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Sustainable Pandemic Recovery Depends on “Building Back Democratically”

Global Analysis and Priority Actions

**A White Paper By
the National Democratic Institute (NDI)**

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic is placing an acute strain on many countries already dealing with poor governance and profound socio-economic challenges. In many instances, COVID-19 is exacerbating problems and the fallout -- if left unaddressed -- will continue long after the virus is defeated. At the same time, authoritarians are using the pandemic to seize more power at home and attack democratic systems that protect the rights and dignity of all people.

Through programs spanning more than 70 countries, NDI is actively evaluating political and economic trends, while working with partners on pandemic response initiatives and a sustainable recovery through democratic engagement that prioritizes:

- Shoring up democratic institutions
- Engaging the furthest behind through participatory and inclusive decision making
- Strengthening information integrity through effective communications and countering disinformation
- Combating COVID corruption
- Preventing violence by renewing the social contract

As the international community ramps up aid for COVID recovery efforts, there is an opportunity to strengthen the foundations needed for long-term sustainable development. Addressing fundamental governance deficits by **building back democratically** is central to pandemic recovery and long-term development.

SHORE UP DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

THE PROBLEM:

Pandemic response measures centralizing resources and decision making power in the executive branch have shifted power away from legislatures and, as a result, weakened essential checks and balances. When COVID-19 hit, **legislatures** scrambled to adapt technologies and develop new parliamentary procedures to operate safely and/or remotely. A combination of [executive opportunism](#) and poor crisis preparedness sidelined legislatures from decision making and oversight. According to one study covering April to September 2020, one-third of legislatures had limited or no opportunities for executive scrutiny, while one-quarter played only a marginal role in policymaking.

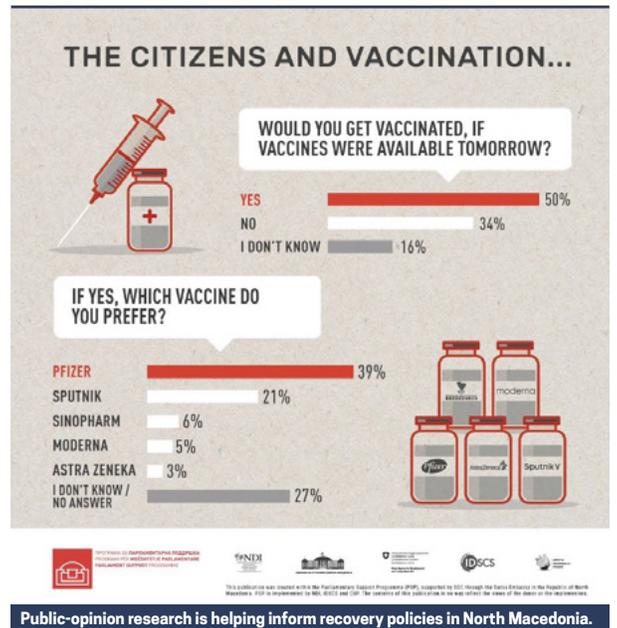
Despite being on the front lines of crisis response, the capacity of **local governments** has been similarly hampered by muddled lines between central and decentralized government jurisdictions and limited participation in the design of national response measures and relief packages.

NDI'S SOLUTION:

Broaden recovery assistance beyond central governments by engaging local governments and legislatures in decision-making and implementation.

As the national institution most closely linked to citizens, legislatures are critical for ensuring that policymaking reflects public needs, while local governments' responsibility for service delivery makes them essential players in policy decisions. Some examples of legislative and local government engagement for a more effective and democratic pandemic response include:

- In Nepal, as municipal governments plan and implement COVID relief and economic recovery programs, NDI is supporting the **work of local officials to increase employment opportunities for returnee migrants and strengthen the local agricultural sector.**
- In North Macedonia, NDI is sharing **COVID-related polling data** - including the finding (see graphic) that only 50% of respondents were willing to be vaccinated against COVID-19 - with the **parliament to inform responsive policymaking.**
- Through the bipartisan [House Democracy Partnership](#), NDI supports legislatures to strengthen their pandemic response capacity through **adaptations to constituent communications procedures.**
- In collaboration with the [Open Government Partnership](#) (OGP), NDI advances [parliamentary and local government transparency](#) in Morocco and Georgia to develop action plans that address the pandemic in ways that are accountable and responsive to citizen needs.



ENGAGE THE FURTHEST BEHIND THROUGH PARTICIPATORY AND INCLUSIVE DECISION MAKING

Encuentro NACIONAL de LIDERAZGOS POLITICOS LGBTI

DESIGUALDAD MÁS EVIDENTE POR LA FALTA DE CONECTIVIDAD

VIRTUALIZAR ESPACIOS DE PARTICIPACION

LEGALIZACION DE LA VIRTUALIDAD

LAS NECESIDADES DEL ELECTORADO QUE BUSGÓ NO SON LAS MISMAS QUE LAS ACTUALES

DESAFIOS EN LA PANDEMIA

Colombia's LGBTI communities are acting collectively to engage political leaders.

THE PROBLEM:

The pandemic has disproportionately impacted [women](#), [persons with disabilities](#), [LGBTI](#) people, and others marginalized due to their race or [ethnicity](#). [Young people](#) might be the most affected, as they experience major disruptions in their education and diminished employment prospects. Across marginalized communities, NDI has witnessed the desire to act and effect positive change. However, these communities need to make up lost ground to achieve the equality and dignity they deserve. This includes ensuring equal access to on-line spaces and virtual exchange, which COVID-19 has necessitated and made central to participation. According to [NDI analysis](#), governments have not taken concerted action in response to the heightened challenges facing marginalized communities. In many instances, the policy decisions made have lacked nuance and seem to favor more well-off majorities. At the same time, groups have had to fight for access to routine [health services](#) and continued government investment in basic subsistence programs. Assistance must be designed to shift governance processes quickly away from the “tyranny of the urgent,” so that effective and sustainable recovery can be achieved.

NDI'S SOLUTION:

Combine targeted efforts that help organize marginalized communities, with wider efforts that incentivize participatory and inclusive policymaking.

A twin-track approach will amplify the voices of these communities and foster spaces where they can participate without suffering discrimination, intimidation or reprisal. Efforts supporting more responsive and accountable government policies that meet the needs of all people include:

- During the pandemic, NDI has continued to provide **small grants and technical assistance to organizations representing marginalized communities**. This work has helped keep these communities visible, networked regionally and transnationally, and engaged in collective actions to protect their rights and promote government accountability.
- To enhance public policy making, NDI has been working with political parties and parliaments. While assisting political parties with action planning in Colombia, NDI convened **multiparty roundtables with the LGBTI Observatory** on Political Participation to inform party leaders of the pandemic's impacts on LGBTI individuals.
- Likewise, NDI has undertaken a program in Iraq to support a diverse group of **women parliamentarians in addressing the dramatic uptick in domestic violence**. This coincides with work in six of Iraq's provinces to support **Women's Advisory Boards** campaigning for improved and assured educational access for girls.
- Across all programs, NDI has moved to reduce the digital divide by sharing guidance with **partners** on how to make virtual activities safe and accessible. Additionally, NDI has supported **web connectivity, cybersecurity, and media literacy**. These are necessary steps to ensure marginalized communities can continue to organize and act alongside other segments of society.

STRENGTHEN INFORMATION INTEGRITY THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS AND COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

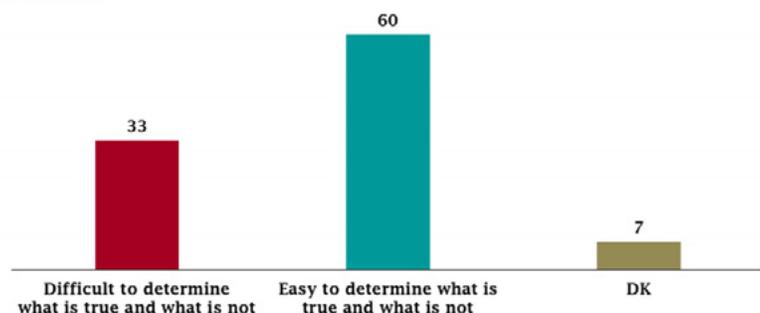
THE PROBLEM:

Proving as infectious as the virus, disinformation has undermined compliance with health guidance, increased social division and scapegoating, and diminished trust between citizens and their government. A review carried out by NDI in February of 48 countries highlighted the presence of pandemic-related disinformation in 77% of the countries. This global scan was reinforced by NDI's public opinion research in Georgia which, as shown in the below graphic, revealed that one-third of the population found it difficult to differentiate between accurate reporting and false information.

NDI's media monitoring in Kosovo found that nearly half of all articles (46%) contained some form of disinformation with COVID-19 featuring as the most common topic. Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, media monitoring with partners, Observatoire Ivoirien des Droits de l'Homme, the Demos' Center for the Analysis of Social Media and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, revealed pervasive COVID-19 disinformation, including allegations that authorities were deliberately spreading the virus and raising doubts regarding the efficacy of masks and vaccines.

Covid-19 - telling truth from lies

When you get news and information about the Covid-19 outbreak, do you generally find it ... (q7) - of the 99% who receives information about coronavirus



Public doubt in COVID-19 news and information may hamper Georgia's recovery.

NDI'S SOLUTION:

Support efforts to counter disinformation through inclusive and evidence-based trust building and communications strategies.

In response to the global disinformation 'infodemic,' NDI is supporting partners around the world to monitor and promote information integrity.

- In Kosovo, NDI continues to **monitor the information space** to understand how COVID, and the response to it, is portrayed and discussed in regional news organizations and websites and social media. NDI is manually tracking and scraping data and using the Crowdtangle monitoring application. NDI is also working with Charitable Analytics International (CAI) to **examine the nature and impact of state-based gendered disinformation campaigns** in Brazil and Lebanon, in order to inform responses to their influence on political discourse.
- In Africa and Asia, NDI's [INFO/tegrity initiative](#) supports local partner capacity through its **network promotion, training for communications strategies, social media monitoring, and cybersecurity measures** for a more effective response to false COVID-19 narratives.
- In Latin America, NDI has supported local governments to identify and share **innovative technology and digital adaptations** that counter disinformation and promote citizen trust.

COMBAT COVID CORRUPTION

THE PROBLEM:

The pandemic has been a boon to corrupt actors, providing countless opportunities for misdeeds and exploitation, including contract fraud, price gouging, counterfeit medicines and bribery related to tests, vaccines, treatment and quarantine restrictions. Beyond lining their pockets, politicians may also misuse emergency aid for political purposes by rewarding allies, punishing enemies and otherwise expanding their power base.

Given the life-and-death stakes, vaccine distribution transparency is of particular concern. A review of countries where NDI operates found that only a minority of governments had publicized a national COVID-19 vaccination strategy. Incidents of [VIP line jumping](#) have emerged in a number of countries, spawning indignant hashtags ([#vacunagate](#)) and protest movements, roiling domestic politics and further undermining trust in political institutions.

NDI'S SOLUTION:

Build in transparency, monitoring and oversight measures to ensure that vaccines and recovery resources get to those who need it most.

Donors can combat COVID corruption by promoting transparency in the use of pandemic relief (including vaccines), as well as supporting legislatures for effective oversight, civil society for process monitoring, and independent media for investigative reporting:

- As the pandemic has exacerbated [debt distress levels](#) globally, parliaments have been sidelined during loan approval processes and loans have been disbursed with [inadequate anti-corruption provisions](#). To address this problem, In Georgia and Kenya, NDI is working with legislators for more effective **public debt decision-making and oversight**.

- NDI’s support to Transparency International Zambia exposed the **weakness of the government’s own monitoring mechanism** for donations, poor inter-agency coordination, and reluctance by officials at all levels to provide data on donations and expenditures. Similarly, in Honduras, a 22-member coalition of good government watchdog groups supported by NDI **found more than 50 pandemic procurement irregularities** involving medicine, equipment, and health supplies.

PREVENT VIOLENCE BY RENEWING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

THE PROBLEM:

COVID-19 has increased instability and tensions, threatening peace and security around the world. More than a quarter of the countries where NDI operates are experiencing increased insecurity according to a survey of NDI country offices. Another [analysis](#) of pandemic-inspired insecurity predicts outbreaks of civil violence over rising prices and falling incomes in the next two years. In some instances, armed groups are occupying spaces vacated by state actors. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is providing pandemic health services. In Mali, the United Nations peacekeeping force has had to reduce its operations, and EU development support for communities experiencing jihadist violence has been partially diverted to fund the country’s COVID response. As a result, communities have engaged local vigilante groups, such as Da Na Ambassagou, a documented human rights abuser, to counter terrorist threats.

As fragile and conflict-affected states begin vaccine distribution programs, discrimination and corruption can increase the risk of violence. Some of that insecurity is caused by the state itself. Seventy-one percent of NDI-program countries have seen an uptick in security sector involvement in the pandemic response, often in heavy-handed ways that target the most vulnerable and marginalized populations.

NDI’S SOLUTION:

Structure assistance to facilitate citizens and public officials interacting on security-sector decisions.

Conflict-sensitive international assistance programs are required to avoid exacerbating pandemic-induced insecurities and conflict dynamics. Assistance and vaccine distribution should be structured to support social cohesion by reintroducing a constructive, community-level state presence in combination with strong elements of civil society oversight and citizen feedback to activate the social contract, as exemplified by the following:

- Conflict-sensitive programming depends on a deep understanding of local social, political and economic dynamics. In Mali, NDI is supporting its partner Alliance for Rebuilding Governance in Mali (ARGA) in **studying the impact of COVID-19 on the security situation** in four regions of the country.
- In Burkina Faso and Sudan, NDI is enhancing **community resilience to the pandemic** in ways that strengthen responses to violence and peace transitions. NDI is working with local women’s networks to engage local governments in better informed and enhanced service provision. Rebuilding the social contract between state and citizens after it has been disrupted by the pandemic and exploited by violent groups is key to preventing renewed violence.

