

Planning for Election Observation
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 Planning for Election Observation field guide deals with the crucial task of how to make a detailed plan to support all aspects of your election observation effort.

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. Start at the Beginning

Observing an election is a big job. It involves people, money, logistics, and politics. To organize an effective observation effort, it is critical to have a plan that everyone on your team acknowledges as the way forward. A plan should be flexible and can be adjusted for the unexpected during the course of your activities. Here are some preliminary considerations:

What is a Plan?

- ✓ A Strategy for Success
- ✓ A Framework for Your Objectives
- ✓ A Summary of Your Goals
- ✓ A List of Your Activities
- ✓ A Map to Your Expected Outcomes

Why Plan?

- ✓ Stay Focused
- ✓ Organize Resources
- ✓ Maximize Impact
- ✓ Minimize Effort
- ✓ Stay on Track
- ✓ Avoid Negative Outcomes
- ✓ Succeed

Key Components of a Plan

- ✓ Objectives (Realistic & Measurable)
- ✓ Goals
- ✓ Activities
- ✓ Timeline
- ✓ Resources
- ✓ Expected Outcomes

2. Conduct a Needs Assessment

Prior to making a plan, conduct a “needs assessment” to determine what aspects of the election process need the most attention and should be priorities for your observation effort. A broad range of sources should be consulted to get a balanced view of the situation, and regional variations should also be taken into account. You might want to organize your needs assessment using the following topics:

Legal Framework

What laws regulate elections? Are the laws compliant with international standards? Are there any provisions that have been identified as problematic?

Political Landscape

Who is planning to contest the elections? Are there any obstacles for those contesting elections? What are the general expectations for the campaign?

Election Administration

What is the structure of the election administration? How is it selected? Is it generally viewed as independent and impartial?

Media Environment

How do voters access information about the elections? Is there adequate information available to make an informed choice? Do the main broadcast channels (public and private) present a balanced view of political issues?

Women’s Participation

Are there any obstacles to women’s participation in elections as voters and candidates? Are there any mechanisms to enhance representation of women?

Minorities

Do minority groups have particular issues that affect their political participation? Are there mechanisms to enhance their representation?

Election Observation

Who is planning to observe the elections? International and / or domestic groups? What capacity do political parties have to observe?

[Tip] Put it in Writing

It is useful to produce a written document from your needs assessment so that you can share your findings with others in your organization and refer to it later.

A few steps to be taken for a needs assessment:

Document Review

- ✓ Previous election observation reports
- ✓ News coverage
- ✓ Election legislation

Interviews with Key Stakeholders

- ✓ Election Commission / other relevant government authorities
- ✓ Political parties
- ✓ Prominent legal / media experts
- ✓ Specialized NGOs (e.g. women's groups, minority organizations, human rights groups)

3. Define Your Objectives

After your needs assessment, your group or network should decide on the objectives for your project. It is advisable that you hold a meeting of the leadership to discuss what it is you want to achieve. If you have a network involving several groups, all of the groups should be represented so that everyone shares a common understanding from the start of the project. During the meeting you should decide on the following:

Objectives

Why is your group / network observing the election process? What do you hope to achieve (e.g. promoting public confidence, deterring and/or detecting irregularities, educating voters, helping to resolve disputes and mediating potential conflict, improving election legislation)?

Goals

Objectives can be divided into goals that your group intends to pursue. These might be specific to the parts of the election process that you have prioritized (e.g. detect errors in the voter register, hold parties accountable to the code of conduct, report on acts of election-related violence, increase voter understanding of the election process, observe Election Day processes, advocate for a new election law).

Activities

These are the tasks that your group / network hopes to carry out before, during or after the election process. Activities should be derived from your goals (e.g. radio campaign for election law reform, computer audit of the voter register, survey of selection of election commission members, targeted observation of Election Day proceedings, Parallel

Voter Tabulation, monitoring of post-election complaints and appeals). Activities should be specific and should reflect the resources and time available to your group (see Sections 5 & 6 “Consider Your Resources”).

Expected Outcomes

These are the results upon which you can judge whether your goals and objectives have been achieved. What result do you expect to have accomplished at the end of the activity (e.g. a more informed electorate, a timely report on the Election Day process, a list of violent incidents and how they were addressed by authorities)?

Once the objectives, goals, activities, and expected outcomes have been defined, they should be organized into a planning chart for future reference. The chart should be circulated to all network partners so that everyone has a clear understanding of what has been decided (and what has not been decided). The chart can also be shared with potential donors to demonstrate your careful assessment of the situation and what activities should be prioritized.

[Tip] Be Reasonable & Realistic

Plans should include objectives and goals that are reasonable and achievable, given the amount of time and resources available. It is much better to set limited objectives and to achieve them than to set unreasonable objectives that might not be met and could lead to a failed observation effort.

4. Make a Timeline (with Election Calendar)

An important part of planning is timing. Once you have defined your objectives, goals and activities, you should draft a timeline of activities and tasks. Only when you have plotted your activities on a timeline will you see if they are realistic and can be achieved. The timeline should be discussed in a meeting by key members of the group / network so that everyone shares in the decision-making process. Remember to include the following information in your timeline:

Election Calendar

When are the major events in the election calendar? These dates should form the basis of your timeline, as your observation activities should be tied to electoral events. For instance, campaign monitoring should start at the beginning of the campaign period, and so on.

Fundraising Deadlines

What deadlines have major donors set for receiving proposals? If deadlines are not fixed, then set internal deadlines for proposal submission to allow enough time for activities.

Training Dates

Working backwards from Election Day and other key election dates, determine when you should train long-term and Election Day observers (fixed and / or mobile). If you are using a cascade training plan, you will need to train the trainers, who will in turn train observers.

Reporting Schedule

For each monitoring activity you plan, you should have in mind the timing for a public statement. In order to produce a public statement, you should also plan the timing of submission of information from observers. For instance, if you have long-term observers, will they report on a bi-weekly basis?

Evaluation

Evaluation should be conducted as soon as possible following the completion of a project, in order to collect useful and valid information. Remember to schedule an evaluation meeting of your group / network in your timeline. You might want to consider holding regional evaluation meetings to reach out to your network and collect information from around the country.

[Tip] How Much Time Do You Have?

Your group's approach to planning will depend in part on how much time you have until Election Day. If "snap" elections are called suddenly, with only two months until an Election Day, your group will not be able to carry out the same range of activities that is possible if you have a year in advance to plan. The most important thing to keep in mind is to be realistic with your expectations of what can be achieved and how long it will take to do so.

5. Consider Your Resources – Financial

Election observation is a resource-intensive activity that requires careful financial planning and vigorous fundraising efforts. When planning activities, consider what financial resources may be available from domestic or international donors. Your group may have to readjust its original activity plan if adequate funding sources cannot be identified earlier in the project. If funding sources are scarce, it is better to carry out a smaller number of activities rather than trying to do too much and possibly jeopardizing the success of your efforts and the credibility of your group.

Draft a Budget

An important first step in fundraising is to determine how much money you will need to secure. Draft a detailed budget for the full period of your project as outlined in the timeline, including all planned activities. Your budget should include operating expenses of your organization as well as costs associated with each project activity. Although the initial budget will largely be based on estimates, be as realistic as you can about the various costs. It is common that the bulk of costs are related to observers (training, materials, transport, and stipends for meals and communications). For this reason, the budget will be an important factor when considering how many observers to recruit and deploy during pre-election activities and for Election Day.

Identify Potential Donors

While it might be preferable to rely on domestic sources of funding for election observation activities, in many countries this is not possible and it is generally international donors that fund the bulk of these activities. Still, groups should consider whether they could identify domestic organizations

or companies as potential funding sources. At the same time, care should be taken to identify potential funding sources that are free from partisan influence so as to avoid any accusations of partisanship. Have a brainstorming session and make a list of potential donors – domestic and international – that your group could approach.

[Tip] Be Honest with Donors

When meeting with potential donors, it is important that you are open and transparent about what funding you have already secured and from what sources. This will help to bolster the credibility of your group.

Meet with Potential Donors

Once you have drafted a budget and a list of planned activities, arrange meetings with potential donors to explain your plans and funding needs. Most donors will require you to write a proposal outlining your planned activities and how they would be implemented. Ask what funding opportunities exist, whether there are deadlines for funding applications, and in what format a proposal should be drafted. You might also consider holding a joint meeting with a range of potential donors.

Be Creative

Although it may be difficult to raise funds locally, it might not be impossible. Think about whether there are any opportunities for in-kind contributions or goods or services. Could a radio TV broadcaster donate airtime for recruitment drives and other publicity? Would a commercial printer offer to print handbooks at a reduced rate? Could it be possible to borrow furniture and office equipment from commercial companies or NGOs?

6. Consider Your Resources – Human

Personnel is a key factor to consider when planning an election observation project:

- ✓ Who is going to carry out your planned activities?
- ✓ Do you have a volunteer database from previous activities upon which you can draw?
- ✓ How will you coordinate your staff / volunteers?
- ✓ Is your organization only based in the capital city or do you have offices or contacts in the regions?
- ✓ Do you have partner organizations in the regions?

Carefully consider the *human resource implications* of your planned activities. Election observation requires a large number of volunteers and this must be factored into your plans. Being able to recruit and coordinate adequate numbers of volunteers is essential to the success of your planned activities.

Elections are typically *nationwide events*. As election observers, it is important to capture a national picture of what happens, both in the pre-election period and on Election Day. If your group is based in the capital and lacks regional coverage, you may not be able to offer citizens an accurate picture of what has happened throughout the country.

If your group does not have offices outside of the capital city, or lacks contacts in certain areas of the country, you should consider building a regional network. The most efficient way to build a network is to identify credible civil society groups in each area of the country that might be interested in taking

part in your monitoring effort as a coalition partner. Taking on partners who are based in different areas of the country will offer opportunities for coordinating activities and recruiting volunteers. At the same time, it will be important to manage these relationships carefully and ensure that partners share in the decision-making process.

[Tip] Clarify Roles & Responsibilities

Managing a network can be challenging. If multiple groups are engaged in a network to observe the elections, a memorandum of understanding between member groups will clarify the partnership arrangement and reduce the potential for conflict. In any network, it's also important to develop a clear management structure with clearly defined roles for personnel. A written description of the responsibilities of your personnel helps to ensure that assigned tasks are completed and confusion is minimized.

7. Always Have Plan B (and Plan C)

Contingency planning is a critical part of election observation. Because election observation by nature is a complex, large-scale activity operating within strict timeframes – and often in sensitive environments – there is a lot that can potentially go wrong. While it is important to remain optimistic that activities will go according to plan, it is equally important to be realistic and identify the areas of your activities most vulnerable to disruption and to have back-up plans in place. Potential disruptions to your activities could be caused by internal factors within your operation or external factors outside of your control. Either way, you should be ready with Plan B (and Plan C).

Here is a list of potential difficulties to consider. Of course, every country has its own specific context and you will have to think about what is most relevant to your situation.

Communications

Election observation relies on various communication technologies to quickly pass information, particularly to transmit observer findings from around the country to headquarters on Election Day. Such communication systems might include fixed phones, radios, mobile phones, fax machines, computers or a combination of these. Regardless of which technology is used, communication networks can be interrupted or overwhelmed, and a back-up communication plan must be in place. All observers should be trained to know what to do if the primary method of communication does not work. In some cases, information might have to be sent by vehicle or other means.

Logistics

Election observation is a huge logistical operation requiring elaborate planning at the central, regional and local levels. For a variety of reasons, these plans can break down. For instance, bad weather conditions can block roads and prevent materials and personnel from being transported. Contingency plans should be put in place for all aspects of the logistical operation.

Potential Conflict

Elections are a particularly sensitive time in a country and there is always the possibility that they may lead to a potential conflict. Depending on the dynamics and severity of a political conflict, it might affect election observation in different ways. In such a situation, an observer group must remain alert and flexible, ready to respond to issues as they arise. In the face of public uncertainty about the results or consequences of an election, impartial findings of election observers are more important than ever.

Security Concerns

Security problems can arise at any time, but may be particularly prevalent at the time of elections – which are by definition a contest for power. Election observer groups should be prepared for possible security incidents and have plans in place to protect their personnel and premises. Security problems in a country may disrupt logistics, transport and communications - and can even prevent election observation from being conducted in certain areas. Leaders of observation groups must carefully consider possible security threats and incidents and take measures to ensure the safety of observers at all times.

8. Remember Evaluation

Evaluation is an often forgotten part of an election observation effort. However, it is a critical part of the work so that lessons can be learned, good practices maintained, and mistakes avoided in the future. A thorough evaluation of the election observation activities should be a fundamental part of any election observation plan from the beginning and should be factored into the budget as well. Here are some tips for conducting successful evaluations:

Schedule Sufficient Time

Evaluation will be most useful if there is sufficient time given to properly consider all aspects of the operation and to allow various participants to speak. If resources allow, schedule a two or three-day session in a conference facility away from your office so that everyone can focus on the evaluation.

Involve Partners

If an observation effort is conducted by a coalition of civil society organizations or a regional network throughout the country, different coalition partners or regional coordinators should be brought together to discuss the observation, since experiences can vary around the country. This also helps to ensure buy-in and can strengthen your network for future activities.

Choose a Facilitator

While you do not necessarily need to hire a professional facilitator to lead an evaluation session, it might be helpful to choose someone independent who has not been directly involved in the observation effort to lead the discussion. This can help to ensure an impartial approach and may encourage more free participation.

Ask Participants to Prepare in Advance

Circulate the agenda and ground rules for the evaluation exercise in advance so that all participants know what to expect. Ask participants to consider the topics that will be discussed and, if coalition partners are attending, to discuss them with their organization prior to attending. Well-prepared participants will contribute more to the discussion and result in a more thoughtful and productive evaluation of the process.

Review Objectives

Use your original goals and objectives for the observation project as a starting point for your evaluation. Go through each objective and discuss to what extent you have achieved what you intended.

Draft an Evaluation Report

Assign the task of producing an evaluation report to one or more persons who will act as the “note-takers” during the evaluation exercise. The report will act as the institutional memory for the observation effort, so it is important to take time to prepare it properly. The evaluation report should also be sent to all donors of the project.



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.