

A Field Guide for Domestic Election  
Monitoring Groups in the  
Southern African Development Community

# PLANNING FOR ELECTION OBSERVATION




## **PLANNING FOR ELECTION OBSERVATION**

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, and in particular the NDI Handbooks, *How Domestic Organizations Monitor Elections: An A to Z Guide* and *The Quick Count and Election Observation*. These handbooks and other materials are available on the NDI website: [www.ndi.org](http://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 was inspired by the proceedings of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Regional Election Monitoring Workshop, “Recruitment and Training of Election Observers and Drafting of Election Statements” held October 30 - November 1, 2007 in Lusaka, Zambia. The 15 domestic observer groups represented at the meeting lent their ideas, expertise and enthusiasm, which are the basis for these field guides.



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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?**

- Ü a strategy for success
- Ü a framework for your objectives
- Ü a summary of your goals
- Ü a list of your activities
- Ü a map to your expected outcomes

### **Why Plan?**

- Ü to succeed
- Ü to stay focused
- Ü to organize resources
- Ü to maximize impact
- Ü to minimize effort
- Ü to keep on track
- Ü to avoid negative outcomes

### **Key Components of a Plan**

- Ü Objectives (realistic and measurable)
- Ü Goals
- Ü Activities
- Ü Timeline
- Ü Resources (human and financial)
- Ü 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?

### **National Minorities**

Do national 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?



#### ***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**

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

#### **Interviews with Key Stakeholders**

- ü Election Commission/other relevant government authorities
- ü Political parties
- ü Prominent legal/media experts
- ü Specialized NGOs (e.g. women's groups, national 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 at the meeting 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 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 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 during, before 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 Vote 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 and 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 has not!). The chart can also be shared with potential donors to demonstrate your careful assessment of the situation and what activities should be prioritized.



### ***Be Reasonable and 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 to 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.



##### ***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 before Election Day, your group will not be able to carry the same range of activities that are 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 achieve it.

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 for 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 are the deadlines set for funding proposals from major donors in your country? 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 must train long-term and Election Day observers (fixed and 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 of the public report. In order to produce a public report, 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.



#### ***Remember to Mark Your Calendar***

Well in advance of general elections in October 2005, The National Committee for Elections Monitoring (NACEM) in Liberia developed a calendar that included key election dates and corresponding activities, such as observer trainings and press conferences. The calendar allowed NACEM to manage each component of its observation during the pre-election, Election Day and post-election periods. NACEM also included dates for when reporting was due and evaluations of key aspects of the observation effort were to take place.



## **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 early in the project. If funding sources are scarce, it is better to carry out a smaller number of activities rather than 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 raise. 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 food/drink or allowance). 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 can identify domestic organizations or companies as potential funding sources. At the same

time, care should be taken that potential funding sources 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.



### ***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 at the meeting 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 of goods or services. Could a radio or 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

Another key factor to consider when planning is the “human factor”:

- Ø Who is going to carry out your planned activities?
- Ø Do you have a volunteer database from previous activities?
- Ø How will you coordinate them?
- Ø Is your organization only based in the capital, or do you have offices or contacts in the regions?
- Ø 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 in the regions, or lacks contacts in certain regions, you should consider building a **regional network**. The most efficient way to build a network is to identify credible civil society groups in each region that might be interested in taking part in your monitoring effort as a coalition partner. Taking on partners in regions will offer opportunities for coordinating activities and

recruiting volunteers. At the same time, it will be important to manage these new relationships carefully and ensure that partners share in the decision-making process of the network.



### ***The Creation of a Nationwide Network***

The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) was founded to bring together civil society organizations to engage in the electoral process, in particular monitoring elections. Civil society was actively involved in the February 2000 Constitutional Referendum in Zimbabwe, including monitoring, but did so as individual institutions rather than under a single banner. Since then ZESN has coordinated domestic election monitoring and has monitored numerous national and local elections.

ZESN has a full-time secretariat that implements activities on behalf of the member organizations. The network's membership is very broad based and reflects very different types of organizations with very different political positions. Some groups have small offices only in the major cities, with no membership while others are national in nature with members across the country. This diversity among the groups provides ZESN with broad national coverage and an expertise on a range of issues, while also helping maintaining its neutrality.

Above the ZESN secretariat is the ZESN board of directors drawn from the member organizations. The board has a smaller management committee that acts on its behalf. Further, there are a number of task forces that are intended to bring expertise from the member organizations to bear on different issues. One taskforce is devoted to election monitoring. ZESN has provincial committee that mirror the board in composition from the member organizations.



## **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 political 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 our activities most vulnerable to disruption and 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.

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 the most relevant for your situation.

### **Communications**

Election observation relies on various communication technologies to quickly pass information, particularly to transmit observer findings from around the country 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 chosen, communication networks can be interrupted or overwhelmed, and back-up communication plans must be in place. All observers should be trained to know what to do if the primary communication means does not work. In some cases, information might have to be sent by a 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.

## Political Conflict

Elections are a particularly sensitive time in a country, and there is always the possibility that they may lead to a political 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.



### ***A Practical Contingency Plan***

For the 2007 general elections in Sierra Leone, domestic observer group National Election Watch (NEW) decided to design a quick reporting system to gather qualitative findings on the elections so that they would be prepared to release a statement the day after elections. NEW relied on short message system (SMS) technology to gather the data from 500 randomly selected “priority polling stations”. However, they realized that in case the cell phone network broke down, they would not be able to collect the data. NEW therefore engaged all four mobile phone networks in the country to set up backup communication systems, in case one network was down. They also had “runners” ready to retrieve data if no cell phone communication was possible. Despite logistical challenges, the central Freetown office received all 500 responses within 24 hours, and was able to make a timely statement about the election process.





## **Security Concerns**

Security problems can arise at any time, but may be particularly prevalent at the time of elections. 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 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 their observers at all times.

## **8. Remember Evaluation**

Evaluation is an often forgotten part of an election observation effort. However, this is a critical part of the work so that lessons can be learned, good practices maintained, and mistakes not repeated 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 hotel or conference facility away from your office so that everyone can focus on the evaluation.

### **Involve Partners**

If an observation effort is based on 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.



### ***A Good Approach to Evaluation***

Following the 2005 referendum in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Réseau des Organisations Partenaires de l'IFES (ROPI), a coalition of NGOs from throughout the country, participated in a comprehensive post-election evaluation.

The evaluation involved a list of topics to address and was conducted in discussion format with the leadership and coordinators of the observation effort to identify lessons learned. This included the review of the training of trainers, training of observers, deployment for observers, the coordination, communication and transmission of results and the relationships with donors and the international community. ROPI used the information from this discussion to develop a list of short- and long-term recommendations. These internal recommendations, along with the general evaluation discussion, were made available in a report that was circulated to relevant parties throughout the organization.

This kind of evaluation was critical for ROPI for a multitude of reasons. The referendum observation was the first Election Day monitoring effort for the coalition, the organization had yet to internalize observation experiences. Moreover, ROPI would be participating in an even larger scale observation of the 2006 Presidential/Parliamentary elections. This post-election evaluation helped ROPI identify lessons learned and institutionalize best practices that made them well-prepared for the 2006 elections. Based on these recommendations, ROPI was able to increase their training and monitoring capacity for the Presidential and Parliamentary elections and deployed over 1000 observers on Election Day.

### **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 within their organization prior to attending. Well-prepared participants will contribute more to the discussion and result in a more thoughtful 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 “scribes” during the evaluation exercise. The report will act as the “institutional memory” for the observation activities, 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 **SADC Election Support Network (SADC-ESN)** is a loose network of civic organizations from across southern Africa engaged in domestic election monitoring; member groups exist in all 14 SADC countries. Beyond election monitoring, these groups also advocate for electoral reforms, conduct civic and voter education, and observe elections as a body in all SADC countries.

The **National Democratic Institute (NDI)** is a nonprofit 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 nonpartisan domestic election monitoring groups in more than 60 countries and has helped to develop regional associations of monitors in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East.

The **Electoral Institute of South Africa (EISA)** is a nonprofit organization established in 1996 focusing on promoting credible elections, participatory democracy, human rights culture, and the strengthening of governance institutions for the consolidation of democracy in Africa. EISA serves as the secretariat of SADC-ESN.

