

Civic Update

The Infomediary Role of NDI Partners

Citizen Participation Team | January 2015

Active and informed citizens are vital to the health of any democracy. Citizens and their representative organizations need timely and accurate information about political issues to form knowledgeable opinions, raise awareness and act collectively. Accurate information also plays an important role in expanding citizens' voices by providing evidence to strengthen their claims and demands.

NDI's citizen participation programs have typically assisted local partners in building their overall capacities to serve as intermediaries between citizens and government. Successful intermediaries actively organize and involve citizens, develop political strategies and interact with the government on behalf of citizen interests - a process that builds citizenship skills and democratic norms.

NDI's programs increasingly involve myriad different organizations and new, discrete roles, often with a particular focus on expanding citizen access to information. In many instances, they step out of a traditional intermediary role, leaving organizing, citizen participation and issue advocacy up to other organizations that may use their data.

"Citizens, civil society organizations and private sector companies... are no longer merely consumers of information, but have their own data points to share on the quality of public service delivery and the health of their communities. ... A data revolution that narrowly addresses data from national statistical offices and providers of official development assistance will miss out on these other critical pieces of information essential to collecting the dots."

Samantha Custer, AidData

These groups thus play *infomediary* roles. They gather, analyze, produce and distribute political information so that more citizens and civil society organizations have the information needed to more effectively take part in political processes.

A wide range of organizations may play an infomediary role at different times, including media, think tanks, market research companies and private corporations. However, in most NDI programs they are comprised of politically oriented civil society organizations and policy research institutions. These organizations serve a variety of both intermediary and infomediary functions, depending on the circumstances. Some organizations monitor and report on political processes such as parliament meetings, and then move to policy research or other activities when a legislative session is complete. Others may observe and report on election results, human rights abuses or the government's implementation of gender equity policies at key times, then return to community service or civic education when political demand subsides. As the South Sudan case study below illustrates, NDI itself can function as an infomediary when local organizations lack capacity, political space, or the creditability to act as a neutral vendor of information.

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This issue of Civic Update looks at some of the infomediary roles played during NDI programs, by offering several examples from the field, and suggesting guidelines to consider when supporting infomediary activities.

COMMON INFOMEDIARY ROLES

Global trends towards more transparent governance and evidence – based advocacy, combined with modern technology, has made political information, such as government budgets, election data, and draft legislation available to greater numbers of people. Unfortunately, not all of this data is relevant to citizens’ concerns, nor is it presented in ways that are easily accessed, analyzed or understood to have value in solving real problems. Organizations that act as infomediaries, on the other hand, go beyond simply making information available through dense online datasets, highly technical reports, intricate pdf files or enigmatic websites. They serve as knowledge generators and translators by gathering, analyzing and then distributing information in ways that can catalyze action.

Another infomediary role is that of data producer - especially when the government lacks the capacity or the political will to provide information themselves. For example, governments may actively hide information on sensitive subjects from their citizens, lack resources to produce data from remote areas, or the means to disseminate data to its intended audience. Additionally, the scale or degree of an issue, such as election related violence, may not be adequately understood or documented despite general awareness of its existence. Timely and accurate information is especially valuable in these situations by filling gaps in existing knowledge and elaborating on whether an issue is widespread or pressing.

Organizations use a variety of tools and outlets (e, g., social media, mobile phones, open source programs, crowdsourcing, data visualizations, smart phone apps, searchable databases etc.) to obtain and circulate this information, in an order to make it widely accessible, easily understood and relevant to political actors. This may include citizens, CSOs, political parties, the private sector or in some cases, government. In turn, these actors also need to be aware of new information need to the ability to understand and make use of this information in their initiatives. When working with partners who desire to enhance their infomediary role, and those who want to use the in-

formation they produce, the Institute often provides both technical assistance – such as capacity development, advice on use or presentation of data, and collaboration with other actors-- and technological assistance -- designing websites, building data collection apps, creating web portals, and using information communication technology to disseminate information.

Over the years, NDI has assisted numerous groups serve an infomediary role- including CSOs, community radio stations, think tanks and universities- to collect, analyze, and present information about political processes in their communities.

Examples include [Vote Match Tunisia](#), [Serbia Truth-o-meter](#), and various polling firms and parliamentary monitoring organizations (PMOs). Each focuses on different political processes and uses a variety of data collection methods. Data collection methods include, but are not limited to:

- audits
- right to information (RTI) requests
- polls and surveys
- budget and expenditure tracking
- key informant interviews
- political process monitoring
- legislative monitoring
- shadow reports

NDI also has helped its partners disseminate information through reports, brochures/pamphlets, data visualizations, maps, public events, TV news, print media, social media, and radio.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

The following examples from Nigeria, Honduras, Jordan, and South Sudan demonstrate the work that NDI and its partner organizations have done to increase access to non-partisan and reliable information.

USING DATA TO IMPROVE ELECTION TRANSPARENCY: NIGERIA

Prior to the 2011 elections, data about the Nigerian electoral process was limited, and citizen confidence in Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was low. Local and international observers also expressed concern over difficult voter registration processes, opaque tabulation of official results, and lack of citizen oversight. In an effort to alleviate these issues, NDI partnered with four civil society organizations — one of which was the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) — in 2011 to conduct Nigeria's first-ever and the world's largest parallel vote tabulation (PVT), which would provide independently confirmed election data and results.

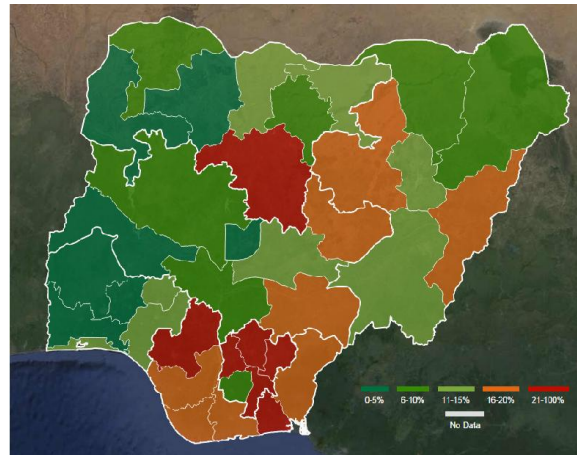
A PVT, or “quick count,” employs trained citizen observers to monitor election processes and results at a statistically random, nationally representative sample of polling units. A well-executed PVT provides precise, nonpartisan, and rapid assessment of election results. With technical assistance from NDI, the PVT partners conducted a quick count for the presidential election and 6 gubernatorial elections in 2011, while noting some irregularities in the general elections and a few that need to be addressed for future elections.

Building off of the PVT results, TMG has designed its www.TMGtowards2015.org website, with technical assistance from NDI. The site emphasizes presenting data in a simple, accessible format, and avoids cumbersome statistics and reports. Users can easily find the information they need by specifying the electoral issue — such as voter harassment or votes to a particular party — or geographical region of Nigeria. Data visualizations illustrate the information in a way that is both appealing and easy to understand. By walking users through the data, the site ensures that the information is comprehensible to a broad range of actors.



Civic, government and political actors are currently using the TMG website to prepare for the 2015 elections. NDI is helping TMG to reach out to political parties that can use the maps to identify strong support bases and target voters accordingly. Likewise, electoral officials have used

TMG's data to identify logistical issues from the 2011 elections that will need to be addressed for 2015. Activists have used the site to identify and raise awareness in regions with high occurrences of problematic election activities. TMG's dissemination of PVT data also shows promise in persuading losing parties to accept official election results, thereby discouraging post-election violence.



This map from www.TMGtowards2015.org shows the state-level breakdown of the percent of polling units where new voters were accredited during voting.

INCREASING CITIZEN ACCESS TO ELECTORAL, CITIZEN SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS INFORMATION: HONDURAS

There may be a need to support the development and provision of political information when governments, political parties, and advocacy groups do not have the will or ability to collect data on sensitive issues. For example, prior to the 2013 Honduran elections, there existed little information about vote buying and campaign finance — due to lax reporting requirements and a dearth of raw data. To support more democratic elections, NDI assisted local groups with an interest in playing infomediary roles.

The [Centro de Documentación de Honduras \(CEDOH\)](http://www.cedo.org.hn), or Documentation Center of Honduras, employed a variety of methods, from door-to-door surveys to budgetary monitoring, to generate information about illicit activities in the 2013 elections. The CEDOH studies revealed that the majority of campaign funding in 2013 came from unknown private sources and that parties frequently targeted rural voters in vote buying schemes.

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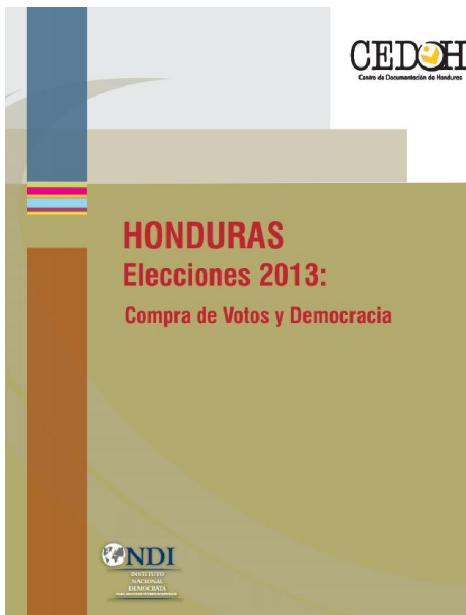
CEDOH also found that women's political participation in the 2013 elections was mainly confined to voting, and that women were not given fair consideration for elected positions.

CEDOH's findings gained extensive media coverage and inspired a national conversation on electoral reform, particularly the study on vote buying. CEDOH was able to use the media attention to call for greater transparency in campaign activities, which could help curb the influence of obscure private or criminal interests in Honduran elections.

The [*Instituto Universitario en Democracia, Paz y Seguridad*](#)

(IUDPAS), or the University Institute for Democracy, Peace and Security, studied electoral violence. IUDPAS found that it was difficult to assign purely political motives to violence as it is often entangled with additional motives, such as personal vendettas or unpaid debts. Instead, IUDPAS reviewed victim lists and found that most attacks were carried out by paid assassins who intercepted their targets to-and-fro meetings. IUDPAS' findings also revealed sluggishness on the part of the judiciary to prosecute these attacks.

To disseminate its findings and reach a broader audience, IUDPAS recently launched an open-access virtual library to connect citizens with documents regarding citizen security, human rights, democracy, and governance. This is the first resource of its kind in Honduras, and marks a huge step forward for citizen access to information. Activists can use the documents to bolster existing demands for government accountability. The virtual library also serves as a hub of information for the next election season.



PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH TO IMPROVE GOVERNANCE: SOUTH SUDAN



Citizens of South Sudan gather in a show of support for their new country.

In 2011, the world witnessed the creation of the Republic of South Sudan by popular referendum. After years of conflict, and prior to hostilities that broke out in late 2013, a wave of optimism swept the country as it looked towards its future. Still, it was clear that government officials, CSOs, nonprofits, and international actors in South Sudan needed information on the direction of the country and the sentiments of its people. Lacking local partners with the capacity to conduct national public opinion research, NDI served the role of infomediary to fill in this knowledge gap by conducting multiple rounds of [focus group research](#). The focus groups helped define the attitudes and expectations of South Sudanese citizens over the period from 2004 to 2012, giving civic, political, and international actors a clearer picture of the new nation's most pressing concerns

The Institute's staff took the raw data from the focus groups discussions, analyzed it and created detailed reports that were sent to various NGOs, CSOs, and government officials in South Sudan. NDI also discuss its findings with the President of South Sudan, the Vice President, and the National Constitution Committee. Acting as an infomediary, NDI researched what each recipient would be most interested in knowing, which findings were relevant to those interests, and how those

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findings could be used to further the recipient's goals. This evaluation helped NDI tailor its information and recommendations accordingly. For political parties and government officials, the focus group reports highlighted issues, such as tribalism and infrastructure development that they should address to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of the South Sudanese people. NDI's presentations to international actors suggested the use of the focus group findings to inform development of programs that addressed the priorities of the new nation.

HELPING CITIZENS RETHINK PARLIAMENT'S ROLE: JORDAN

Infomediary groups can shed new light on an issue, provide activists with information that assists their advocacy and change people's expectations of government. When King Abdullah of Jordan came to power in 1999, he promised reforms that would move the country incrementally towards democracy. While Jordan has made steady progress by holding regular parliamentary elections and allowing space for civil society, the legislature remains weak and does not effectively serve the interests of the citizenry. Jordanian citizens and CSOs were frustrated at the lack of representation in parliament and the inaccessible legislative process. In response, NDI partners, the [Al-Quds Center for Political Studies](#) (Al-Quds) and the [Al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development](#) (Al-Hayat), both launched initiatives to monitor the activities and gauge the effectiveness of Jordan's parliament and present this information in ways that assist other activists and organizations' efforts.

Al-Quds has worked with NDI since 2008 on developing its Jordanian Parliament Monitor project (JPM) to produce regular parliamentary monitoring reports and public opinion research. Al-Quds observers provide minutes on parliamentary sessions, note MP attendance, and analyze political issues. JPM disseminates its findings via its website, www.jpjpm.jo, which acts as a central hub of information connecting ordinary citizens with information on Jordan's otherwise opaque legislature.

Likewise, Al-Hayat is leading a coalition of CSOs called Rased that uses quantitative measures of MP performance, such as number questions posed to the government and number of bills raised, to publish individual MP scorecards. Al-Hayat's scorecard reporting was the first of its kind in Jordan, gaining widespread coverage in the

media and generating a national conversation on the role of Jordan's parliament. The scorecards are frequently referenced in conferences, debates, and TV programs discussing parliamentary activities. Additionally, Rased produces weekly monitoring reports on parliamentary activities, which it disseminates to the public via Twitter and Facebook.



Al-Hayat and Al-Quds activities have helped reframe the debate surrounding parliament's role in the government. There is a common misconception that parliament's duty is simply to provide services to the people. In response, Al



-Hayat and Al-Quds framed their reports to assess parliament's oversight and legislative duties as outlined in the constitution and their ability to work towards improving socio-economic

conditions. This factual and timely information about the activities of parliament gives citizens access to Jordan's political process for the first time. As a result, Jordanians are rethinking the role of MPs and the legislature. Growing numbers of Jordanians expect elected representatives to attend parliament sessions and engage each other in debate, in addition to taking an active role in drafting legislation on constituents' key concerns. By providing regular information on parliamentary activity, Al-Quds and Al-Hayat have opened up avenues for citizens to engage with elected leaders.

TENTATIVE LESSONS FOR INFOMEDIARY ACTIVITIES

Informed citizens are better equipped to advocate for reforms and make demands about how they wish to be governed. To be effective in these efforts, citizens need time-

ly, accurate, and comprehensible information about political issues to raise awareness and act collectively. However, information is not enough, as in the democratizing contexts where NDI's work, activism requires many complex steps. Change will not come about by a romanticized vision of informed citizens, accessing information by crowdsourcing and custom APIs, or simply acting in concert via social media and twitter crusades. Rather, change happens when citizens mobilize and take action in the using time-tested methods of citizen participation, such as advocacy, lobbying, community organizing and voting. With 30 years' experience in assisting local activism, The Institute can play a lead role in helping local actors transform raw data into informed political action by sharing best practices in understanding power imbalances, organizing and activating citizens, and holding government to account.

"...empowerment of citizens is where the concern lies with the current approach to the data revolution being too technocratic to change the world. While they're right that the lack of adequate data is a serious obstacle to good evidence based policy (and practice), the right statistics alone will not change the world. Without looking at the power dynamics behind this 'revolution', very little is transformational."

Neva Frecheville in "What's missing from the data revolution; people"

For NDI:

- NDI can bolster its programs by helping infomediary groups strategize how their information can be used by a broad range of actors. This includes representative groups who advocate their constituencies' concerns or move public opinion or identify and maximize political "entry points" for their campaigns.
- NDI plays an important role in helping its partners identify the intended audience of their information initiatives and how they can best access and make use of the information. Data should be gathered and information disseminated with these intended users in mind—often members, target audiences or constituents of other NDI partner organizations.
- Additionally, NDI's unique role as a convener of a multitude of political actors can be a useful in creating new expectations about data collection and dissemination, which can also further democratization by underscoring the need for transparency and evidence.
- NDI must assist partners in overcoming the all too common belief that furnishing citizens and CSOs with accurate, accessible information will, in itself, lead to political change. Partners taking on an infomediary role should understand that political actions are not spurred by access to data alone, but on how activists and organizations can use it in their campaigns.
- In a given NDI program, some partner organizations may be able to access, analyze and use data while others cannot. In such cases, NDI help can strengthen coalitions by fostering and promoting an infomediary role for more advanced groups, whose information may be incorporated into others' awareness raising or advocacy work.

For Partners:

- **Present information in an easy-to-follow format-** It is not sufficient to simply gather and report information; instead, it must reach relevant political actors in a comprehensible format. Key infomediary functions include generating new data and/or "translating" existing information on a complex subject. . This can be done through simplifications such as videos and visualizations. Partners should also communicate why their information is important in order to make dry subjects more interesting and relevant to citizens.
- **Information should appeal to a wide audience-** By definition; democracy requires interaction between diverse groups of people. NDI partners should provide information that is usable by many political actors in order to maximize its impact. Understanding the audience is also important, as partners should know what information is in demand and by whom. They can then disseminate information that is specific to each user, increasing its utility.

- **Find windows of opportunity**- Key political events, such as elections or budgeting processes provide short windows of opportunity when citizens are more engaged and interested. Partners acting as intermediaries can provide facts and information that add to the momentum of civil society campaigns during these key periods.
- **Consider a variety of distribution methods**- Tech-savvy organizations can take full advantage of social media to distribute information to a wide audience in a cost efficient manner. However, it is possible that an intended audience may not have regular access social media or the internet. Therefore, it is essential to consider the use of newspapers, pamphlets, community radio, and other low-tech approaches to spreading information.

“One of the (undeserved!) knocks against open data is the presumption that its core audience is technical and that the only people who can truly take advantage of open data are developers who can tap into APIs to build applications that then make sense of open data for lay audiences (unless the audience happens to be researchers in which case they probably have the necessary tools and the forbearance to troll through vast amounts of raw material). Viewed through this prism, open data is only effective via infomediaries.”

Prasanna Lal Das, *Open data and the 'average' citizen*

and enable people to work with it to create and share knowledge

- **The Access Initiative**- a global network that promotes access to information in environmental decision-making through the use of maps and publications.
- **Open Government Partnership**- an international platform for domestic reformers committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens
- **Transparency International**- a global nonprofit providing indexes, reports, assessments, tools, and data on corruption across the world.
- **The International Budget Partnership** - collaborates with civil society around the world to analyze and influence public budgets in order to reduce poverty and improve the quality of governance.
- **AidData** - a research and innovation lab that seeks to improve development outcomes by making development finance data more accessible and actionable.

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or visit www.ndi.org/civic_update

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Sunlight Foundation**- a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that creates tools, open data, and policy recommendations to foster government accountability globally
- **Data Dredger**- a resource for Kenyan journalists to download, embed, and publish visualizations of Kenyan data
- **The Open Knowledge Foundation** - a worldwide non-profit network promoting openness, using advocacy, technology and training to unlock information

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