

TRENDS IN INTERNAL GOVERNANCE AND DIRECTION

No. 2

**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 Monitoring¹ 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 research 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 from Armenia, Colombia, Croatia, Dominican Republic, Ghana, Guinea, Kosovo, Lebanon, Malaysia, Moldova, Philippines, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Ukraine, and Zambia. 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 Internal Governance and Feedback](#); [Trends in Responsiveness and Agility](#); [Trends in Fundraising and Sustainability](#); [Trends in Alternative Funding](#); and [Lessons from NAMFREL and Gong](#).

Introduction

Citizen election monitoring organizations face the same decisions as other civic organizations: how to build internal oversight and governance structures to maintain the health of their organizations. At the same time, election organizations must balance the political sensitivity of their work, the need for neutrality and inclusiveness, and the need to center citizens in the work to build democracy. Interviews conducted with a wide array of citizen monitoring organizations around the world show how organizations meet these goals of organizational health, political sensitivity, neutrality, and inclusion as they establish formal mechanisms for internal governance.

What are common models of internal governance?

The exact structure of internal oversight and governance varies among citizen election organizations, often influenced by the organizational structure, the political

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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.

context, and, in many cases, association laws of the country. Citizen monitoring organizations typically use one of the four mechanisms listed below (or a mix) to promote their organizational health and strategy. These include:

Coalition Decision-Making and Steering Committees: When election monitoring organizations are formed by coalitions, member organizations often provide oversight and governance to the secretariat (the entity tasked with implementing the work of the coalition). In small coalitions, each member may be represented on a formal governing or oversight board. In larger coalitions, a steering committee made up of a small number of coalition representatives may serve to oversee the work of the secretariat. Many coalition organizations noted that they rotate or elect new steering committee members to ensure diverse viewpoints are represented and that the current contextual and operational needs of the organization are met. Often these coalition steering committees played a hands-on role making political decisions for the organization, representing the organization to the public, and in hiring and managing the secretariat.

Traditional Board of Directors: Nearly all citizen monitoring organizations that operate as a single organization have a formal board of directors. In most cases, these boards are nominated to specific terms and are composed of people with relevant commitments and expertise. At a minimum, boards of directors engage in basic governance and oversight of the organization's operations: reviewing financial audits/practices, broadly approving annual strategic and program plans, and providing oversight of the executive director. Some board structures compelled members to support certain areas of the organization's work, including legal, financial, communications or grassroots engagement. Some boards played an active and consultative role in guiding the organizations – especially at times of existential crises or at times of high political sensitivity (like elections).

General Assemblies: Several citizen monitoring organizations are guided by general assemblies. Typically, assemblies are composed of a few dozen individuals with a stake or interest in the organization: original founders, current or former staff, like-minded civil society partners, community representatives or other independent thought-leaders. Several countries require NGOs to be governed by assemblies (or membership models). Typically, these general assemblies serve in an advisory capacity, providing feedback on broad strategic direction, offering a support network during political crises, and/or serving as a source of community perspective and citizen feedback for the organization. Typically, general assemblies do not

engage in detailed oversight so are often paired with a formal board of directors or steering committee. In some cases, general assemblies may produce, nominate, or select members of the formal governing board.

Membership Models: Some organizations are founded on membership models, where hundreds of individuals join as formal supporters of the organization. Often, this includes friends and volunteers of the organization. Many citizen monitoring organizations see this model as an important way to democratize their governance and lift up the voices of their entire network: including geographic, gender, ethnic, income and other demographic factors. Members often have the opportunity to guide the direction of an organization: many hold annual meetings, are able to amend by-laws, and help set the broad strategic framework for the organization. Organizations that have memberships often see this as an important tool for bottom-up governance and for better responsiveness to the priorities of citizens. In many models, board members must be nominated from or elected by their membership pool. Some organizations empower regional members to organize into chapters, providing more formalized lines of communication and more decentralized power-sharing.

What are citizen election organizations gaining from their governance structures?

Citizen monitoring organizations noted that their internal governance structures provide a number of benefits, especially when tailored to the political and organizational context. That included providing the organization with **greater legitimacy through accountability and transparency** that comes with strong financial and strategic oversight. Citizen monitoring organizations said that strategic recruitment of board, coalition, and/or assembly membership allowed them to **fill gaps in their organizational capacity or perspective**. Some would seek out specific skill-sets in members (like financial or legal expertise), or would seek out a specific viewpoint that was underrepresented in the organization. Those organizations with broad-based membership said they had **greater bottom-up accountability and inclusive governance** that kept their strategies grounded in citizen priorities. Several organizations said their governing bodies provided **critical strategic support during times of crisis**, helping them navigate political upheavals—including during elections, and even helping to provide communication support and representation as appropriate. (See also the series paper ***Trends in Responsiveness and Agility***).

Conclusion

While the precise structure of governance models varies based on organizational structure and legal requirements, citizen election organizations are relying on their internal governance and feedback mechanisms to strengthen their work. Internal governance brings citizen organizations greater legitimacy and broader capacity for core organization functions. Most importantly for citizen election organizations, internal governance structures can bring more inclusive views – through diverse boards or through broad-based membership – to steer the direction of the organization toward relevant citizen priorities and navigate significant crises. While there is no one-size-fits-all model, it is clear that inclusive, effective and active governance structures support more sustainable and impactful citizen election organizations.