

# **Managing Internal Communications**

*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](http://www.ndi.org)

The Managing Internal Communications field guide explains how to develop an internal communications plan for your election observation activities.

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.

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## **1. Developing a Communications Plan**

A reliable communications system is critical to the success of your election observation mission. It is at the heart of your ability to share important information with your group leaders, provide instructions to your field staff, and collect data from your observers to issue election statements.

Complexity and high cost are not necessarily the best indicators of a good communication system. Instead, you should focus on developing mechanisms that provide speed, accuracy, and reliability. Constraints of infrastructure, technology, and budget are important considerations and must be taken into account when considering different options.

At the outset of your observation mission, it is essential to develop the structure of your communications system. Managing the flow of information requires that you develop a plan for how everyone in your organization will engage with one another throughout your observation effort.

Here are some important steps that you should take when developing your communications plan:

### *Create a Contact List*

You must identify everyone with whom you need to communicate and where they can be reached. In the beginning stages of your observation mission, you should collect essential information (e.g. names, phone numbers, etc.) of your steering committee members, central- and field-level staff, and observers. Record this information so that it is

secure but easy to retrieve. Simple computer databases or spreadsheets are commonly used for this purpose.

### *Identify Communication Means*

After you have identified your contact list, you must establish the means by which your contacts will engage in communications. This may include mobile phones, landline phones, email, fax, post, courier, foot or bicycle messengers, and even satellite phones and two-way radios, if possible.

### *Develop a Telephone Tree*

An efficient system should include the creation of a telephone tree. Under this system, one person initiates the communication of a message to several other members of the mission. Each of these is instructed to contact others, who in turn are instructed to repeat the process, and so on. The key to making the telephone tree work is assuring that each person knows where and how the next person can be contacted. The tree can be used in reverse to pass information to your central headquarters when large numbers of observers are in action, such as on Election Day.

### *Have a Back-up Plan*

Primary means of communications can be disrupted or fail. In some cases, attempts are made to undermine observation efforts and the point of attack is usually the observer group's communications system. Having a backup plan means that you still have the capacity to convey instructions and collect findings even if your primary communications system fails.

### *[Tip] Remember to Budget Appropriately*

Communications can be among the most costly aspects of an election observation mission and it is often where groups fail to budget adequately. When developing your budget, think critically about costs you may incur throughout the entire period of your mission, not just around Election Day.

## **2. Central Communications**

A good communications system must begin with a clear management structure and strong coordination mechanisms at the central level. For your operation to run smoothly, it is integral that individuals at the head of your organization managing observer recruitment, training and deployment are on the same page with those managing logistics and finances.

Everyone must have access to the information they need to be able to carry out their assigned tasks in accordance with your organization's goals, activities, and timeline. When developing the communications plan for your organization, you should take the following actions:

### *Issue Terms of Reference*

Each member of your organization should have a clear understanding of his / her roles and responsibilities. Terms of reference (or job descriptions) should be written for each staff member with specific tasks that s/he is expected to perform throughout the duration of the mission. The writing of terms of reference will help you ensure that someone is responsible for key aspects of the mission and that there is no confusion over, or overlap between, staff member roles.

### *Develop Policies & Protocols*

It is important to develop operational policies and protocols to clearly establish an internal reference document for your organization at the outset of your mission. Clearly defined policies concerning human and financial resources as well as procedures regarding organizing events and reconciling expenditures will help to reduce questions, confusion, inconsistencies and misunderstandings during the mission.

### *Establish a Steering Committee*

A Steering Committee should be comprised of individuals within your organization vested with decision-making authority. It should include individuals who are responsible for managing key aspects of your mission, including observer recruitment and training as well as financial and logistical matters. If you are participating in a network, it is important to include decision-makers from each member organization.

### *Hold Regular Meetings*

The primary function of your Steering Committee should be coordination between different arms of your mission to ensure activities are conducted in accordance with your goals and timelines. For each meeting you should have a consistent agenda that covers issues related to observer management, logistics, finance, etc. As activities increase and you get closer to Election Day, meetings should be held more frequently.

### *Share Critical Information*

It is important that members of your organization who are responsible for implementing activities are informed of key decisions that are taken by organizational leadership. Special consideration should be given to the quickest and most efficient way to communicate urgent and critical information. This is essential when changes in timelines or activities are initiated or existing policies and protocols are amended. Depending on the size and structure of your organization, you may consider direct communication (face-to-face meetings, phone calls, etc.) or indirect communication (for example, activating your telephone tree).

### **3. Field Communications**

If the central level is the head of your organization, your field staff is the body.. Directions must be issued from the central level to the field so that field staff understand their responsibilities. Communication is a two-way street: just as information must flow from the center to the field, information from the field must be transmitted to the center.

The communication system that your organization employs will depend on the size of your mission. Geographical, infrastructural and logistical considerations will also come into play in determining an appropriate communications apparatus. When developing a field communications system, you should consider the following:

#### *Identify Field Coordinators*

If your organization is recruiting, training and deploying a large number of observers, you will need to identify field coordinators to assist with observer communications. It is neither possible nor practical for central level staff to provide instructions, collect data, arrange logistics, and address questions from observers. Field coordinators or supervisors can play an intermediary role between the central level staff and observers in managing observer activities. If you have many field coordinators, you may also need central or national coordinators to similarly serve as intermediaries.

#### *Disseminate Policies & Protocols*

It is important to share relevant operational policies and protocols with field coordinators to guide their management of observers and implementation of activities. Disseminating clearly defined guidelines to field coordinators will promote



compliance with organizational standards and reduce the number of questions emanating from the field to the center.

### *Share Essential Information*

The amount of “need-to-know” information decreases as you move from the central level down to the field level. Field coordinators need to be provided with the information necessary to be able to manage, recruit, organize trainings for, and oversee deployment of observers. Observers need to know when, how, and where to participate in trainings, conduct observation activities, and transmit findings. Field staff must also be made aware of changes in timelines or amendments to policies and protocols that affect their work.

### *Set Reporting Expectations*

Depending on the roles and responsibilities you have assigned to field coordinators, you may need to create templates, timelines and mechanisms for collecting reports. These reports may be narrative (i.e. observation-related activity reports) or financial (i.e. expenditure reconciliations).

### *Keep Contacts Updated*

You should always keep your contact list / database as up-to-date as possible. Field coordinators and observers may drop out, be replaced, or change their phone numbers during the mission. It is important that you have a system for maintaining and updating contact information. It is critical to have accurate and current contact information for your field staff and observers as you move closer to Election Day.

#### **4. Election Day Communications**

The effectiveness of your Election Day observation mission is predicated on your ability to issue statements based on data sent by observers. It is important to have a clear plan for Election Day communications in order to collect observer findings. There is no point in deploying observers and asking them to collect data if you don't have a system to collect it!

The design of your Election Day communications system will have to take many factors into account, including the size of the country, quality of infrastructure and number of observers. Be sure to consider the following points when developing your communications plan:

##### *Establish a Reporting Mechanism*

A clear structure is necessary so that every observer knows how and to whom they should transmit their findings on Election Day. Many observer groups establish a Central Data Center where observers call in their findings to a phone number(s). Data clerks at the Central Data Center operate the phones and input the findings into a database. Some groups ask observers to report via SMS directly to a database. Other groups have observers report to field coordinators who report to the central office. A few groups circulate runners or mobile teams to collect data from observers on Election Day.

##### *Keep Reporting Simple*

You should try to keep reporting as efficient and easy as possible to promote rapid and accurate data collection. If you ask observers to call in their observation findings, a simple prompt-and-reply system is most effective: data clerks read the question (or, more efficiently, the question number) and

observers provide their findings in response to each question.

#### *Set a Reporting Schedule*

Setting times for observers to report their findings helps to systemize data collection and enable timely analysis of observer findings for statement drafting. You may consider asking observers to report at key intervals, such as after opening and set-up of polling stations, during the voting process, and after polls have closed. Staggering reporting times by region is useful if you are deploying a large number of observers as it helps to avoid congestion in communication channels that may result in delayed or lost data.

#### *Include Reporting Instructions on Observation Forms*

Forms should contain instructions for observers on times they are expected to transmit reports and the phone numbers to which they should call-in findings, violations, and problems encountered (for example, if they are expelled from the polling station or their car breaks down on the way to the polling station). While this information should be included in observer manuals, observers do not always carry the manuals with them to polling stations on Election Day, - but they will definitely carry the observation form.

#### *Have a Back-up Plan*

If your primary communications system is disrupted, your organization should have secondary (and tertiary) plans for collecting data. Mechanisms may include landline or satellite phones, regional collection points, and mobile teams. Field coordinators and observers should be trained accordingly.

[Tip] *Develop a mechanism for critical incident reporting*

Critical incident reporting can be complicated and time-consuming. Violations may not happen everywhere, but they vary in degree of impact on the process and often require follow-up to gather additional information. To avoid disrupting your data collection process, it's useful to have a distinct mechanism to report violations that is separate from the regular collection of checklist data, whether through a dedicated phone line or via field coordinators.

## **5. Central Data Center**

On Election Day, you need a data collection system that complements your observer reporting strategy. It is common practice among observation groups to establish a central data center to receive, manage, and analyze observer data.

The goal of establishing a central data center is to consolidate the data collection process. The existence of a centralized hub for your Election Day observation activities will facilitate the process of collecting, reviewing and analyzing data sent by observers for the purposes of drafting election data.

A central data center may be situated in your organization's office, a conference facility, a hotel, or any other suitable place depending on the size of your data collection operation. When establishing a data center, you should take the following into consideration:

### *Phone Operators & Data Clerks*

Based on the reporting strategy that you have put in place, you will need to recruit and train individuals who will be responsible for answering phones and / or entering data into a spreadsheet or database. Phone operators and data clerks may be organization staff or volunteers, friends or family members, students, etc. The number of individuals you recruit will depend largely on the size of your observation mission and amount of data to be collected.

It is important to train phone operators and data clerks on what data observers are collecting and provide them with copies of the checklists so that they can manually record the data observers provide. They should also be trained on how to follow-up to collect missing data, review and clean existing data, and address problems that may arise.

### *Phone Bank*

Many groups collect data via direct phone calls from observers. It is custom to set up a phone bank to field those calls. There are two main phone bank systems:

The most common system is a “multi-line” phone bank. With this system, you need to acquire several or more numbers for observers to call. Observers need to be provided with a primary number to call and a list of alternate phone numbers to call in case the first number is busy. Unless data center telephone numbers are carefully assigned to each observer, observers may face the problem of having to repeatedly call the same number until that particular line is open.

A less common, but more efficient system, is a “cascading” phone bank. With this system, observers are provided with

one phone number (hotline) to call and that number will automatically transfer and re-route observer calls to the next available free line. This system decreases the likelihood that callers will get a busy signal when they call the number and therefore reduces the amount of time they will spend reporting their findings.

### *Database*

You will need a mechanism to aggregate observer data collected. The most practical method is through a simple computer database that is user-friendly, searchable and can generate summary reports. Where technological capacity allows, it is ideal to use an intranet system such as GoogleDocs, which allows one database to be accessed on multiple computers at the same time so that data clerks can simultaneously enter data from observers. Where internet connectivity is weak, It is common for groups to use more basic methods for data aggregation, including spreadsheets.

## **6. Applying Technology**

Technology can help information to travel faster and may be useful as part of the data collection system. Notably, SMS reporting systems offers a rapid means of data collection. Computer databases can be developed so that SMS reports can be sent from the observer directly to the database.

While technology can facilitate more rapid internal communications, there are practical issues that need to be considered: what is the cost? Are there implications for data security? Is there sufficient infrastructure throughout the

country? How reliable is the phone network? Will additional training be necessary? Will the scope for human error be increased?

There are huge differences among, and even inside, countries when it comes to communications infrastructure. Before applying technology, observation groups must have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the infrastructure for mobile and internet communications.

When determining whether and how to apply technology, you should take the following into consideration:

#### *SMS Reporting System*

SMS reporting systems are being increasingly employed by election observation groups to collect observer data. The advantages of using SMS reporting are that it increases the speed with which data is transmitted while reducing the burden on central level staff for data collection. In some cases, the use of SMS can help reduce communication costs, particularly when large numbers of observers are deployed.

There are also challenges to employing SMS reporting. Depending on the telecommunications infrastructure, there may not be sufficient mobile network coverage to allow for observers to reliably use SMS, particularly in rural areas. It may not be practical if you are not collecting time-sensitive information. It may also not be cost-effective given computer hardware and software that would need to be procured.

If you decide to use SMS reporting, you will need to adapt your observation and data collection strategies accordingly. Avoid open-ended questions, as observers will find it difficult

to report lengthy answers via SMS. Checklists must be simplified to include primarily yes / no, multiple-choice, or numerical responses that can be reported via encrypted messages and using a limited number of characters. Observers need to be trained carefully on how and where to send messages to avoid mistakes or lost data.

### *Database*

If you employ SMS reporting, you will need to develop and configure a database to receive transmitted reports. SMS reports will need to be first received through an aggregator or a mobile phone that is attached via modem to the computer hosting the database. The message will then need to be decoded or “parsed” so that the data can be received by the database and understood by a data clerk.

The database should be easy to use and search. Although observer reports may be received directly by the database, it is critical that data clerks are able to review, clean, correct or input data manually when data is missing or reporting mistakes are found. Databases may also be configured to allow for two-way communications or “bulk SMS” that enables the data clerk to send messages directly from the database to observers. This is useful for reminding observers when to report findings, and for informing observers of changes to plans.



## 7. Simulation Exercise

A simulation exercise allows your group to test every aspect of your Election Day observation mission. In a simulation, observers report fictitious data to the central data center. At the data center, phone operators and data clerks gain first-hand experience that helps them prepare for Election Day.

Simulation exercises have become common practice because it allows observation groups to do the following:

- ✓ *Address communication challenges before Election Day.* Identifying potential weaknesses in communication lines enables you to anticipate and avoid problems.
- ✓ *Increase efficiency of Election Day data collection.* Practice allows you to increase reporting speed and correct observer reporting mistakes in advance.
- ✓ *Engage in scenario planning.* Organization leaders can use fictitious data to discuss possible scenarios for analyzing data and issuing statements.
- ✓ *Inspire volunteers, staff and leadership.* A successful simulation exercise gives confidence to all involved that the Election Day exercise will run smoothly.

Most groups conduct a simulation exercise a week or two weeks before Election Day so that they have time to review and address any problems that may arise. In some cases, groups may decide to retrain observers who made mistakes.

It is important to keep the simulation exercise in mind while developing activity timelines. Planners should treat the simulation as if it were Election Day. All activities to prepare for Election Day should be completed by simulation day.

## **8. Back-up Communications**

Regardless of what communications system is adopted, communication networks can be overwhelmed or interrupted and back up communication plans must be in place. All observers should be trained to know what to do if the primary means of communication does not work.

Preventative measures and precautions should always be taken to avoid the need for backup plans: mobile phone coverage maps should be obtained to identify trouble spots; observers should charge and load credit to their phones the night before an election; and generators and uninterrupted power supplies should be available at the central data center.

However, it is important to recognize that preventive measures may not overcome all obstacles that may impact your communications system. Take the following into consideration when developing backup plans:

### *Landline Phones*

Mobile phone network congestion can prevent or delay communications. It is important for your organization to know where there are landline phones that can be accessed to call in observer reports. Give consideration to where your organization or partner groups may have offices in a region where observers are deployed so that they may call in their reports from existing telephone landlines on Election Day.

### *Satellite Phones*

Where legal frameworks allow, and if financial resources permit, it is useful to deploy observers with satellite phones in areas where you know that there is no mobile coverage.

### *Two-way Radios*

In areas where telecommunications lines are very poor, it may be practical to use two-way radios. Two-way radios are relatively inexpensive in comparison to satellite phones.

### *Mobile Teams and Runners*

In areas where mobile network coverage is poor or where distances to regional offices may be long, it is useful to consider using mobile teams or runners to collect reports from observers. Field coordinators, supervisors or other observers may be assigned responsibility to visit polling stations and collect checklists or reports from observers.

### *Data Collection Points*

In areas where telecommunications access is poor, or if you experience problems at your central data center, you should consider establishing regional data collection points where observer reports can be collected. It may be useful to develop summary checklists or forms that can be used as data collection spreadsheets on which individual observer reports can be aggregated. This would aide the data collection process from the regional level to the central level.

#### *[Tip] Have a Troubleshooting Plan*

Problems such as observers being denied access to polling stations, falling ill, or being harassed or intimidated may arise on Election Day. Plans should be in place to have observers contact field coordinators or another designated point of contact when such incidents occur. Strategies for dealing with such problems should be shared before Election Day.



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.