TRENDS IN STRATEGIC APPROACHES

No. 1

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

Around the world, nonpartisan citizen organizations that observe elections share a common goal to improve transparency, deter misconduct, and promote citizen participation in elections. However, these organizations work well beyond election day–not only monitoring pre- and post-election activities, but also engaging on broader democracy, governance and citizen empowerment issues. Interviews with a wide array of citizen monitoring organizations show such organizations take a thorough, measured approach to building strategies, adapting approaches and implementing activities to further democracy in their countries.

How do organizations create their strategies?

Citizen monitoring organizations regularly devise formal multi-year strategic plans – typically centered around an anticipated electoral or political cycle. These planning processes are typically inclusive– involving board, assembly and/or coalition

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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.

members, as well as multiple levels of staff. To better measure impact and improve their responsiveness, some organizations invite various stakeholders to give inputs into the process, while others closely measure program indicators and monitor the political environment.

These strategic planning processes help organizations remain clear-eyed about their direction and mission. Several organizations said that their strategic plans also helped to educate donors and build support for their longer-term approaches beyond specific projects like observing an election. Many organizations mentioned that building a clear plan helped them focus on their core strategies, and avoid falling into donor-driven agendas. *(See more in the series paper **Trends in Funding and Sustainability**.)*

Despite the fact that organizations remained focused on their multi-year goals, the vast majority of organizations said they had to change tactics or strategies because of unforeseen circumstances. This included political or electoral instability, shifts in funding levels, changes to the legal, political or social context, and/or national emergencies. For many organizations, these external shifts were seismic: a major crisis (like a coup d'état, war, or other violence); implosion of the political system (requiring repeated snap elections); or severe economic collapse. Beyond crisis situations, even shifts in the political environment–like the opposition stepping into power for the first time, or the fall of a dominant party or leader–required a shift in strategy. **In the face of these constant changes, citizen monitoring organizations have learned that adaptation, agility and relevance – as well as the support of flexible funding and technical assistance partners – were key to their sustainability and impact.** *(See more in the series paper **Trends in Responsiveness and Agility**.)*

What are citizen monitoring organizations doing around elections?

Citizen organizations are employing a number of strategies to build more transparent and inclusive election processes. Many work to engage citizens in the process through voter education and mobilization, promotion of voter rights, peace campaigns, and voter assistance to overcome barriers (like identification and transportation). Citizen election organizations also advocate for improved legal frameworks by promoting recommendations based on their findings, producing researched policy proposals, and/or soliciting citizen inputs into proposed election reforms.

Depending on their specific context, organizations are monitoring and assessing different aspects of the formal and informal pre- and post-election period. Many organizations are using professionally trained observers to monitor general environment/violence, campaign, political finance and spending, abuse of state resources, voter registration processes (including auditing voter lists), election management/administration (such as new program roll-outs), and voter rights violations reported by citizens. On election day, citizen organizations employ methodologies specified to their context, goals, and funding. This includes full, partial, statistical[2], or hot-spot deployment to polling stations around the country. A growing number of organizations use complex deployment strategies, monitoring the tabulation process and/or the complaints process in addition to polling stations on election day.

What do organizations do beyond elections?

Nearly every organization interviewed was focused not just on the election process, but on democracy, governance and transparency, more broadly. Some citizen monitoring organizations were founded to work on broader issues, like transparency, human rights, and/or accountability – and later adopted election monitoring as one strategy to advance those core goals. Other monitoring entities are coalitions formed by diverse democracy, governance and grassroots organizations that see election observation as complementary to their individual efforts.

The majority of organizations interviewed initially formed as strictly election-focused organizations that monitored the formal electoral processes and advocated for reform. **However, with time, almost all election-focused organizations determined that the election process – on its own – was insufficient to secure long-term democracy in their countries.** As such, most citizen monitoring organizations expanded their work beyond the immediate election process to other related democracy, governance, citizen accountability and transparency issues.

These strategic shifts and new roles for organizations are highly tailored to each context and to the specialization of each organization. Depending on the specific democratic challenges in their countries, citizen election organizations are expanding their scope to:

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2. This includes Sample-Based Observation (SBO) and Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT).

- Bring more transparency, efficiency, and citizen representation to government;
- Promote policies and reforms to address political instability and violence;
- Strengthen rule of law and citizen access to justice;
- Fight corruption that corrodes accountability to citizens;
- Build democratic culture and resiliency through citizen education and engagement;
- Defend the information space and citizen awareness; and/or
- Protect human rights and ensure broader inclusion of citizens, especially those marginalized by unfair social and legal structures, like women, people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ individuals, and ethnic and religious minorities.

To reach these goals, citizen election organizations rely on organizational competencies that draw from or complement their election work. For example, several organizations deploy their network to monitor specific processes (like local governance, enforcement of laws, civil registration, or service delivery), monitor the political environment (including the civic and information space, or violence), or conduct public opinion polling. Some citizen election organizations engage and educate citizens to fight democratic apathy or extremism, or to promote awareness about information integrity or rights. Some organizations mobilize citizens in social accountability and mass-advocacy campaigns. And others continue policy research and advocacy to build democratic institutions, promote rule of law, and protect and expand the civic and information space.

Looking Abroad: How and Why CDD Ghana is working beyond its borders to fortify democracy

Founded in 1998, the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) is a research and advocacy think tank, working to advance democracy, good governance, and inclusive economic growth through research, analysis, education and participation. As a leader in the Coalition of Domestic Election Monitors (CODEO), they are also actively involved in citizen election observation, monitoring every election in Ghana since 2000.

Building on this breadth of experience, CDD-Ghana expanded its work to engage regionally and internationally. In 2010, they helped found the West Africa Election Observers Network (WAEON), which brought together citizen election organizations from the region to share lessons, build solidarity, and promote the adoption of

international and regional democracy norms. Staff of CDD-Ghana also participated in a number of technical support exchanges across the African continent to share their experience with nascent election observer organizations. In recent years, they have led regional networking projects in other areas, including parliamentary monitoring, youth leadership, and democratic solidarity.

To CDD-Ghana, this shift to work beyond Ghana's borders was a strategic one and in-line with their mission to build democracy in Ghana and beyond. For years, Ghana has experienced democratic stability, with repeated credible elections and peaceful transfers of power. They recognize, however, that Ghana is not an island–and that the health of democracy in other countries in their region would directly affect the health of Ghanaian democracy. Therefore, working to support their peers in other countries to build greater democratic institutions and strengthen is directly in their interest and scope.

In addition to broader strategic aims, CDD-Ghana staff also see internal benefits to working beyond Ghana. Working regionally and being continentally-minded helps strengthen the organization by building the image of the center as an international think-tank, growing the capacity of staff, and bringing lessons, innovations and new strategies to the organization's broader work.

In the future, CDD-Ghana hopes to grow its international work, especially linking with peers in other regions of Africa.

Overall, what do organizations consider their most important and impactful approaches?

In general, citizen election organizations interviewed said that measuring impact and success was not always straightforward, since many goals were long term and complex. Several organizations mentioned that their success depends on broader political developments and their ability to adapt. *(See also the series paper **Trends in Responsiveness and Agility**.)*

Many organizations believe **election monitoring (and PRVTs, in particular) is their most impactful work**. They said nonpartisan observation had a clear impact on their country: it helped build public confidence in elections, it helped maintain calm amidst delayed election results, it raised public awareness about the quality of elections, and it dissuaded manipulation.

More organizations said that their election monitoring activity had a **greater organizational impact**, and said that election observation activities helped to grow their organization's prominence, earn the respect of stakeholders, and establish the organization as a trusted, neutral, distinguished actor in their country. Many noted that those reputational gains helped them have greater impact in other areas of their work by providing greater access to decision-makers and greater influence with the public. Several organizations said that election observation helped to strengthen the organization's grassroots network and establish closer links to citizens than other areas of their work.

Beyond election monitoring, many citizen organizations saw their greatest impact (or potential for long-term impact) in other areas of work. That included work to **build democratic culture**, through civic education and outreach, and to **empower citizen voices** through mass mobilization, public opinion research, and fighting barriers to full inclusion. Some organizations said their work to **secure strong legal foundations** – like the Right to Information and legal safeguards in elections – had the greatest measurable impact. While others said that their efforts to **advance the integrity and effectiveness of elected leaders** was most important.

Where do citizen monitoring organizations look to grow and expand capacity?

Most organizations acknowledge that their current strategy and programming is a priority and are not looking to add new areas of work. That said, several identified areas where they would like to improve and expand the work they currently do. This included:

Improving knowledge and use of digital and social media tools
Enhancing the ways they engage, mobilize and amplify citizens – including marginalized communities, as well as their own volunteers
Expanding their regional and international engagement to share their experiences, learn from their peers, and stop trends of authoritarian influence
Gaining greater autonomy and expertise to operate all activities independently (and possibly grow into for-profit services in the future)
Strengthening their research capacity to develop and promote meaningful policy reforms

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In reflecting on what is most effective in building capacity, citizen election organizations said that gaining hands-on experience was most important. They said having freedom to try out new programs–with room to test their ideas and room to fail–helped them grow into new areas. organizations also said that exchanges and shared-learning with their peers in other countries was helpful in gaining new knowledge and perspective. Several citizen election organizations mentioned that coaching and support from mentors and technical assistance providers was also important, especially early in their organizational development.

Conclusion

Interviews with a wide array of citizen election organizations show that establishing and following a relevant, clear (and adaptable) strategy was highly important to their organizational sustainability and impact. Most organizations discovered that broadening their scope beyond narrow election processes to related issues of democracy and governance helped their organizations be more relevant and impactful. Citizen election organizations demonstrated a diverse approach to building democracy, with both election and broader democracy projects being highly tailored to the needs of their country and their organizational capacities. Relatedly, the areas of greatest impact varied by organization – with some seeing great strides in election observation work, while others noted foundational wins in improving legal frameworks or longer term work to build democratic institutions and culture. While most organizations are not looking to add new areas of work, they are interested in strengthening their approaches, sharing knowledge with peers and continuing to grow their strategies.