TRENDS IN RESPONSIVENES AND AGILITY

No. 3

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[1] 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

In interviews with a wide array of citizen election organizations, **nearly two-thirds said their countries had experienced significant, disruptive and often existential crises within the last 5 years alone.** This included wars, coups, severe economic collapse, and extreme political instability. These crises brought real challenges to citizen election organizations: significant shifts in the needs of the country; the demand to quickly adapt organizational strategy; and real obstacles to operations, funding and security.

While citizen election organizations typically focus on the impact they can have on the democratic path in their country, many organizations acknowledge they are limited by the country's trajectory. As one organization representative said: "Ultimately, our success depends on political developments." Citizen organizations that are prepared and resourced to respond to the realities on the ground, adjust

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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.

their strategy, and re-deploy their resources quickly are better able to 'meet the moment.'

How do crises shift the needs of a country?

Crises place significant strain on democratic processes, institutions and rights. In political crises, which may include the collapse of governments, constitutional crises and/or repeated snap elections, citizen monitoring organizations described the need to work on multiple fronts to restore stable governance, protect democratic principles, and maintain public confidence. Organizations noted that the need for transparency, accountability and inclusive decision-making was heightened during such crises. Depending on the root of the crisis, additional needs emerged, including reforms to the legal framework that could stabilize government, mediation among political organizations, and broader work to fight citizen apathy in the face of democratic dysfunction.

In existential crises – like war, coups or severe economic crises – organizations said that democratic processes, institutions, and rights were sidelined, put on hold, or even abolished. In these moments, their countries needed immediate work to mitigate the impact of the crisis, and political work (where possible) to seek a remedy. At the same time, longer-term efforts are needed to defend civic space, protect human rights, bring accountability, rehabilitate democratic institutions, and restore citizen trust and engagement in democracy.

How are citizen election organizations responding during crises?

In the face of crises, many citizen election organizations said they rapidly shifted their strategy and stepped into new roles to meet the emerging needs of their country.

Some organizations shifted their approach and adopted tactical innovations to respond to their new political reality. Other citizen monitoring organizations spoke to **broad strategic shifts** that pivoted their existing capacities to respond to the crisis at hand. For example, some organizations spoke to bulking up their policy research and advocacy work in new areas to push legal reforms to greater democratic stability. Others shifted their efforts to monitor, document and bring accountability to human rights abuses experienced in the country *(see Case Study on Ukraine below)*. Others responded to crises by re-focusing messaging and

outreach to citizens to retain support for, and confidence in, the democratic process.

Several citizen election organizations said their reputation as a neutral actor and their earned public trust helped them step into a role of mediator during political crises. For example, Sri Lanka's People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) has monitored elections in their country since 1987 and in 2015 founded the March 12th Movement – a mass political movement of civil society and citizens that called for clean politics and effective democratic representation. In early 2022, years of economic and political mis-management came to a head resulting in economic collapse, widespread shortages of fuel, medicine and food, political paralysis, and large-scale protests across the country. In response, PAFFREL built upon its reputation as a trusted, neutral actor, its position as a good governance leader, and its relationships with stakeholders and lawmakers to step into the role of crisis mediator. PAFFREL brought together various stakeholders including civil society, unions, and leaders of the protest movement to identify core demands and resolutions to the crisis.

The Role of Innovation and Agility in Sustainability

As citizen election organizations meet unanticipated events or political changes, adaptation – both in innovation and strategic agility – is key.

Innovation most often refers to tactical changes (a new technique, method, or tool) to make an existing process or strategy more efficient or effective. In the context of election monitoring, "innovation" is often used to describe adoption of a new methodology (like the Process and Results Verification for Transparency [PRVT]) or a new technology (like a social listening tool). During these interviews, only a handful of organizations spoke about innovation as a significant aspect in their work. Those who did mentioned how adopting PRVTs and faster reporting tools increased their impact and improved their reputation. However, in regards to extreme crises, few organizations said they need to innovate specific tools or methods to stay relevant – and several mentioned that they lacked the capacity and funding to create and maintain new technology tools or invent new methods.

On the other hand, nearly every organization spoke to the importance of strategic agility as key to their impact and their sustainability during serious crises. Strategic agility is what allows organizations to survive and respond to crises in their country.

Agility is also what allows organizations to adapt their long-term approach to meet evolving needs in their country. *(See also series paper, __Trends in Strategic Approaches__)*.

The **distinction between innovation and agility – and their different roles in sustainability – is important for citizen election organizations**, as well as technical assistance providers and donors, to consider. Innovations may be developed by citizen election organizations, exchanged and shared between peer organizations, or even outsourced to technical assistance providers and others. Agility, on the other hand, is not something that can be outsourced, shared or quickly adopted by organizations; it relies on an organization's own health, capacity, responsiveness, and culture. As described below and in the series paper __Trends in Sustainability and Fundraising__, building agility requires strong staffing, greater capacity and longer-term funding for citizen election organizations.

What empowers citizen election organizations to be agile and responsive at times of crisis?

Citizen election observers that navigated national crises identified a few key factors that ensured their agility, responsiveness and relevance. This included:

- **A strong, experienced core team**. Several organizations said having high levels of staff capacity and experience allowed their organization to quickly pivot, identify new strategies, step into new roles, and mobilize new activities.
- **A diverse and active advisory board, assembly or grassroots network**. In times of crisis, many leaders of citizen election organizations said they relied significantly on their advisory boards, their member assemblies and/or their grassroots networks to better understand the situation, identify a way forward, and navigate new political terrain. Many said that the diverse perspectives of their advisors helped ensure relevance and creativity in how they approached the problem.
- **Flexible and Long-Term Funding**. Several citizen election organizations noted that funding (especially project-based funding) was neither flexible nor responsive to crisis situations. Some organizations experiencing serious crises said that traditional donor mechanisms lacked emergency procedures to quickly deploy new funds or approve shifts in strategy/activities in the face of crises. Several organizations said that core funding was best at fortifying their organization and staff to respond to crises and shifts in the political context and environment.

How Citizen Election Monitoring Group OPORA is Responding to the Invasion in Ukraine
A Case Study

When Russia illegally invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the work of citizen election organization OPORA – like the whole of Ukrainian life – was uprooted. As war spread to the capital, Kyiv, and the eastern half of Ukraine, OPORA had to act quickly to secure their staff, support their fellow citizens, and re-group to deploy their resources and network to meet the needs of the country.

In the early weeks of the war, OPORA first took steps to secure their staff. They made policies about the personal security of staff. They organized communication trees to check on staff security. They supported staff while they and their families sought safety.

After just two weeks, OPORA's staff began to re-group remotely to determine how they could redirect their work to meet the needs of Ukraine during the war. With martial law in place, elections and even legal reforms were off the table. As such, OPORA's objectives – to monitor legal compliance, catalyze citizens' participation in democracy, promote democratic culture, share best practices, generate public demand for ant-populism in public policy, and participate in policy making – were on hold. Without formalities, bureaucracy, or traditional 'strategic planning' structures, OPORA decided their response. Staff who were available joined Zoom calls to determine what capacities OPORA could bring to bear and how they could best help Ukrainians.

To determine their new direction, staff looked at the internal needs of Ukraine, including considering lessons from historic movements in other countries. They considered the organizational strengths they could apply in new work, including a reliable public reputation, strong relationships with decision-makers, past experience in conflict mediating and monitoring from previous Russian invasions of Ukraine, and a clear view of the steps that will be needed to rebuild citizen participation and democratic elections after the war ends.

What is OPORA doing to support Ukraine during the war?

With these considerations in mind, OPORA quickly deployed a number of new activities, including *using their resources and experience collecting data and recording incidents in elections to document war crimes.* They helped to set up the Center for the Documentation of War Crimes in Warsaw. OPORA deployed a group of lawyers and psychologists to work directly with victims of war crimes, providing critical long-term support and legal guidance. They conducted analysis and released a report in February of 2023 showing a breakdown by geography and by type. The evidence and relevant information from interviews is sent to the appropriate prosecuting body for further investigation.

Additionally, OPORA is *relying upon its extensive contextual monitoring and analytical experience to build a history of the war's timeline and dynamics and inform citizens.* Members of OPORA's core team are conducting in-depth analysis of Russian and Ukrainian public messaging and actions, and are producing daily reports on popular Ukrainian media. OPORA staff are also producing regular contextual and legal analysis regarding occupied territories in a column called Occupied.

At the same time, OPORA is building upon its previous work on democratic culture and institutions. The organization continues its work **monitoring the information space**, analyzing and compiling data on how the war changes how Ukrainians are getting their information, what sources of media they trust, and how false information is impacting them. The team is also **researching and formulating policy recommendations** for accountability and justice systems, as well as post-conflict electoral structures and outreach.

What support does OPORA and groups in similar situations need from donors, partners and peers?

Based on its intensive experience, OPORA said that a strong team is key to their ability to respond to the present situation, shift strategically, and lead new activities. Support and funding for those team structures is critical, especially over the long term. In a wartime or other crisis scenario, it is especially critical that financial support be adapted or issued in a timely way, without undue delays due to bureaucratic processes or a hesitation to 'wait and see' how the situation unfolds.

More broadly, OPORA sees the need to support and build a path forward alongside the war. Amidst the battlefield and humanitarian needs, there is a clear and concurrent need to defend civic space, transition away from weak practices and institutions of the past, and prepare laws, structures, and citizen engagement for the particular challenges of a post-war political process.

Conclusion

Global interviews with citizen election organizations show that unexpected crises are a likelihood (not an exception)–and something that organizations (and donors) should prepare for. Citizen organizations that are prepared and resourced to respond to new realities on the ground, adjust their strategy, and quickly re-deploy their resources are better able to have an impact and ultimately survive a crisis. In this sense, **agility** (much more so than innovation) is key to long term sustainability, relevance and impact of citizen election organizations in response to serious crises. Strong core teams, inclusive governance mechanisms, and long-term, flexible funding, can build responsiveness and agility among citizen election organizations and should be a priority for organizations and the donors who support them.