reporting. Numbering your questions (i.e., 1,2,3...) and assigning a letter to the response category (i.e. y, n, or a,b,c...) will enable quicker and easier data collection.

[Tip] *Conduct a post-election review of your forms*

It is good practice to review observation forms soon after an election to see what questions tended to be answered incorrectly or not answered at all because people didn't understand them. This type of review will help you to improve the way you ask questions by understanding semantic weaknesses.

4. Avoiding Common Mistakes

Poorly worded or confusing questions yield useless data. Here are some of the most common mistakes made by observer groups when developing observation questions:

Open-Ended Questions

When designing observation forms, many groups include open-ended questions, leaving a blank space for observers to write at length about what happened. This type of question provides you with a wide range of responses that can be difficult to analyze for the purposes of making a statement.

Two-in-One Questions

It is also important not to include two questions in one. A question like: "were there security forces present *and* did they intimidate voters?" is not a good question since the answer to the first part could be yes and the answer to the second part could no, for example. Split these types of questions into two questions.

Leading Questions

Leading questions prompt observers to give answers that are seemingly prejudiced in favor of a particular response. If your group is seeking to evaluate the quality of the voters' list, you should not ask how "good" or "bad" is the voters' list. Instead, ask how many people tried to vote but were not allowed because their name was not on the voters' list. It is important to ask questions in a way that allows the observer to provide a direct, unbiased response to the question.

Recycled Questions

Do not just re-use old observation forms when developing observation forms for a new election. Old forms may include good questions and it can be useful to look back at the questions that you asked in previous elections, but simply updating your old forms could lead you to ask irrelevant questions.

5. Testing Your Questions

Once you have formulated your questions, you should test them to make sure they are good questions. Applying the following tests will help improve your data collection efforts:

The Usefulness Test

For each proposed question, you should have an idea about how you are going to use the data you get back. If there is no clear notion of how that information will be used, then the question should not be asked on your observation form.

The Validity Test

Is the question clear? Can the response be easily measured? When formulating questions, you should always ask yourself: “is there a better, more direct, or clearer way to formulate a question to get to a more easily measurable answer?”

The Reliability Test

Validity has to do with whether the response can be measured. Reliability has to do with the consistency of measurement. Your goal should be to reduce the possible variation in the responses between observers.

The Categories Test

Response categories for questions asked have to satisfy two conditions: they should cover all ranges of possibilities for a response and one category should not overlap with another.

The Efficiency Test

Categories should also be designed to be efficient: the fewer response categories used, the faster the data can be transmitted and the easier it can be analyzed.

6. Critical Incident Forms

When you develop an observation form, you do so in consideration of the questions that you think will yield the most useful information for making a statement. However, developing practical and efficient observation forms means that you may omit questions that would allow you to gather detailed data on problematic incidents that may impact the process.

There are a number of electoral violations or offenses, such as ballot box stuffing, circular voting, acts of violence, that may not be commonplace but that can negatively impact the process. It is important to have a mechanism for capturing data on low-probability-high-impact incidents such as these by developing a “critical incident form.”

Critical incident forms should be simple forms that enable observers to record violations or offenses by ticking a box next to a specific incident. Common violations or offenses that you might include in your critical incident form may range from flagrant violations to minor infractions, including:

- ✓ Violence
- ✓ Intimidation
- ✓ Ballot Box Stuffing / Stealing
- ✓ Circular Voting
- ✓ Vote Buying
- ✓ Denying Access to Observers / Candidate Agents

Space should be provided on the critical incident form to allow observers to explain the incident in greater detail, as necessary. It is important for observers to record what happened, where it happened, who was responsible / involved, and the impact on the election process.

When developing critical incident forms, you should take the following steps:

Compile a List of Violations

Violations that you would include on your critical incident form may be stipulated as “electoral offenses” in the legal framework governing the election process. It is useful to

review previous election reports and note what violations and offenses may have occurred in the past.

Define Violations Clearly

Be as specific as possible when listing violations on your critical incident form to simplify data collection and analysis. For example, “illegal campaigning” might encompass a wide range of actions from overt (active campaigning, vote buying) to subtle (presence of campaign materials or posters).

Provide Examples during Trainings

Be sure to train observers on what constitutes a violation. Providing examples during trainings will reduce confusion and challenges for observers during the election process.

Consider Your Reporting Strategy

Collecting data on critical incidents can be time consuming and may require follow-up to gather more details. It can be burdensome on individuals collecting and reviewing checklist data to also deal with critical incident reporting.

Consider assigning specific data collection clerks to collect, review and clean critical incident data. You may also consider tasking field coordinators with following up with observers under their supervision to gather additional information.

7. Developing Observer Manuals

An observer manual is a condensed version of all the information that observers received during their training. Each observer benefits from having a written resource that can be consulted and reread after the training session has ended. Distributing manuals during trainings also helps to ensure that all observers receive uniform information across the country. This is particularly important if a pyramid training approach is used.

A clearly and concisely written manual should outline the role, duties, and responsibilities of election observers. Different observer manuals may be developed for Election Day and for pre-, and post-election observation activities, including:

- ✓ Voter Registration
- ✓ Candidate Nomination
- ✓ Campaign Period
- ✓ Media Coverage
- ✓ Election Day (i.e. Opening & Set Up, Voting Process, Closing, Counting of Votes)
- ✓ Complaints & Appeals

Creating an observer manual benefits both your group and the observers because the process of developing a manual prompts an organization to further refine its goals and develop the plan by which these goals will be achieved.

You should take into consideration the amount of time needed to produce training materials, including drafting, printing, and distribution. Many groups underestimate the

length of time required to complete this process, which may delay your trainings and disrupt your activities plan.

The precise contents of the training manual may vary depending on the unique environment of each election and the focus of your observation activities. However, the contents of a typical observer manual includes:

- ✓ An Introduction which briefly describes the organization, including objectives, goals, and observation methodology and activities
- ✓ A brief perspective of the current political context in which the elections are taking place
- ✓ An explanation of non-partisan election observation and the rights and responsibilities of independent election observers
- ✓ An overview of the legal framework, election administration and election procedures relevant to the observation mission
- ✓ Step-by-step instructions on the duties of an observer, including:
 - How to perform observer duties (i.e. where to go, when to arrive, what to bring, etc.)
 - How to record observation findings
 - How to transmit observation findings
- ✓ An observer code of conduct and pledge of neutrality
- ✓ Instructions and contact information in the event that problems occur
- ✓ Pictures, graphics and anecdotal illustrations help make the text easier to understand.

[Tip]: *Create a Quick Reference Guide*

Time and cost permitting, you should consider creating a pocket-sized handbook that observers could carry with them during the election process for easy reference.

8. Developing Trainer & Supervisor Manuals

In addition to manuals for observers, specific manuals should be designed for individuals engaged in the training and supervision of observers. Like the observer manual, these manuals should define the role, duties, and responsibilities of trainers and supervisors engaged in the election process.

Trainer Manuals

Trainer manuals should include all the necessary information that trainers need to be able to impart information to observers. You should develop your trainer manuals *after* you have finalized your observer manuals to be sure that there is consistency between the two documents. Trainer manuals should be issued to trainers during the training-of-trainers session that is conducted prior to observer trainings.

Trainer manuals should include much of the same information about the political context, legal framework, and duties of an election observer. However, they should also include the following information in detail:

- ✓ Training **dates and locations**
- ✓ A training **agenda** with a step-by-step breakdown about what each session should cover
- ✓ Training **materials** to be provided to participants during each training session
- ✓ How to conduct an **evaluation** of the training

In addition, trainer manuals should also include information on **teaching tools** such as experiential training techniques, simulation exercises, visual aides, etc. It's important to keep training tools simple. It is often inappropriate, if not

impossible, to use technology such as PowerPoint presentations in rural areas of many countries.

Depending on what you expect your trainers to cover during observer trainings, you might also include financial, logistical, and operational details to be imparted to observers.

Supervisor Manuals

Supervisor (field coordinator) manuals should include all the necessary information that supervisors need to know to be able to oversee observers. Similar to trainer manuals, you should develop your supervisor manuals *after* you have finalized your observer manual and issue them to supervisors during trainings conducted for supervisors.

Supervisor manuals should include much of the same information as observer manuals, but also include details related to the specific roles and responsibilities of supervisors. These may include observation assignments as well as financial, logistical, and operational responsibilities associated with recruitment, training, deployment and management of observers during the election process.

[Tip] Draft Manuals for Data Clerks & Phone Operators

You may also give consideration to developing manuals for others involved in your observation activities, including phone operators and data entry clerks. In addition to being useful reference tools, such manuals also serve as good institutional memory for your organization prior to future observation activities.



The **National Democratic Institute (NDI)** is a non-governmental, non-profit 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 non-partisan domestic election monitoring groups in more than 70 countries and has helped to develop regional associations of monitors in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Eurasia, Latin America and the Middle East.