



# CIVIC UPDATE

May 2003

A Newsletter of the NDI citizen participation programs world wide

This Civic Update issue examines the use of focus groups in NDI's citizen participation programs. The Update covers examples from Angola, Bulgaria, East Timor, Lebanon, and Morocco. In each case, NDI used focus groups to achieve different programmatic purposes. We hope the Update helps provide you with information about some possible ways to use focus groups effectively in your programs.

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## FOCUS GROUPS: A TOOL FOR ANY SEASON

Over the years, NDI has used focus groups for a variety of purposes. In 1992, focus groups in South Africa helped inform the design of a nationwide voter education program. Likewise, focus groups in West Bank and Gaza helped establish NDI's first Civic Forum program in 1995, and were used periodically over a three-year period to assess the program's progress. NDI has also used focus groups results to prompt policy discussions between civic groups, political parties, and government institutions. In some cases, NDI also has worked to help establish a local capacity for ongoing focus group research.

Focus groups are basically a form of qualitative research that rely on small, targeted discussions led by a trained moderator who create an open environment for participation. Focus groups are generally conducted as a series, with different groups, in order to draw out patterns. Participants in each group are selected based on common demographic characteristics or experiences. Groups are typically comprised of six to ten people—large enough to exchange ideas and opinions, but small enough for everyone to participate in the discussion.



The moderator uses a detailed discussion guide of open-ended questions that follow a logical sequence and addresses topics and issues related to the research's purpose. This open-ended format allows participants to respond in their own words, and lets researchers probe attitudes and opinions in a more in-depth manner. Discussions typically run from ninety minutes to two and a half hours, possibly longer in some countries.

Focus groups reveal not just what people think, but also why they think that way, how they formulate opin-

The next Civic Update will feature discussions about how NDI has worked with and within universities.

ions and how strongly these opinions are held. The findings are directional; they provide context and understanding.

This type of research can help you assess concepts, policies and messages, create new ideas, and plan for quantitative research. Qualitative findings cannot be projected to a larger population. No matter how many groups or interviews you conduct, the results will not be statistically reliable.

At the same time, however, focus groups are a valuable tool with many applications.

— Much of this is drawn from NDI's Political Party Development team's upcoming guide on focus groups, [The Focus Group Process at NDI: From Proposal to Presentation](#).

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## MONITORING THE TRANSITION AND ASSESSING PROGRAM DEVELOPMENTS: EAST TIMOR

During the transition to independence and multiparty democracy in East Timor, the United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET) was criticized for marginalizing the voices of Timorese citizens, civic organizations, and political parties in their development programs. Timorese citizens were frustrated with this state of affairs and felt little ownership over the democratization of their country. In addition to the lack of consultations between UNTAET and civic group and political parties, there was no concrete information about citizens' opinions of the transition process. To address this deficiency, NDI began an activity to identify and report the views, perspectives, and perceptions of Timorese citizens. NDI used focus groups for this purpose. This measure of the citizens' opinions was useful to government and civic groups, as well as other international organizations in the country, and NDI has been recognized and commended not only for reporting crucial information on citizens' opinions, but also for its efforts to include local groups in the process. The focus groups which NDI conducted also informed the development of a civic forum program.

In February 2001, the first set of focus groups was conducted as part of the *Citizen Views and Political Dialogue* program funded by the NED. These focus groups were designed to measure the views of the public on issues relevant to the elections and to the transition to multiparty democracy, thus ful-

filling the program's objective to amplify the voices of Timorese political actors and citizens.

To most effectively conduct the focus groups, NDI partnered with the East Timor NGO Forum's Working Group on Voter Education (KKPP). Through this partnership, NDI was able to incorporate local participation in the design and implementation of the program. The NGOs that were frustrated with the over-internationalization of the transition process particularly appreciated this inclusion. Furthermore, NDI's method of providing background support and guidance while allowing Timorese citizens to conduct the focus groups set a precedent for the greater "Timorization" of civic programming.

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KKPP identified a group of facilitators from its member NGOs, and NDI trained them to conduct the focus groups. These local facilitators conducted 14 focus groups with groups of citizens, including fishermen in a remote village on the southeast of the island, women coffee farmers, students from Dili, political activists, traditional leaders, religious groups, and demobilized guerillas.

The report of the focus group findings, entitled *Timor Lorosa'e Is Our Nation*, was shared with domestic and international political actors. The report generated discussion and dialogue among policymakers and opinion leaders, including current presi-

dent Xanana Gusamo, the UNTAET, and the World Bank's Community Empowerment Project. Additionally, NDI conducted follow-up consultations with both Timorese and international NGOs and broke ground by translating the report into a variety of languages to allow to encourage debate among local non-English speaking actors.

These focus groups were instrumental in introducing a new methodology to civic education in the country because the findings contradicted the commonly held belief that citizens did not want to engage in civic and political discussions. In fact, the focus group findings showed that Timorese citizens were both willing and eager to participate in the transition process. It also showed that despite being in country for around 16 months, the UNTAET had neglected consulting the Timorese people outside of a very narrow range of political leaders.

This initial program in East Timor helped to set the stage for an Election Support program funded by USAID. The objectives to expand citizen knowledge and understanding of basic democratic concepts and to encourage the development of an aware and active citizenship through participatory grassroots civic education were developed through the findings of the first focus groups and augmented by a second set of focus groups which were conducted in November 2001.

NDI worked with the Social and Political Sciences faculty of the University of East Timor (UNTIL) to measure citizens knowledge and attitudes to key democratic consolidation is-

ues. Final year political science students from UNTIL were trained as facilitators for the eleven focus groups that were conducted. The findings were then published in the report *Carrying the People's Aspirations*, which was released at a seminar attended by Constituent Assembly representatives, political party representatives, members of international and local NGOs, and representatives of the international community. The report proposed recommendations to these officials to address the citizens' concern for the ability of elected officials to fully reflect the interests of the common people and their demand to be better informed by elected representatives about the constitutional process.

In May 2002, NDI conducted focus groups on security issues across the country to inform the Security Sector Reform Program that had recently started. A Timorese academic at the University of Dili (UNDIL) prepared his own focus group report in January 2003 using transcripts from these focus groups.

Using the same university student facilitators, NDI continued the annual exercise in keeping a finger on the pulse of public opinion by conducting focus groups in November 2002 specifically looking at the issue of local government. The report published in January 2003, *Government Within Reach*, was used both as tool to direct the Civic Forum program as it focused increasingly government at the local level as well as feed into an ongoing debate and discussion about the future of local government in Timor-Leste planned for mid-2003.

NDI's solid reputation for this research saw the Institute approached

### **"Democracy Survey" in Newsweek**

*"If they are eating sweet potatoes, we should all be," one Timorese woman recently told researchers conducting a democracy survey. "They have dollars and good food, while the ordinary people are ignored."* —Newsweek, May 12, 2003

Although NDI was not credited for conducting the aforementioned "democracy survey," the use of NDI's focus group research in Newsweek demonstrates the impact and the legitimacy that focus group reports hold in both local and international communities.

by the World Bank and the New York-based International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) to conduct focus groups research on their behalf. Both projects in different ways highlighted some limitations or potential pitfalls for the Institute. While the World Bank-sponsored research on government service delivery was in partnership with the Ministry of Planning and Finance, the research was suddenly indefinitely postponed the day before the facilitators were due to go to the field. In part, this was due to sensitivities that the study, part of a larger internal review of spending and budgeting priorities, might document rising discontent in the population with the government's performance. While the World Bank-funded study would have been in line with NDI's focus on local government, the ICTJ research on justice issues show how time consuming managing the research can be. It called into question

conducting this type of research or even managing local partners when the research does not support NDI's programs.

All in all, the focus group findings acted as a means of widening the views and perspectives available to policy makers and those taking part in the public debate shaping East Timor's political future. Understanding the needs and desire of Timorese citizens was essential to informing the democracy development efforts of NDI and other international organizations. Furthermore, at this difficult time of transition, focus groups acted as an important method of informing elected officials of their citizens' desires.

For more information about programs in East Timor, please contact Raissa Tatad at [raissa.tatad@ndi.org](mailto:raissa.tatad@ndi.org)

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## DEVELOPING LOCAL ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: LEBANON

While it is the only Arab state that can legitimately claim a history of limited democratic practice, Lebanon's recent history is one of conflict, corruption, and foreign (Syrian) influence. To encourage the progression towards democracy, NDI launched a program in September 2001 to strengthen the capacity of civic organizations and to support reform-oriented municipal officials.

As part of the current program, NDI is working with the NGO *Sho'oon Jenoubia* in Lebanon's post-conflict southern region. One of *Sho'oon Jenoubia's* primary activities is the publication of Southern Issues, a magazine focusing on local issues facing citizens. The magazine, which is funded directly through the NED, is a means to stimulate dialogue and increase citizens' involvement in public debate. NDI is helping the group to strengthen the quality of dialogue and, ultimately, citizen participation.

NDI is pursuing a couple specific objectives with *Sho'oon Jenoubia*. The first is to help the organization's members develop skills to solicit citizen input through informal opinion polling, while they

are disseminating the magazine door-to-door. The second is to develop the capacity to organize public forums and discussion circles regarding relevant issues featured in the magazine.

As part of the overall effort, NDI and *Sho'oon Jenoubia* decided to conduct focus groups as a means of attaining citizen viewpoints about the magazine and about local issues. In December 2002, NDI's resident representative conducted a training session for facilitators. Eighteen participants from the magazine attended the all-day training session to learn the methodology and techniques of facilitation and reporting so that data collection would be as uniform as possible. Through the training, participants developed skills needed to facilitate focus group discussions in an appropriate non-directive, non-judgmental style. They also improved their listening abilities, learned how to use a standard reporting instrument, and sharpened their note-taking skills.

In mid-January, the trained facilitators used their newly acquired skills to conduct seven focus groups around southern Lebanon. The focus group findings showed *Sho'oon Jenoubia* the positive and negative

perceptions of their magazine. This information has helped *Sho'oon Jenoubia* to adjust the contents of the magazine so that it better meets the needs and interests of citizens.

Through the focus groups, *Sho'oon Jenoubia* also identified a number of ways it could play a more direct role in civic life and public policymaking. One proposed method of advancing the organization's direct involvement was to conduct town hall meetings that would further allow citizens to express their interests. NDI plans to work with *Sho'oon Jenoubia* on this endeavor, as well.

To date, NDI has helped *Sho'oon Jenoubia* develop an ability to organize focus groups and apply the information to their work. Additionally, the organization has been able to be more responsive to citizens. Advancing this integral connection between *Sho'oon Jenoubia* and the citizens to which the magazine is targeting will be crucial both to the success of the magazine and ultimately, to its promotion of citizen participation.

For more information about programs in Lebanon, please contact Kora Mehta at [kmehta@ndi.org](mailto:kmehta@ndi.org)

## **CIVICUS Launches Civil Society Watch Program**

CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organizations with more than 600 members in 100 countries. The organization is committed to promoting civic existence, civic expression, and civic engagement around the world.

The CIVICUS Secretariat has recently implemented a new Civil Society Watch Program. The purpose of the program is to mobilize "quick, public responses to situations that violate rights enshrining freedoms of civic association around the world."

The Civil Society Watch will work with the network of CIVICUS organizations to monitor threats to civil society. The program will then mobilize responses ranging from statements of protest and letter writing campaigns to media campaigns and fact finding missions.

For more information about the new program, write to [cswatch@civicus.org](mailto:cswatch@civicus.org).

## **PROVIDING A BASIS FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE AND ACTION: BULGARIA**

In 1997 the government of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) began implementing legal and structural reforms intended to furthered democracy in Bulgaria. Although successful in some respects, the reform process did not do much to promote the substantive interaction between Bulgarian citizen groups and their elected representatives. Members of parliament rarely consulted with NGOs and those civic activists eager to communicate with government did not often do so. As a result, Bulgarian citizens remained disillusioned by unresponsive political institutions.

With a grant from the Westminster Foundation, NDI began an effort in late 2001 to establish interaction between citizens and elected representatives. NDI conducted a series of focus groups exploring public perceptions of political institutions and gauging attitudes toward a variety of policy issues. NDI organized the groups with a cross-section of Bulgarian society, including members of minority communities, and also complemented the research with one-on-one interviews examining parliamentarians' receptivity to NGOs. Using the findings from the focus groups and interviews, NDI held joint presentations in six

cities for public officials, party leaders, and civic activists. In addition to being well attended, the presentations also illuminated opportunities for civic groups and public officials to interact on policy issues.

NDI contracted Alpha Research, a Bulgarian sociological research firm, to conduct six focus groups that took place in the cities of Ardino, Burgas, Sandanski, Silestra, Sofia, and Vidin. The groups in Ardino and Vidin comprised Turkish and Roma citizens, respectively. NGO activists that NDI had worked with previously arranged logistics, helped recruit participants and observed the focus group process by way of concurrent videography. In this way, NDI's established relationships in Bulgaria contributed to successful focus groups. Additionally, by helping NDI implement the program, the partner organizations benefited, by learning how to organize focus groups and hearing first-hand about citizen interests and concerns.

NDI presented the focus group findings to parliamentarians and NGO leaders. NDI also held individual consultations with partner NGOs and parliamentarians. These meetings explored how to apply the focus group findings to planning advocacy campaigns and drafting parliamentary outreach and legislative agendas.

Marlene Cohen, an independent evaluator, also made the following conclusions regarding the success of these focus groups. First, NDI introduced the focus group approach and its benefits to many NGOs and politicians. Because the focus groups offered a forum in which citizens were able to freely express their view-

points, these civic and political leaders were greatly benefited from the previously unfamiliar process of conducting focus groups. A second valuable result was that the focus groups clearly succeeded in their role as catalyst to building connections and even networks among NGOs, as well as among NGOs and local and national government and political officials.

NDI also used the focus group findings to enhance the ongoing technical assistance being provided to NGOs through a USAID grant. In these instances, NDI incorporated its presentation of the focus group findings with the ongoing consultations. Topics of discussion included how to use focus group data for meaningful public communications and how this data could be used in developing the organizations' future activities.

For the Rodopska Iskra Community Center, this meant developing the most effective format for meetings and handouts, designing an evaluation form, and creating a concept paper to be distributed to local government officials with mutually identified issues for potential cooperation. NDI's presentation to the Women's Alliance for Development helped to determine that its training agenda for the next six months would include topics such as confidence building, public speaking and communication, media training, crowd building and exercising political pressure.

For more information about programs in Bulgaria, please contact Annisa Wanat at [awanat@ndi.org](mailto:awanat@ndi.org)

### **Lesson Learned: Pilot Groups**

During the initial focus groups in Bulgaria, NDI became heavily involved in advising facilitators and monitoring the focus groups. This additional consultation was unexpected, and after the completion of the first focus group, NDI and the local research firm discussed the problems that had arisen in this session. As a result, the subsequent focus groups were significantly more uniform and successful.

**The Lesson Learned:** Conducting a pilot focus group will allow problems to be resolved before official data is being collected. Thus, the focus group findings will more accurately reflect to views of the participants.

## A PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT TOOL: ANGOLA

With the signing of the Lusaka Protocol by members of the Angolan government and rebel opposition group the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), a tenuous peace existed in Angola from 1994 until the resumption of civil war in 1998. At that time, the country faced the political and logistical challenges of developing a multiparty democracy, establishing the rule of law, and incorporating UNITA into the government at the national and local levels. An atmosphere of distrust, as well as an underdeveloped and fractured civil society, complicated the process of integration and decentralization. To assist Angolans with these challenges, in 1996, NDI began a new phase of programming which focused on political integration, government decentralization, and public participation.

As the first project implemented under the USAID grant "Angola: Accountable, Democratic and Participatory Government," NDI conducted 21 focus groups in both government and National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) areas in the provinces of Benguela, Bengo, Cabinda, Huambo, Huila, Moxico, Luanda and Uíge. This project was the first comprehensive research done on public opinions toward and knowledge of national reconciliation, the government of national unity (GURN), human rights, and democratic principles. Because such feelings of Angolans had not previously been determined, conducting focus groups was essential as the initial component to NDI's programming in Angola.

Through the results of the focus groups, NDI was able to incorporate the concerns of both officials and the general public into its subsequent programming. Later

NDI programming was thus specifically designed to meet the needs of Angolan citizens.

While NDI's initial proposal indicated that its goal was to introduce democratic concepts and practices to Angolan citizens, the results of the focus groups showed that Angolans already had a relatively high level of understanding of democratic values. NDI then shifted its focus from the basic introductions to democracy to civic education programs that built on people's pre-existing knowledge of, and remaining faith in, government institutions. Thus, focus groups proved to be an integral component in designing programming which appropriately addressed the needs of Angolan citizens.

In addition to directing the focus of NDI's programs in Angola, the focus groups findings were also used to inform Angolans of the public opinion in their country. In the one presentation of the findings, NDI discussed methods and strategies of civic education with a group of local government officials, educators, church officials and civic leaders. The presentation of the focus group findings was coupled with discussion of issues of the community concern and structure of local government. Through the discussion of the focus group findings in conjunction with community issues particular to the group of leaders present, the participants were able to see how their specific community concerns were part of the larger scope of problems in Angola.

A second workshop brought together political and civic leaders, including opposition parliamentarians, political party representatives, police officials, UN and USAID representatives and a

### Angola:

#### Round Two

The February 2002 death of UNITA military leader Jonas Savimbi, which led to a ceasefire and subsequent peace accord ending the 27-year civil war in Angola, has provided Angolans with the first real opportunity in decades to live in a climate of peace and stability. These events are slowly turning the attention of Angolans towards holding the country's second-ever elections, and NDI's current program has been designed to facilitate the eventual electoral process. Building on the knowledge and experience gained through conducting the focus groups in 1996, the Angola team recently conducted 24 focus groups in eight provinces to evaluate citizens' opinions about this new political climate. By assessing citizens' views on democracy, elections and political parties, NDI will be able to develop voter and civic education programs targeted for the needs of Angolans. The results of the surveys are now in the process of being compiled. Beyond being used by NDI staff to develop program activities, the results will also be shared with Angolan political and civil leaders and the international community.

range of local NGO and religious leaders in Luanda. Here, the presentation of focus group findings was combined with discussions on how the information could best be used to design civic education programs.

After the conducting the focus groups, NDI moved forward with its *Voices of Reconciliation* radio journalism program. This project was the principle program activity of NDI and a key component of the Institute's work in supporting the peace-building process in Angola. Based on the focus group findings, the series of issues to be covered by the radio programs were designed to address particular concerns which citizens had communicated. Focus groups results further impacted the selection of 15 municipalities within which NDI conducted civic education

and local government training. Additionally, the training of moderators to conduct focus groups offered a peripheral benefit. The 30 NDI-trained moderators formed the basis for a network of future civic education trainers.

The focus groups in Angola provided an important source of information for both NDI and local leaders. By compiling information on the opinions and concerns of citizens, focus groups provided a basis for understanding that then guided both NDI programming and the actions of political and civic leaders in Angola.

For more information about programs in Angola, please contact Gemima Neves at [gneves@ndi.org](mailto:gneves@ndi.org)

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## A FOCUS GROUP CENTER FOR MOROCCO

NDI recently opened The People's Mirror, a focus group center in Rabat. Building on the limited use of focus groups before the 2002 parliamentary elections, NDI has opened the center, the first of its kind in the region, to provide much needed qualitative research on civic and political issues. The center has already held a number of sessions concerning the upcoming communal elections, the impact and causes of child labor and reactions to family law legislation.

This year they have also conducted one set of focus groups to test different voter education messages on women and another set which examines women's condition under the Moudawana.

The objective of the first set of focus groups was to have a general discussion on voting and to gather feedback on the television ads that NDI had produced in order to target women voters. Two focus groups were conducted addressing these topics. The first group consisted of illiterate women from 18 to 24, and the second group was women from ages 25 to 35. In targeting illiterate women, focus groups proved ideal in that they allowed information to be compiled through means of dialogue rather than forms of written feedback. For many of them, the focus group discussions marked the first time that anyone had ever requested their opinions on political

issues. As a result of the women's excitement, moderators had to extend the length of discussion segments.

The second set of focus groups, explored public perceptions about the condition of women under the Moudawana. The Moudawana is the civil law or Personal Status Code which is based on a mixture of custom and Islamic law. The country has been divided about whether to reform the Moudawana; one faction declares that the current law is restrictive and violent towards women and the other attests that the reforms are Western-inspired impositions onto their cultural practices. To gauge citizens' feelings about women's condition under this law, NDI conducted two focus groups. The first focus group consisted of women from average to lower social class groups whose ages ranged from 25 to 45. The second group included lower class male citizens between the ages of 25 and 45. Conducting these groups with only a single gender contributed to the comfort level of the participants when speaking about the controversial subject of the Moudawana. Thus, more honest and open opinions could be expressed through these gender-segregated group discussions.

For more information about programs in Morocco, please contact Susan Kupperstein at [skupperstein@ndi.org](mailto:skupperstein@ndi.org) or Tricia Keller at [tkeller@ndi.org](mailto:tkeller@ndi.org)



*The Civic Update is a quarterly production of NDI's Citizen Participation Team. We ask that you please send any comments or suggestions you may have to Citizen Participation Senior Advisor: Aaron Azelton (Aaron@ndi.org).*

*Also, we are always looking for insightful articles to include in the newsletter, so please do not hesitate to send us any submissions for future issues.*

*Thanks and we sincerely hope you found this newsletter of interest.*

### Editing

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Aaron Azelton, Jim Della-Giacoma, and Lynsey Kryzwick with acknowledgement to the following program teams for information and language provided in their reports: Angola, Bulgaria, East Timor, Morocco, and Lebanon.

## WELCOME JIM DELLA-GIACOMA TO THE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION TEAM

Jim Della-Giacoma has joined NDI's citizen participation team as a part-time Senior Advisor. Jim comes to Washington, DC after spending more than two years directing NDI's office in Dili, East Timor and leading the implementation of several programs, including a very successful Civic Forum initiative. Jim was also responsible for opening the Dili office and building a solid reputation for NDI with Timorese partners and the international community. I believe Jim's field experience has given him a great perspective on several aspects of the Citizen Participation Team's work, from assisting with the development of proposals and monitoring and evaluation strategies, to the production of publications and training materials.

While in East Timor Jim also worked on political party code of conduct issues, local government and security sector reform. He organized focus group research, candidate forums, study circles, public discussions and training seminars. He also helped NDI play an instrumental role in Timor's first presidential debate. He worked with multiple donors in East Timor and came to NDI with background that included working at the United Nations on peace building and peacekeeping as well as working on anti-corruption issues at the World Bank. A fluent speaker of Indonesian, Jim came to the world of political development after a career in journalism that culminated with reporting on the fall of Suharto. An avid enthusiast of any outdoor activities, Jim was one of the founding organizers of the Timor Divers Network ([www.timordivers.net](http://www.timordivers.net)).

Jim can be reached at [jdella-giacoma@ndi.org](mailto:jdella-giacoma@ndi.org) and at ext. 6351. In addition to working on the citizen participation team, Jim will also be working on select regional team programs and projects.

## COMINGS AND GOINGS

### Comings

**Brionne Dawson** has joined the SEA team in Washington. She is working on the Malawi and Zambia programs.

**Mohaned Dansoko** has joined the CEWA team and is working on the programs in the DRC, Mali, Senegal, and Togo.

**Grant Godfrey** has also joined the CEWA team to work on the Niger and Sierra Leone programs.

### Transfers

**Thabi Mngadi** is leaving the Mozambique office to become the Resident Director in the East Timor office.

**Laura Paler** left the Asia team in DC to work in NDI's Cambodia office.

**Terry Horton** has recently joined the Eurasia team in Washington after leaving her post in the Kyrgyzstan.

**Mariam Dilakian** has moved from the Eurasia team in DC to the Kazakhstan office.

**Erica Berth** has joined the LAC team in Washington after leaving the NDI office in Ecuador.

### Goings

**Trevor Boyd** left the Eurasia team to join the Foreign Service.

Go here to view citizen participation programs and contacts:

[http://webserver.ndi.org/teams/civicpart/citizen\\_contact\\_chart.doc](http://webserver.ndi.org/teams/civicpart/citizen_contact_chart.doc)