

## Civic Update

### The Role of Dialogue in Deepening Democracy

Citizen Participation Team | September 2014

A democracy relies on dialogue to help mitigate conflict and promote consideration of alternative ideas and perspectives. Appropriately-managed dialogue can lay the groundwork for peaceful deliberation across party, ethnic, and religious divides by creating a safe space for open discussion and more inclusive political agenda-setting. In this regard, it is a critical means of increasing pluralism and a shared sense of community. Dialogue can also help build social cohesion and strengthen democratic values, even in communities with deep social fissures or little experience with democracy, but it has to be well managed and repeated in one form or another in order to establish new normative behaviors.

However, many societies lack established practices or the know-how required for regular public dialogue and deliberation. In response, NDI has supported various forms of dialogue to achieve both immediate and long-term democratic development objectives. In the short run, dialogue might be used to raise awareness of an issue, analyze a problem, share perspectives or build relationships. Ideally, these immediate outcomes would in turn contribute to wider efforts designed to influence decision making and rein-



*Participants at a constituency dialogue in Cambodia*

force the role of citizens in political life. Although dialogue is often central to many change processes, NDI has learned that public dialogue alone might not change very much, unless it is combined with other political actions that would take place before and after the dialogue. For example, a “constituency dialogue” should be viewed as a link in a chain of actions to encourage more accountable elected leaders. The dialogue itself, however, does not guarantee that citizen needs and interests will be taken into account when it comes time for the elected leader to take a decision.

This edition of the Civic Update discusses considerations on supporting dialogue and deliberation through public forums. If you have questions or comments, please contact NDI’s citizen participation team.

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## DIALOGUE WITH A PURPOSE

It is important to differentiate the dialogue that happens during public forums from other forms of interaction, such as decision making or negotiation. Dialogue may occur in conjunction with decision making and as a part of a broader process like peace negotiations, but as a intermediary step. Dialogue is distinguished by its emphasis on sharing ideas and strengthening relationships through a give and take exchange process.

Different types of public forums can provide a space for citizens to express their voice and engage public officials and political leaders. When organized with purpose, these spaces can help shape patterns of participation and political relationships.

The most appropriate type of dialogue in a given situation is determined by underlying purpose. Different types of dialogue require different formats, tools and planning. For example, a constituency dialogue would be organized differently than an issue forum or a town-hall meeting. A purposeful dialogue will have an explicit objective and corresponding process. In each case, thought has to be given to what happens after the dialogue, so that the dialogue itself produces the required outputs.

*Constituency dialogues* can address the information gap between voters and their representatives at all levels of government. Constituency dialogues provide citizens with the opportunity to meet their elected representatives and voice their concerns about policy issues. This format also allows representatives to discuss their legislative records, present their plans for future legislative action, and get to know the demographics, values, and priorities of their constituents.

Holding a *town hall* meeting can facilitate dialogue around issues that affect an entire community. Town hall meetings provide community members the opportunity to engage with each other to discuss needs and priorities. A town hall meeting can be part of the reconciliation process where members of a community air grievances and share thoughts and experiences.

*Public hearings* establish a space to discuss the viability and implications of a specific policy, proposal or initiative. Legislative bodies or local authorities

may hold a public hearing on a proposed law or policy in order to raise awareness and gather information about how the law will impact different segments of society. Local conflicts over public goods, land, or resources can also benefit from public hearings where multiple stakeholders discuss their positions in an effort to resolve the issue.



*A community assembly in Belladere, Haiti*

Similarly, dialogue can help unify public opinion around a particular topic. For example, on topics like constitutional reform, *issue forums* allow communities to develop consensus around their reform preferences. Particular segment of society, like women or youth, might be targeted so that their unique voices are aggregated in a way that would resonate with decision-makers.

## PREPARING CSOS, PUBLIC OFFICIALS, AND CITIZENS TO PARTICIPATE IN DIALOGUE

Although different dialogues might serve different purposes and be organized differently, they share some common characteristics. Ensuring a dialogue is effective requires careful planning, agenda-setting, and facilitation so that participants can trust the process to be inclusive, fair, and safe. Facilitators may require training in order to understand the principles that make dialogue work, as well as to take the steps needed to ensure those principles are applied during the dialogue. Without quality facilitation, a dialogue might be captured by interest groups, devolve into partisan arguments, or even escalate to violence.

Similarly, participants must have at

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least some knowledge of the format, disposition, and expected outcomes of the process so that they may participate actively, effectively, and appropriately. Training of participants can be limited to information contained in advertising or promotional materials, a brief overview at the beginning of the dialogue event, or respectful correction of inappropriate behavior. On the other hand, it could include a more involved process to help participants frame their positions and practice public speaking. Dialogue organizers should also strive to make participants aware of the specific roles of the public officials present, as well as appropriate questions and requests in light of those roles. Without this information, citizens may come forward with personal requests or complaints rather than questions about policy or community issues.

Organization of dialogues requires careful consideration of whose participation is necessary to ensure appropriate representation of the broader community. The key concern is to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the dialogue event and their anticipated role in it. The dialogue can still be legitimate even if some stakeholders choose not to attend. The event must also be held at a time and location that is accessible for all participants in order to maintain legitimacy.



*Participants at a Democracy Dialogue in Honduras*

In addition to inclusion, the principle of fairness must be protected during the dialogue process. Inclusiveness ensures that all relevant stakeholders are present at the dialogue, while fairness ensures that all participants are allowed to engage with each other on equal terms. Power imbalances that are external

to the dialogue, such as those between majority and opposition party members or marginalized groups in the community, can inhibit the dialogue process. Dialogue facilitators are responsible for levelling the playing field so that all participants feel empowered to speak and no single participant or group dominates the conversation. Fairness also implies respect for all viewpoints during the dialogue. Facilitators should make clear to participants that personal attacks, prejudices, or discriminatory statements will not be tolerated during the dialogue. Preventing discriminatory language helps maintain an open environment so that all participants feel comfortable both sharing their perspectives and listening to the experiences of others.

WHEN PLANNING A DIALOGUE EVENT, THERE ARE A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Is there a need for a designated moderator? Who should moderate the dialogue (e.g. a public official, a representative from the partner organization, a third-party, etc.)?
- Does the moderator require training on how to handle disruptive behavior or strategies for ensuring all interested participants have a chance to speak?
- Is the dialogue held in a location that is neutral and accessible for all participants?
- What background information do participants need before the dialogue? How will they receive this information (e.g. through publicity materials, a brief presentation before the event, etc.)?
- What is NDI's role in comparison to the role of local partner organization(s)?
- How can the dialogue be most effectively advertised (e.g. newspaper ads, radio, flyers, word of mouth)?
- Will all relevant groups in the community attend the dialogue? How can the necessary stakeholders be encouraged to attend?
- What are some questions or concerns likely to be raised during the dialogue? How should the facilitator prepare for controversial topics or emotional responses?
- How should the event be recorded (e.g. note-taking, audio or video recording, etc.)? How will this information be used after the event?
- How should public officials be encouraged to attend? Is their presence necessary, or can the dialogue proceed without them?

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- How will participants ask questions? Will questions be screened before the dialogue, or will the floor be open for all questions and comments?
- What follow-up activities will likely result from the dialogue? Who will be responsible for these activities?
- What are the ground rules for the event (e.g. raising your hand before speaking, no discriminatory language, only one person speaking at a time, etc.)? How will these rules be enforced?
- Will community members feel safe attending the dialogue? Should police or security forces be present?
- What are the expected outcomes and results of the dialogue? Are they in line with participants' expectations?
- What ethnic, religious, or cultural differences might be highlighted by the dialogue? How can facilitators support inclusiveness?

## Moderator's Guidelines

See "Additional Resources" for guides on moderating public dialogue events.



*Citizens of Bethlehem gather for a question and answer session with the mayor live on a local radio station*

crease the participation of youth in this process and develop a youth position on constitutional reform in advance of the government's national dialogues.

In pursuit of these goals, NDI partnered with four local youth organizations to help strengthen their skills in organizing, advocacy, and engagement with decision makers - Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), Zambia Rainbow Coalition (ZRC), Youth Alive Zambia (YAZ), and Young Women in Action (YWA). With NDI's assistance, the partner organizations planned a total of eight youth dialogues to capture youth views and prepare youth to participate in the constitutional reform process.



*Discussion during a youth dialogue in Zambia*

In preparation for the dialogues, NDI held trainings with each of the organizations on advocacy and strategic action planning. NDI also held joint trainings with all four organizations to develop an implementation plan for the project. The partner organizations were responsible for planning the dialogues, including choosing the location and developing the agenda for each session. NDI provided a review process following each dialogue to help the partners synthesize participant views and strengthen partners' understanding of their roles. The partner organizations tapped into their pre-existing country-wide networks to help locate venues for the dialogues, recruit attendees, and promote the dialogues in local media. At each dialogue, representatives from the partner organizations served as facilitators as participants discussed recommendations for a preliminary position paper on youth priorities for constitutional reform. The dialogues also provided a platform for participants to interact with public officials and share their questions and concerns about the draft constitution.

After completion of the dialogues, NDI's partners

## ENGAGING YOUTH IN CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN ZAMBIA

Following the 2011 elections, the new administration in Zambia fulfilled its campaign promise to restart the constitutional reform process, releasing a draft constitution in April 2012 and launching a national dialogue process to solicit feedback on the draft. NDI supported a number of youth organizations to in-

drafted a two-page issue paper based on the recommendations and priorities identified by participants. The issue paper has helped guide youth advocacy during the ongoing constitutional reform process and has strengthened the ability of youth organiza-



tions to participate in ongoing dialogue around constitutional reforms by giving them a concrete platform to use as a foundation that was developed

through an open, participatory process.

This project offers many lessons for NDI staff seeking to support a similar public dialogue process for youth. First, it is important to understand the cultural and political context of the programming country, as well as the dynamics between organizations who are working together. It can be a challenge to capture passionate views and then communicate them in a way that decision-makers understand, respect, and can act on. Appropriate training on advocacy, engaging public officials, and defining the role of the partners can help expand the reach of the program. MOUs can also be important when working with local partners to make sure that everyone understands the expectations for the partnership. This project also highlights the importance of setting realistic expectations for results with partners in dialogue programming. The process is valuable even if the groups are not successful in getting all of the proposed reforms passed.

## COMMUNITY-BASED CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN HAITI

Haiti's transition to democracy has been marked by poverty, inequality, and corruption. Weak political structures and limited engagement between citizens and public officials can undermine opportunities for addressing community problems and increase the likelihood of violence. NDI has worked in Haiti since 1998 to foster citizen participation through the Civic Forum program, which provides civic education to civic groups and encourages them to apply the principles they learn to form community action groups. Many of these community action groups took the form of Initiative Committees (ICs) that identified community priorities and worked to find solutions.

As a result, more than 250 ICs have been formed in all of Haiti's 10 departments.

NDI's work in Haiti has often focused on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic because it is particularly prone to violence. The border between the two countries is porous, allowing for easy cross-border movement of goods and people. People from diverse cultural backgrounds are attracted to the region because of these economic opportunities, generating conditions for conflict not found in the rest of the country. In 2012, NDI expanded on its existing work in the border region with the Dominican Republic and began an initiative to help community leaders create safe spaces for discussing and resolving conflict. Community dialogues offer a neutral space for citizens and elected officials to engage with each other about important issues that often lead to conflict.



*A community assembly in Belladere, Haiti*

NDI and local partners first conducted skills trainings with community leaders to increase their capacity to organize and convene dialogues to address local conflicts. An initial training introduced participants to the definition of conflict and the principles and goals of dialogue processes. A second training focused on conducting stakeholder analysis, community organizing, and negotiation techniques. Following the skills trainings, NDI supported community leaders as they organized dialogues to bring together residents, community groups, and political leaders to discuss local conflicts and identify possible solutions. Two stages of dialogues were held at the district level within two communes near the Haitian-Dominican border. Over 900 citizens participated in the dialogues. In the third stage of the program, NDI and the local partners worked together to convene assem-



blies at the communal level. During the communal assemblies, dialogue participants, local authorities, and community members discussed the conflicts



identified at the dialogues and began to identify solutions.

The communal assemblies helped facilitate contact between opposing political

factions and segments of the population that mistrusted each other and avoided interaction. By raising awareness of community-wide problems like electoral violence, the dialogues helped citizens recognize that some issues were not inevitable and that cooperation could contribute to solutions. For example, following the assemblies local party leaders in one of the communes have jointly agreed not to support candidates that threaten to promote electoral violence. In both communes, increased trust has led residents to rely more on local police to address crime and patrol high-crime areas. The dialogues changed the existing social dynamics in the communes and contributed to increased trust within the population, as well as to increased trust in local authorities and political figures.

## CONSTITUENCY DIALOGUES IN CAMBODIA

In Cambodia, the lack of a tradition of representatives returning to their districts once elected to seek input from constituents served to limit interaction and accountability between elected representatives and citizens. In 2004, NDI launched a constituency dialogue program across Cambodia to foster public discourse and communication between Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) and their provincial constituents. Over the last ten years, NDI staff in Cambodia have assisted in moderating the dialogues and recruited local CSOs and volunteers to manage the logistics of the constituency dialogue program, such as choosing the date, booking the venue, and advertising the event to the local community. The long-running project offers many lessons learned for NDI staff seeking to implement similar programming.

The dialogues are held in provinces where members of both the majority party and the opposition are represented in the National Assembly. This creates a unique space in the Cambodian political system for representatives from different parties to appear together in public. The dialogues also offer Cambodians the opportunity to interact with their representatives and learn about the roles and duties of the legislative branch. Citizens can ask questions of their representatives and voice their concerns, which give representatives from both parties the opportunity to share their party platforms and learn about their constituents' priorities. NDI supports the local partners in completing follow-up activities as they contact MNAs, monitor any changes in the villages where dialogues are held, and report on progress to community members. Since the dialogues began in 2004, many issues raised at the dialogues have been addressed and citizens report more confidence in their representatives and better understanding of the legislative process.

Over the course of the program, the support for constituency dialogues has overcome some challenges that provide valuable lessons. For example, when the program began in 2004, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) initially refused to participate. NDI staff continually extended the invitation to participate in meetings with CPP party leaders and through radio broadcasts advertising the constituency dialogue events. Holding the dialogues in the absence of ruling party members demonstrated to the CPP that engaging with citizens could be to their advantage, and the CPP eventually agreed to participate in 2006.



*A constituency dialogue held in Cambodia in 2010*

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In the ten years of running the program, NDI reevaluated its approach multiple times and altered the events accordingly, such as switching from MNAs to local elected officials in 2014. Transitioning from national to local officials made sense in this context because many participants were interested in voicing concerns about issues within local jurisdiction. Additionally, as the dialogues became more established, NDI expanded the program to support the creation of Engaged Citizens Networks that recruit participants from dialogue events to conduct community outreach activities and monitor the response of local councils to issues raised at the dialogues.



*An NDI staff member addresses a constituency dialogue*

In a divided political context like Cambodia's, it is important to communicate to all participants that the dialogue event is a safe and neutral space for policy discussion. NDI's reputation in Cambodia as a neutral actor was critical to lend legitimacy to the constituency dialogues, allowing members of both the ruling party and the opposition to attend. To capitalize on the unique opportunity for engagement and discussion offered by constituent dialogues, it can be useful to prepare the representatives for questions that may be asked and appropriate ways to answer. Training the officials on how the dialogue should be conducted can help them moderate their own responses and guide discussion in a way that helps all attendees make the most of the event.

## DEMOCRACY DIALOGUES IN HONDURAS

In countries with deeply polarized political systems, support for organizing dialogues may help highlight commonalities between political factions and restart constructive dialogue in the political process. NDI

used this approach in Honduras, where a 2009 coup and constitutional crisis resulted in a political divide that hampered constructive cross-party dialogue. In 2011, NDI began organizing more than 40 multi-party democracy dialogues to foster reconciliation and provide a neutral space for interaction among political parties, citizens, and civil society across the stark political divide. The dialogues bring together officials from all registered political parties, as well as representatives from emerging political parties, government officials, civil society organizations, and diverse ethnic groups, and cover a variety of topics related to public issues, including women's participation, citizen security, electoral reform, institutional strengthening, and democratic values. In this program, the multi-party democracy dialogues serve as a way to start a conversation between political parties and members of civil society about the political future of Honduras.



*Participants at a democracy dialogue in Honduras*

The success of organizing these dialogues and creating the space for constructive discussions relied on NDI's unique position as an impartial and respected actor in Honduras, allowing the Institute to convene the democracy dialogues and appeal to political figures from all registered parties. To lay the groundwork for each event, NDI staff conduct outreach to various groups and individuals to ensure that participants would represent diverse opinions and that the event would not be perceived as favoring one side over another due to the make-up of attendees. NDI also recruits members of marginalized or underrepresented groups to attend the dialogues, including women, youth, and ethnic minorities. Deliberate inclusion of these groups in the dialogues introduces their perspectives to the conversation and has led to several proposals focused on underrepresented sec-



tors being placed on the national reform agenda. For example, the democracy dialogues were one method NDI employed to support efforts by women to achieve the passage of a 40 percent quota for women on congressional candidate lists, implemented for the first time in 2013.

Additionally, the dialogue events have been future-oriented and focused on proposals for reform, particularly opportunities for increased citizen participation, institutional strengthening, and consensus building. This allows all participants to engage respectfully in spite of their divergent views, and fosters consensus on policy issues and the reform agenda. The opportunity for dialogue allows political actors and members of civil society to find common ground and may encourage more cooperation on legislative proposals for reform.

## ENCOURAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE WEST BANK

In the West Bank, limited national government engagement can make it difficult for citizen priorities to be identified and acted upon. In a 2011 study, NDI found that many Palestinians felt disconnected from their government officials and frustrated with limited engagement. Additionally, several civil society organizations interviewed during the study expressed interest in improving their communities' situation, but felt they had few opportunities to do so. In 2013, NDI launched a local-level citizen participation program in the West Bank to increase the interaction between citizens and local government officials. Through partnerships with two local groups, Palestinian Vision and Omniah Youth Center, NDI aimed to assist citizens in Bethlehem and Jenin as they developed relationships with local government officials in order to affect change in their communities. NDI initially provided the partners with training on project planning, local-level advocacy, and community survey development.

In order to foster stronger and more productive relationships between citizens and local government, Palestinian Vision and Omniah Youth Center used a multi-tiered approach. To identify citizen concerns and priorities, both groups canvassed in their municipalities through door-to-door surveys and radio programs. After compiling citizen responses from the surveys, the two partner organizations tailored their

next steps according to the social context in their respective communities.

After gathering information on community needs, both groups began a process to develop priorities and design an action plan. In Jenin, Omniah formed a committee of concerned citizens to engage with local leaders and represent citizens' priorities. In Bethlehem, Palestinian Vision organized a town hall meeting with public officials and approximately 75 citizens to share the results of the survey and recruit members for a citizen committee. The group chose a town hall as the most appropriate format for selecting citizen committee members in order to ensure a perception of transparency among the public, who may otherwise have questioned the legitimacy of a citizen committee.



*An Omniah volunteer completes a survey*

To prepare for the town hall meeting, Palestinian Vision met with local officials to encourage their attendance and explain the format and topic. Palestinian Vision used their existing networks in Bethlehem to encourage people to attend the town hall meeting, and also reached out to university faculty and students. To maintain their neutral position, Palestinian Vision recruited a member of another local NGO to serve as moderator. Before the town hall began, the moderator described the expectations for the event to make sure all participants understood the purpose of the meeting and to ensure respectful discussion. At the town hall meeting, citizens raised a number of issues to the public officials in attendance. The committee formed at the town hall meeting has worked with the municipal council, the mayor, and city administration officials to address issues raised at the town hall meeting, as well as new issues identified since the meeting. The committees created in each municipality during this process have achieved many



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of the priorities highlighted by citizens, including paving roads, repairing flood plains, and building bridges.



*The mayor of Bethlehem during the radio show*

In addition to the town hall meeting that launched the citizen committee, Palestinian Vision hosted a radio show with the mayor of Bethlehem in the city center in order to get direct feedback from citizens about community needs. The radio show was the first time that a public official in Bethlehem had conducted an open discussion with the citizens. Palestinian Vision coordinated closely with the radio station, local police, and the moderator to ensure that the location in the city center was safe and that overly confrontational or controversial political questions would not be asked. These measures eased the mayor's concerns and ensured that the event went smoothly. The mayor's support and participation was crucial for the success of the later stages of the project.

Over the course of the program, NDI and its partners noted positive change in the relationship between government and its citizens. In Jenin, Omniah and the citizens' committee meet with the mayor on a regular basis, signifying a strengthened relationship. The citizens' committee also consulted with the city council on issues identified as priorities during the survey process, leading to the city taking steps to fix water pipes, pave roads, and convert an abandoned lot into a park. In Bethlehem, many of the issues raised at the town hall have been addressed, including a local dispute over building permits and construction of a slaughterhouse. The mayor has also started holding office hours on Saturday mornings for the public to come to her office for one-on-one meetings. In both cities, the partner organizations

were able to amplify citizens' voices and encourage local governments to pay attention, leading to substantive change in the relationship between citizens and government.

The results of this program demonstrate that careful selection of partners often determines the success of citizen participation programming. Before partnering with NDI, Palestinian Vision and Omniah were both well respected organizations and viewed as neutral in their communities. Both organizations are also politically savvy and well-informed about their communities. Their knowledge about their communities and desire to affect real change shaped the ways they implemented the program. After choosing strategic partners, thoughtful program design and limited financial assistance can maximize results and increase sustainability.

The local focus of the program deliberately emphasized concrete issues with real impacts on the everyday lives of citizens in the communities, like trash pick-up and clean water, instead of long-term projects or national-level issues. By addressing these priorities, local governments demonstrated to their citizens



*A representative of a disabled person's organization speaks at the Bethlehem town hall meeting*

and to themselves that they were capable of delivering results. These initial successes increase citizens' trust in government and lay the groundwork for continued engagement with local officials and civil society organizations on larger issues.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [“Developing Facilitation Skills”](#) — Community Toolbox
  - Available at: <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/group-facilitation/facilitation-skills/main>
- [“Public Dialogue: A Tool for Citizen Engagement”](#) — Centre for Public Dialogue
  - Available at: [http://ncdd.org/rc/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/PublicDlog\\_ToolForCE.pdf](http://ncdd.org/rc/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/PublicDlog_ToolForCE.pdf)
- [“Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners”](#) — United Nations Development Program, Canadian International Development Agency, International IDEA, Organization of American States
  - Available at: [https://portal.ndi.org/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?p\\_l\\_id=256869&folderId=425756&name=DLFE-12984.pdf](https://portal.ndi.org/c/document_library/get_file?p_l_id=256869&folderId=425756&name=DLFE-12984.pdf)
- [“Localizing Development—Does Participation Work?”](#) — The World Bank
  - Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/11859/9780821382561.pdf?sequence=1>

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