

**EL SALVADOR**  
A Look at Local Government

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## **I. Introduction**

This report is based on the findings of a series of consultations and discussion groups conducted by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) as part of a program to strengthen local government in El Salvador. The one-year program is designed to improve communication and interaction between local government officials and community leaders as well as support the development of mechanisms for citizen participation. This effort is being supported by a grant from the United States Agency for International Development/El Salvador.

In March 1994, NDI conducted a survey mission to El Salvador to prepare for the implementation of a local government program. The objectives of the survey mission were to gather information on the structure and needs of local government and determine the municipalities with which to work. Following this initiative, NDI staff returned to El Salvador in July 1994 to conduct discussion groups to further refine NDI's program on citizen participation in local government. The discussion groups were conducted between July 23 and August 2, 1994 in the three municipalities chosen to participate in NDI's local governance program: Texistepeque, Tecoluca and Santa Elena. The three localities are situated in areas affected by the twelve-year civil war and each is governed by representatives of one of the three major political parties: the National Republican Alliance (ARENA), the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Christian Democratic Party (PDC).

This report will detail the discussion group findings and recommendations of both the participants and NDI. As background to the work carried out on the municipal level, a brief overview of government in El Salvador is provided. Following the overview are the findings of the discussion groups. Preceding each section of findings is a detailed description of the relevant aspect of local government.

## **II. Summary of Major Findings**

In order to gain a qualitative understanding of the level of citizen participation, NDI conducted discussion groups in the municipalities of Texistepeque, Tecoluca and Santa Elena. A total of six discussion groups lasting one to two hours were administered with community leaders and local government officials.

The most prominent criticism concerning citizen participation in local government is that the existing structures do not allow continual and constructive citizen input. *Cabildos abiertos*, the most cited example of participation, are open town assemblies or meetings. Held four times a year, they are infrequent and often too large a forum to allow in-depth discussion of local priorities. Many of the ideas suggested in the *cabildos* are not given further attention or funding by local or national agencies. Furthermore, other mechanisms of participation, such as *consultas populares* and open council meetings, are rarely utilized. There is no formal structure for regular communication between local government officials and community leaders. This lack of regular communication has, at times, created an environment of mistrust between the local

town council officials and the community leaders.

Community groups face barriers in their organizing efforts, as well. Legal status, which confers the ability to manage funds, is a requirement for effective operation of a community organization. The process to obtain legal status is arduous. Although the difficulty of the process is changing, the small number of community organizations reduces citizens' potential for full participation. In general, individual citizens are not given enough of a voice in their government.

Both community leaders and local government officials expressed interest in increased communication and collaboration. Suggestions extracted from the discussion groups regarding increased participation include: (1) more meetings in the community; (2) smaller community-based meetings to increase individual community interaction; (3) visits by the mayor to each community; (4) better organization of the communities involved; and (5) increased civic education about local government. NDI believes that concrete mechanisms need to be introduced to incorporate public opinion into planning and prioritizing needs.

### **III. Discussion Group Methodology**

Discussion groups are a public opinion research tool designed to qualitatively measure attitudes and opinions of individuals. Public opinion research of this nature does not result in findings that can be expressed in numerical values or percentages, rather it provides insight into people's beliefs and perceptions. Through its work with discussion groups between July 23 and August 2, 1994, NDI gained an understanding of the level of citizen participation in local government.<sup>1</sup>

The Institute concentrated the discussion groups in three municipalities populated by less than 30,000 people and consisting of a small "urban" zone and a larger rural area.<sup>2</sup> Local government officials assisted NDI in arranging discussion groups in each location. A total of six discussion groups were held. Two discussion groups were conducted with council members

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<sup>1</sup> Originally conceived as a series of focus groups, the discussion groups differed in that they included non-random samplings of people. Furthermore, the town hall, the most common site employed, was not a neutral location nor were the discussion groups segregated by gender or age. Designed to specifically explore the attitudes and opinions of the people with whom NDI expects to work, this exercise was not a methodologically rigorous examination of the larger community. The findings of the discussion groups can not be generalized across El Salvador. Moreover, it would be a misuse of the data to disaggregate the information by locality or party.

<sup>2</sup> The municipalities visited in NDI's survey mission were chosen based on the criteria outlined in the AID grant and conversations with USAID officials and representatives of local government institutions in El Salvador. The criteria in the AID grant include: (i) population of less than 100,000; (ii) financial viability as a municipality; (iii) a demonstrated institutional capacity; (iv) a demonstrated interest in citizen participation; and (v) logistical concerns. The municipalities initially visited were Apopa, Nahuizalco, Santiago de Maria, Sonsonate, Tecoluca, Texistepeque, el Tránsito and Usulután. The towns NDI chose are represented by the three major political parties. In addition, all expressed interest in participating in NDI's program. The localities Tecoluca, Texistepeque and Santa Elena were chosen as sites as sites for the discussion groups and the program.

and four with community leaders. As an additional source of information, two extra group interviews were conducted; one with council members and one with community leaders.

The discussion groups lasted one to two hours with nine to 15 participants. Each session followed a format outlined in a moderator's guide. Carefully written in Washington and refined in close consultation with a Salvadoran moderator, the guide contained open-ended questions exploring: (1) the perceived responsibilities and role of local government; (2) the current manner and level of citizen participation in local government; (3) the identification and resolution of problems by communities; and (4) the rationale, structure and function of community groups.

The semi-structured format of the discussion groups enabled participants to answer freely while remaining focused on the relevant topic and, in turn, helped NDI clarify perceptions of community participation in local government. Word association activities were utilized during the discussion sessions to elicit perceptions and feelings held by individual group members. Participants responded with the first thought or word that came to mind when presented with a particular topic.

#### **IV. Background on Governmental Framework**

##### *Central Government*

Executive power rests in the hands of the President who, serving a five-year term, is assisted by the Vice President and an appointed Council of Ministers. The National Assembly holds legislative power and comprises 84 elected members serving three-year terms. In the recent March 1994 elections, the right-wing National Republican Alliance, won a 39-seat majority in the Assembly. The leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, participating in the elections for the first time, garnered 21 seats. The traditionally centrist Christian Democratic Party won 18 seats.

While civil and political unrest disrupted the realization of an effective central government during the 1980s, the signing of the 1992 Chapultepec Accords brought an end to the 12-year civil war. A presidential election followed in March 1994 in which ARENA secured the presidency. This election also marked the inclusion of the former guerrillas, the FMLN, as a political party at all levels of the political process.

##### *Local Government*

The comprehensive Municipal Code of 1986 established mechanisms for participation and outlined the role of local government. Barriers, however, still exist that impede comprehensive and participatory local government. For instance, local government officials are elected from a party slate on a winner-take-all basis. Consequently, there is no opposition representation on local councils. This law creates a structural impediment to bringing local actors from varied political parties into the governing process.

In the March 1994 elections ARENA won 206 of the 262 municipalities, 29 were won by the PDC, 16 by the FMLN, 10 by the National Conciliation Party and one by the Authentic Christian Movement. In the nine municipalities visited by NDI during these elections, seven were won by ARENA, one by the PDC and one by the FMLN.

### *Actors and Mechanisms of Participation in the Local Government*

The main actors in local government are local government officials and community groups. The existing mechanisms of participation are: *cabildos abiertos*; *consultas populares*, council meetings and community organizations. While the functions and responsibilities of these actors and the uses of these mechanisms of participation will be further detailed throughout the report, the following is a brief description of each:

- (i) The Municipal Code establishes the structure of local government.
  - Mayor: Serving as the legal and administrative representative of the township, the mayor is the most visible member of local government and the person to whom people present their problems. The mayor is elected for a three-year term.
  - Town Council: Comprising from two to ten members, the council is generally charged with protecting and preserving the funds and property of the township. Each council has four alternate members who are allowed to attend meetings but are not permitted to vote. Elected on a list from the same political party as the mayor, town council members serve three-year terms.
  - Town Clerk: A hired municipal employee, the clerk is responsible for the daily administrative operations of the town hall, including the maintenance of the official records of the various town meetings and any other official business.
  
- (ii) The Municipal Code establishes four basic mechanisms of participation.
  - Cabildos Abiertos: These are open town meetings where citizens have the opportunity to voice their concerns and problems in their community or neighborhood.
  - Consultas Populares: These are forums with a particular community regarding a specific problem. A resolution, decided by majority vote taken during the meeting, is binding on the town council.
  - Council Meetings: Every two weeks the council meets officially to discuss municipal business. In the meeting following the *cabildo abierto* the council prioritizes community needs to submit projects for funding.

- **Community Groups:** These consist of a number of citizens from a geographic area organizing to discuss and attempting to resolve community issues and/or problems. Community group leaders are elected by an assembly of the entire community. Selected on their personal leadership qualities, community leaders represent the members of their community at *cabildos abiertos* and communicate with the mayor, municipal council and other official entities.

## **V. Discussion Group Findings**

### **A. Local Government**

#### *Structure of Local Government*

As stated in the Municipal Code of 1986, local government consists of a mayor, council and municipal employees. The mayor and the council are elected for three-year terms on a party list system. This electoral system makes no provision for opposition representation at the local level. The party receiving the majority of votes, including a plurality of less than 50%, wins the mayoral post and all the council seats. As the legal and administrative representative of the township, the mayor is the most visible member of the local government and the person to whom the people present their problems.

The town council comprises two to ten members. In addition to the regular members, there are four alternate council members who fill temporary or permanent vacancies. The alternates are allowed to attend council meetings and speak but are not permitted to vote. *Sindico* is the title given to the elected council member that deals with the legal and financial issues of the local government. Preferably a lawyer, he or she is responsible for the contracts, audits and investments of the council. Council members must be Salvadoran citizens of at least 21 years of age and have lived in the township for at least one year prior to registering their candidacy. Candidates must also know how to read and write and have full rights of citizenship.

Council meetings are regularly held twice a month. Under certain conditions, special sessions may be called. The council is generally charged with protecting and preserving the funds and property of the township. It is also required to keep the community informed of the progress of municipal activities and engage the community in the resolution of local problems. The public is most often informed about local government activities by talking to the mayor, speaking with community leaders who are directly in contact with the mayor, or attending *cabildos abiertos*.

Generally, each council member assumes responsibility for a particular aspect of local government, such as sanitation or health services. Sometimes a citizen's committee is formed to assist the council members with their duties. In at least one town interviewed, however, council members only assumed responsibility for these issues in the urban area of the municipality and relied on community leaders to provide them with information regarding these

issues in the rural areas.

NDI found through its consultations and interviews that council members commonly reside in the urban areas. When asked what had happened to the candidates who lost local government elections, community leaders from the rural area said that they did not know since the town council candidates all lived in the urban area of the *municipio*. In one of the three *municipios* examined, an exception was found. Each of the members of the council came from different communities in the *municipio*. In NDI's opinion, this system facilitated communication between the council and the public.

#### *Attitudes Regarding Local Government*

The participants stated their belief that local government exists to serve the communities of the *municipio*. In their view, the government should serve the people regardless of political loyalties. The participants saw local government as responsible for the economic development of the *municipio*. As one council member added, "The Council Members should try and fulfill the promises that were made during the campaign."

The word association component of the discussion groups elicited interesting responses. The participants' most frequent association with "local government" was "mayor," showing that the public sees the mayor as the local decisionmaker. Participants identified the mayor as the "boss," "leader" or "administrator." The council is perceived as performing an advisory role to the mayor, reflected in responses such as, "the mayor's team" and "a board of directors."

There is a sentiment that local government could solve all manner of problems. One participant said, "Local government can solve whichever problems that the community proposes." Other participants reinforced the perception with statements such as "all" and "Whatever the people demand." Such responses were not limited to the community leaders. Council members concurred with the idea that local government could solve problems ranging from taxation to helping sick people. In general, local government is perceived as responsible for solving "daily problems."

Local government officials expressed frustration, however, with the number and type of problems referred to them. "The reality is that people come and want the municipal government to solve the problem, but they are a part of solving it." Another local government official added, "Each community thinks their problems are worse than anyone else's in another community." The apportionment of scarce resources and the reconciliation of competing interests is the role of elected officials. It does seem that there are few other interlocutors. Although some mentioned priests or nongovernmental organizations, most participants indicated that they would take most problems to their local government.

While frustrations were expressed in the discussions with council members, council member participants indicated that they accepted the responsibility of being on the council because of a commitment to public service and loyalty to their party. One council member



stated, "I am here to make the town hall representative of the people." Other council members mentioned their earlier service activities in the Red Cross or as community leaders. But in every group someone indicted that ultimately they were on the council because they were asked to serve by the party. In one instance, party members from the separate communities of the *municipio* each selected a candidate. Then, party representatives from the entire *municipio* met to determine which of these candidates would be placed on the party list. The person receiving the most votes was placed on the top for the mayoral position and so on down until a comprehensive list of the preferred candidates was completed. In another, the candidates were chosen by the party.

The council members indicated that they had several ways of prioritizing the needs of the citizens. Council members use *cabildos abiertos* as a means of ascertaining what the community views as important. Then the council members apply their own calculation of costs and benefits to the situation. One council member gave the example of three projects typically presented: a school, a soccer field and street repairs. He said that he would choose the school because he believes educating the young people of the community is the most important of the three subjects. In addition, some decisions on which projects to pursue were based on the conjecture that certain projects were more likely to receive funding at the central government level.

### **B. Community Groups**

#### *Structure of Community Groups*

Each *municipio* consists of a number of different communities. Many of the communities are organized into community groups. These consist of a number of citizens from the same geographic area organizing to address community problems and issues of importance. In the past, community groups were groups centered on a single issue, such as repairing a bad street or building a school. After the particular problem was resolved, the group would dissolve. More recently, community groups have been created which work on behalf of the community on all issues relating to that community. These permanent community groups or associations represent the community to other institutions, such as local government, nongovernmental organizations, the Ministry of Education or the Secretary of National Reconstruction (SRN).

Community groups without legal status are known as *directivas tradicionales* while community groups which have acquired legal status are known as *Asociaciones Comunes de Desarrollo Comunal* (ADESCOs). The difference between the two rests on the achievement of legal status, *personería jurídica*. *Personería jurídica* entitles associations to petition for projects and funding directly from the local government, central government institutions and nongovernmental organizations. The process of obtaining legal status as a community association is complex. First, a group of at least 25 members must write a constitution and by-laws. Second, the documents must be approved by the group and then a board of directors must be elected. Third, a general meeting must be held and the mayor must attend. The group must then submit the request for *personería jurídica*, certification of the organization's constitution, the by-laws, and a signed list of the members of the organization as official documents to the

local government. Finally, the by-laws must appear in the official government paper.

While the law requires the mayor to grant official legal status to groups once they have completed all these requirements, in practice this does not always happen. Mayors are at times fearful of the power community groups can wield. In addition, representatives from nongovernmental organizations working with community groups indicated that this process is difficult, particularly for people with limited written language skills. Without the legal status conferred by the mayor, the community groups are unable to manage projects, solicit funds or receive funds to implement a community project.

Both the community groups and community associations are directed by a board of approximately 11 leaders. These leaders are elected by an assembly of residents from the respective community. Discussion group participants explained that community board members are elected on the basis of their personal characteristics. One participant indicated that communities seek to select individuals who will appeal to the varied groups the board may deal with. For example, one member may come from the ARENA party to deal with people from the governing party while another may be from the party in control of the local government. The community leaders who make up the board work closely with the members of the community to solve problems and discuss issues. Community leaders also represent the members of their community at town meetings and in communicating with the mayor, municipal council and other official entities. These leaders appear to genuinely represent their communities as elected officials outside the formal government structure.

#### *Attitudes Regarding Community Groups*

Some of the characteristics attributed to community leaders by the discussion group participants are that these leader are, "an example for the community," "an intellectual," "someone disposed to serve the community" and "who puts the needs of the community before their own." One participant described a community leader as "someone who knows all the people in the community; has the desire to move the community forward and to improve all the things in the community: health, roads, electrification, or a health clinic." Another participant stated, "A community leader cannot be too rich or too poor. He has to be from the community. He has to have a job and be a good example." Through statements of individuals, community leaders clearly have to have the respect of the community.

The leaders are responsible for helping the community determine its needs and then, helping to resolve those needs by communicating them to institutions and officials outside of the community. "To see the needs of the majority, not just of his own house," as described by one individual. Leaders represent the community in different types of meetings. They also inform the local government about the community. Moreover, community leaders are responsible for recruiting people to participate through manual labor in community projects. The community leaders function as supervisors in the implementation and progress of projects. They also guard against people cheating the community including, as one individual indicated, the local government.

The relationship between local government officials and community groups is generally characterized as one of coordination and communication. One local government participant described community groups as "a means of communicating with the most remote areas of the municipality." Another person referred to community groups as representative of "unity within the community because the work of local government cannot be done alone."

Several participants, however, reported that community leaders from other parties did not communicate with the town hall. "I don't see any difference on the part of the town hall. The difference is in the people from other parties within the communities who say they don't want to participate because the mayor is a member of a certain party." A participant also noted that community leaders from the opposition party are sometimes given a hard time by their fellow party members if they participate in activities with the local government. All reported that in the past there had been instances of favoritism based on party loyalty. In conversations, it was clear that the perception was that the political leanings of a community played a role in the decisionmaking of the local government. This can have a converse effect. In one town, the market was built first to appease the urban area which represented a different political party than that of the local government. NDI accepts that this may or may not be true, however, the reality is less important than the perception. Local government generally faces a perception of unfairness. As one participant pointed out, "This mayor is not only working in one sector, he is also working in an ARENA sector. This is a new example we are seeing."

It is important to note that all of the discussion groups were organized through the town hall. Not every community leader who participated in the discussions came from the same party as the mayor, however, there was a seeming reluctance to criticize the mayor on the party loyalty issue. One response began with the phrase, "In my community, the relationship is very good, but..." This seemed to imply that the relationship between community groups affiliated with another political party and the town hall was not always good.

While frustrations among community leaders arose due to party affiliation, when asked about partisanship within the community groups, community leaders hastened to say that the community groups are unaffiliated. "My community group has a rule that we can't talk about politics or religion in our meetings. We meet to talk about health and how to resolve problems in our community."

The problems discussed by the community groups are first publicly identified by community leaders. They become aware of problems through the people in their community or their own interactions as a citizen of the community. According to the community leaders, problems are prioritized by their level of urgency. "There are always some that are more serious than others." As a participant indicated, "If someone is sick, that is the most urgent." If a large problem or a question arises in a community, a community assembly is organized to discuss the problem and decide how to solve it. If there is a disagreement, it is decided by majority vote.

According to the community leaders, they are the first line of problem solving. If it is

possible, the community board and the community try to solve the problem. If it is a large problem, however, it is presented to the mayor or another interlocutor, such as a nongovernmental organization or a church leader. When the mayor is approached with community problems, it may be in a *cabildo abierto* or, more likely, in a bilateral meeting between the community leaders and the mayor.

There was some mention made of the role of nongovernmental organizations or the central government in dealing with some community problems. In regard to nongovernmental organizations, however, some people did not know what a nongovernmental organization was nor of their presence in the *municipio*. Those who were familiar with nongovernmental organizations viewed them as helpful because they provided materials and training programs. They were also perceived as being able to respond to health, education, literacy and other social needs, but only in the limited geographical area in which they operate. When questioned about the role of the central government, the participants said the central government "channels funds from outside the country" and "generally works through local government."

### *C. Mechanisms of Participation*

#### *Structure of the Mechanisms of Participation*

According to both the council members and community leaders, people participate in local government through *cabildos abiertos*, *consultas populares*, functional committees associated with the council (e.g. market, slaughterhouse, garbage collection), conversations with the mayor and manual labor in the projects being carried out in the community. In two of the three localities, the mayor also spent time visiting with communities. In one community, this constituted a more formal meeting in which the mayor and one or more council members visited the community for "a closer encounter and a more direct participation, not only to discuss the physical needs of the community but also, the larger problems that exist in that community." In another, a more informal communication structure existed in which the mayor infrequently visited the individual communities.

#### *Cabildos Abiertos*

The *cabildos abiertos* are public town meetings or assemblies at which community leaders formally present the needs of their communities. The municipal code requires at least four *cabildos abiertos* each year. In conversations with mayors and candidates, the role and structure of the *cabildos abiertos* were explained as a mechanism for citizens to come forward and present problems of their community or neighborhood. Some problems include local road repair, the building of a school, or another community need. A project must originate in a *cabildo abierto* in order to receive funding from the Municipalities in Action (MEA), an AID funded program administered through the Secretary of National Reconstruction.

In most cases described by mayors and community members, *cabildos abiertos* are fairly formal. The mayor, the council, and often representatives of the Secretary of National

Reconstruction, the provincial government and nongovernmental organizations occupy the head table situated in front of the crowd. The meeting begins with an official greeting from the mayor or a council member. The mayor, or occasionally the municipal secretary, then gives a short description of the projects which were approved since the last *cabildo abierto*. They also explain the cost of each project and a progress report on the projects underway or completed, including an accounting of the money spent. In one community which participated in the discussion groups, this report is sometimes supplemented by a more complete description of the municipal budget, including the income and expenditures of the town hall.

After the mayor's report, representatives of each community advance to the microphone and present their community's list of priority projects that they would like to undertake. For example, the representative may ask for a project to provide potable water, sewage drainage channels, a new school or road repairs. Each community presents one to four project ideas for which it would like funding. The leaders also give the council a sheet of paper on which these ideas are written. In some areas more than 500 citizens attend these meetings which can last for six hours. A council meeting is held following the *cabildo abierto* to determine which projects will be submitted as requests for funds to government institutions. The most common way for projects brought up in a *cabildo abierto* to be funded is through the Secretary of National Reconstruction. Once recommended for action by the council, the Secretary of National Reconstruction determines how much each project will cost and then may approve the project.

#### *Attitudes Regarding Cabildos Abiertos*

Participants associated the *cabildos abiertos* with participation. The mayor and council set a time and place and issue invitations to all the community leaders. The community leaders assemble the people in their respective community and as an assembly of the community, they decide which problems are priorities and which projects they will present at the *cabildo abierto*. Often the *cabildo abierto* is held on Sunday after mass in the town square or the town hall.

The council members and community leaders like that the *cabildo abierto* gives people the opportunity to verbally express the needs of their community. As people arrive they can sign up to speak. One council member indicated that the best aspect of the *cabildo abierto* is that "A leader comes and speaks. He takes off his hat and participates in the discussion. For us, this is a significant step toward democracy." Others suggested that the *cabildos abiertos* unify communities because the members of the community have to agree on community priorities. Continued attendance at these meetings despite, a lack of projects in many communities, indicates a genuine desire to participate. When asked why people attend *cabildos abiertos* people said that they wanted to hear about the work of the local government or the mayor, as well as to hear the needs of other communities.

Although community interest in participation is high, both local officials and community leaders expressed great frustration with the inability of the local government to address all of the pressing needs which exist. Community members also expressed frustration that the *cabildos*

*abiertos* raised hopes and expectations for future community projects, many of which will never receive attention or funding. One participant noted a loss of faith in the process. "I came to a *cabildo abierto* and listened to the petitions of the community and listened to their hope. Well, then I went to another *cabildo abierto* and heard the same hopeful voice asking for the same project. It was never given." A council member expressed the same sentiment, "The *cabildos abiertos* are not a good moment for us. Nearly all of the people meet. The problem for us is that all of them ask us to provide an infinite amount of assistance and there are not enough dollars to cover the problems that exist." There is also a frustration with certain community leaders who do not consult adequately with their communities. Instead, they present essentially personal needs instead of community problems.

Asked for ways to improve participation in the *cabildos abiertos*, the discussion group members suggested that the local government's report read during the *cabildo abierto*, be expanded to include everything the local government had done, regardless of size. Other suggestions included: holding *cabildos abiertos* on a rotating basis in each smaller community within the municipio; conducting them more frequently; and holding *mini-cabildos* in each town separately instead of one large all town *cabildo abierto*. The *mini-cabildos* were seen as a way to facilitate participation and increase individual communities' interaction with the mayor and the council. Participants noted the need for improved community organizations and the need to dispel fears about participating in community organizations. Participants also encouraged a more realistic mechanism for project funding other than returning to a *cabildo abierto* every three months and asking for the same things. As one participant stated, "They can improve things by putting in practice what they promise."

### *Consultas Populares*

*Consultas populares* are single community meetings directed at making a decision on a specific issue or proposal. Like a public hearing, anybody can speak. People from the community vote on the proposal, the result of which is binding on the council. Although they had been held in two of the three *municipios* visited, many community leaders and council members were not familiar with the term.

In one community a *consulta popular* was held on the subject of a school that needed to be constructed. Initially, when the community had proposed the project, they had asked for three classrooms. The Secretary of National Reconstruction, however, had approved a project with two classrooms. A *consulta popular* was held in that community because, as the council stated, "The people in the community had to decide. It is not our decision." The community voted to build three classrooms by supplementing the extra work and supplies.

### *Attitudes Regarding Consultas Populares*

In the word associations, it became evident that the term *consulta popular*, is not widely known. In the communities and in the councils, there is clearly a confusion between a *consulta* and a *cabildo*. In fact, in a *cabildo abierto* attended by NDI representatives the words, *cabildo*

and *consulta*, were used interchangeably. *Consultas* have been held in two of the three municipalities visited by NDI. However, even in these municipalities the term did not provoke immediate reactions nor were deeper explanations of the concept forthcoming.

One council member indicated that the Secretary of National Reconstruction gives money through the *cabildos abiertos* and the Social Investment Fund through *consultas populares*. While this is not completely the truth, it reflects the deeper reality that the public is unaware of the provisions for participation in the Municipal Code. The Secretary of National Reconstruction does require that projects be raised initially in a *cabildo abierto* in order to obtain funding.

### *Open Council Meetings*

Currently, the municipal code allows for open council meetings but does not require them to be open. In fact, the general practice is that council meetings are closed. Individuals or representatives of groups, however, have been invited to sit in on meetings or make presentations. Council meetings are held twice a month. In the council meeting following the *cabildo abierto*, the mayor and the council assess the needs of the community, prioritize them and decide which projects funds will be requested.

### *Attitudes Regarding Open Council Meetings*

When asked whether council members had held an open council meeting, the council member participants became confused. One council member proclaimed, "Our doors are always open, anyone can come in at any moment to ask us for something." On occasion, the council has invited a community whose problems they were discussing, to attend the council meeting. However, it was unclear to NDI if that was at the initiative of the council or the community.

Often council members are assigned a functional responsibility such as garbage collection, the municipal market, road repair. The council members said that they rely on the community leaders regarding these issues in the rural areas of the municipality. Citizen committees are also organized to assist the council members with these responsibilities. It is unclear how often they meet or how these citizens become part of the committees, yet, through this mechanism, community members do occasionally participate in council meetings.

## **VI. Conclusions**

The lack of opposition representation at the local level limits citizen participation. In other countries adequate participation is facilitated by inclusive electoral processes. Local councils are elected on a proportional representation system or ward system which provides other political parties access to the decisionmaking process. Because there are not several parties involved in the policy process, the participatory mechanisms that exist assume greater importance.

The existing structures are not sufficient to facilitate citizen input. The *cabildo abierto* is not sufficient to incorporate public opinion in decisionmaking. The meetings are held infrequently and are often too large a forum to allow in-depth discussion of local priorities. Over 500 people attend *cabildos abiertos* in rural areas, which can last over five hours. As expressed by the participants, a five-hour meeting, four times a year, cannot involve the public in the continuing planning and decisionmaking process. The *cabildo abierto* is structured as a forum for people to petition for redress of the needs of their communities. As structured, it does not allow for other issues such as documentation, land tenancy, and crime, among others, to be discussed. Community members hear about funds spent for capital projects but not about the municipal budget.

This is not to argue that *cabildos abiertos* are not useful. Clearly, they provide a good, albeit insufficient, opportunity for participation and greater transparency in local government than had existed previously. For example, many people cited, as a motivation for attending the *cabildo abierto*, the opportunity to hear about the work of their local government and how money had been spent. In general, the *cabildo abierto* does not give individual citizens enough voice in their community.

In addition, there are no formal structures other than *cabildos abiertos* for regular communication between local government and community leaders. The lack of ongoing communication has, at times, been detrimental to the relationship between local government officials and community leaders. The communication that does exist outside of the *cabildo abierto* is often one-on-one requests to the mayor. Community leaders from each community in the *municipio* rarely see each other and almost never exchange information. As individuals, community leaders play an important informal role in relaying information between the town hall and the community. However, there is no regular meeting with community leaders only ad-hoc meetings.

Because of this lack of communication, mistrust can exist between the councils and its constituents. One council member told NDI that the people believed the council was stealing from them. This situation can be attributed, in part, to a lack of communication and openness regarding the use of funds.

In various places positive steps have been taken to remedy the lack of communication. In one *municipio*, each community association has *personería jurídica* and representatives of each group meet on a *municipio*-wide council. This council discusses issues that affect all the communities of the *municipio* and takes part in economic development planning. In another, the community organization working on a project receives a copy of every receipt and can see where money has been spent on a project. These positive innovations need to be encouraged and publicized within El Salvador so that others can emulate successful programs.

Many suggestions for improved citizen participation arose from the discussion group sessions. Some of the more relevant ones included:



- more meetings in the communities;
- *mini-cabildos* to increase individual community interaction with the mayor and the council;
- visits by the mayor to each community and meeting with the people to discuss their problems;
- an expanded report of the local government activities read at the *cabildos abiertos*;
- rotating *cabildos abiertos* to each community; and
- better organization on the part of the communities involved.

Clearly, there is a desire for more interaction and participation on the part of community leaders. Local government officials likewise expressed interest in having community input. In some cases local officials felt that they were not sufficiently involved in the entire process of project planning.

The inclusion of citizens in the process of local decisionmaking will not, as many participants said, take place between "night and the next morning." Concrete mechanisms need to be introduced to incorporate public opinion into planning and prioritizing at the local government level. At the same time, the professionalization and improved organization of local government and community groups will assist in this process.

The information provided by the discussion groups has served as a guide for NDI's program to foster the consolidation of mechanisms of participation. NDI's program will encourage local government officials and community leaders to look at expanding current mechanisms of participation. Ideas and suggestions raised by discussion group participants will be expanded on in the program. Furthermore, new mechanisms of participation and ideas for expanding existing mechanisms will be raised by international participants.

In all aspects of the program, NDI will sponsor the participation of international practitioners who have worked in the area of local government and community development. They will share their experiences from their respective countries regarding local government and community participation.

## Questions for Local Government Officials

### A. Concepts (10 minutes)

1. I am going to read to you a few words and I want you to tell me the first two words that come to your mind after hearing each word:

Mayor  
Community Leaders  
City Council Member  
Public Consultations  
Director  
Open City Council meeting  
Local Government  
Community Group  
Open Town Council  
Secretary of National Reconstruction

### B. Participation (30 minutes)

1. How do people participate in local government?
2. Tell us about a town assembly?
  - a. How do people participate in the town assembly?
  - b. Who attends the town assembly?
  - c. Why do people attend?
  - d. Describe a town assembly, how it operates.
  - e. What motivates people to participate?
  - f. How do people participate in the town assembly? (suggestions, projects, problems)
  - g. Is there another way for people to participate in the town assemblies? (e.g. To give suggestions or ideas as to how to resolve certain problems)
3. What do you like about the town assemblies?
4. What do you not like?
5. Explain two ways to improve community participation in the town assemblies.
6. Is there another way for the community to participate? Explain?
7. Explain what a public consultation is. Have you ever held one? Why?
8. Now that the municipal code establishes that open town council meetings can be held? Have you held one? (Why or Why not? )

C. Problem Solving (30 minutes)

1. How are problems identified in your community?
2. How do you make yourself aware of problems in your community?
3. Who is responsible for solving community problems?
4. How is it decided what problems will be solved?
5. On what basis are the problems prioritized?
6. What type of community involvement is there in the resolution of problems?
7. What role do the NGO's play in resolving problems?
8. What role does the central government play in resolving problems?

D. Community Groups (15 minutes)

1. Why are community boards or associations formed?
2. How are community leaders chosen?
3. Please describe a typical community leader.
4. What role do the community leaders play?
5. What responsibility do the community leaders have in local government?
6. Describe the relationship between the town council and the community.
7. If a council member is from another party than the Mayor, is there a different relationship between the two? If so, how?

E. Local Government (15 minutes)

1. Before being a city council member, how did you participate in local government?
2. Why did you become a city council member?
3. How do people from other parties participate in your local government? And the ex-opposition candidates?
4. What type of problems can the local government solve?
5. What do you believe to be the responsibilities of the local government?
6. How is the community informed of what the local government does?
7. What is the role of the mayor? the council? the community? the secretary? the central government?

G. Summary (20 minutes)

1. What suggestions do you have to improve the communication between the community groups and the local government?
2. Suppose that you were meeting with a person that had a complete knowledge of local government. What would you ask him/her?
3. Summary of ideas.

## Questions for Community Leaders

### A. Elections

1. In the last elections you voted to elect your local government. What factors did you take into account in voting?
2. There are always candidates that don't win. How do these people participate in the activities of the community? in local government?

### B. Concepts

I am going to read some words and I want you to tell me quickly in one or two words the first thing that comes into your head. There are no right or wrong answers just tell me the first thing that occurs to you.

Mayor  
Community Leader  
Municipal Council  
Consulta Popular  
Community Board  
Open council meeting  
Local Government  
Community Association  
Cabildo Abierto  
National Reconstruction Agency

### C. Participation

1. how do you participate in your local government?
2. As representatives of your communities, you have attended cabildos abiertos. Tell us what they are like:
  - a. How do you know there will be a town assembly?
  - b. Who attends? Why do you think people go?
  - c. What are the town assemblies like?
  - d. How do you take part in the town assembly?
  - e. Is there any other ways to take part?

3. What do you like about the town assemblies?
4. What don't you like?
5. Tell us two ways of improving citizen participation in town assemblies?
6. Have you attended a public consultation or referendum? What is it like?
7. Is there any other way that you take part in local government?

### Problem Solving

1. How do you identify problems in your community?
2. How do you let the local government officials know what your problems are?
3. As representatives of your community can you tell us what are the pressing problems in your communities?
4. Who is responsible for solving the problems in your community?
5. How do you decide which problems you are going to try to solve?
6. What role do NGOs play in resolving problems?
7. What role does the central government play?

### Community Groups

1. For what reasons do you form a community association?
2. How do you choose the people who represent your community?
3. Describe a community leader for us.
4. What role do community leaders play in your community?
5. What responsibilities do community leaders have in terms of local government?
6. What is the relationship between town hall and the community like?
7. If the Community Board is from a different party than the mayor is there a different relationship with the mayor? How is it different?



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