

Civic Update

Community Organizing

Citizen Participation Team | September 2016

Community organizing is a form of collective action that enables people to develop power and influence. In most places where NDI works, citizens have few, if any, opportunities to participate in government decisions impacting public welfare. Informed, active engagement through community organizing is one way for citizens to challenge and change this dynamic. Instead of bypassing government, parliaments, parties and politics, citizens must engage these institutions.

Community organizing demonstrates how change can be locally led, participatory and inclusive, as well as iterative and adaptive. It is also inherently



Citizens meet with Janar Akaev, a member of Kyrgyzstan's parliament, to discuss their community needs

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political by dealing directly with power dynamics and seeking to transform them. Community organizing is usually led by an organizer, who assists local leaders and activists who are struggling to address community issues that require government action. This often includes identifying strategic entry points to the political process, such as elections, which represent a unique opportunity for citizen groups to raise policy issues, secure commitments from candidates, build relations with and mobilize like-minded individuals, and increase the visibility of their cause.

This issue of the Civic Update looks at how NDI has assisted local partners in organizing citizens to work on issues that address their day to day concerns and to bring about social and political change.

NDI's Approach to Community Organizing

NDI assists citizens in using community organizing techniques to elevate their voices, expand political space, and develop accountability relationships with public officials. Starting in Slovakia in 1993, NDI has introduced community organizing in more than a dozen countries. The work that took place in Slovakia two decades ago resulted in organizers, leaders and activists that are still organizing today around issues, such as housing, education and infrastructure.

NDI is currently running community organizing programs in multiple countries, including Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Nicaragua, and the West Bank. In each of these cases, NDI has deployed experienced community organizers to these countries to recruit and develop local organizers. Through these programs, NDI recognizes that community organizing is not always a linear process, and that this approach gives citizens a voice to be their own advocates, demand change and shift power dynamics so that power resides with the people.

With NDI assistance, local partners have been able to:

- Identify issues that are affecting their immediate communities
- Develop relationships with local governments
- Improve their advocacy skills
- Expand citizen participation over time
- Evaluate power dynamics
- Increase their leadership capacity to take on community development projects



NDI's Nicaragua program is developing a community organizing component to complement youth leadership training through the Certificate in Leadership and Public Management.

Community Organizing as an Approach to Thinking and Working Politically

Community organizers think and work politically, and help their communities do the same. This means determining what is politically viable, what incentives can promote or inhibit change, who are the opponents and potential allies, how widely felt is the issue, and other critical considerations. From a democratic development standpoint, the approach helps foster substantive interactions between citizens and public officials around tangible community needs and interests. These interactions are often unprecedented and begin to shape new political norms and practices that favor accountable government and deepen democracy. At the same time, the organizing helps solve problems often tied to the community's socio-economic welfare. As a matter of fact, it is socio-economic interests that usually fuel citizen desire to organize and take action in the first place.

Being a non-linear process, community organizing also gets people to think realistically about what they can achieve, relishing small victories that nourish organizing initiatives while not getting discouraged by setbacks. Therefore, it requires consistent, action-oriented technical support from the organizer for an extended period of time. At the same time, dedicated community leaders and activists must be willing to put in the effort in order to foster a change in thinking and consequently more sustainable change.

The following examples demonstrate how NDI has assisted local partner groups in organizing citizens to collectively drive positive change.

Kyrgyzstan: Strengthening Civil Society, Facilitating Responsive Government and Enhancing Accountability

To increase the number of politically engaged citizens at the local level, NDI launched the Citizens in Action program which consists of grassroots civic education and organizing pilot projects. The Institute recruited six community organizers, or locally referred to in this program as "community educators", from Chui and Issyk Kul oblasts, and trained them on such skills as asset-mapping, organizational leadership management, and door-to-door canvassing. In each

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community, trained educators formed one or two initiative groups, based on voluntary commitments of 15 to 20 citizens. Educators and citizens conducted door-to-door canvassing in 15 different communities to identify potential participants and to find common issues of concern that they would address through organizing advocacy campaigns. After identifying the issue that each group hoped to solve, the educators consulted with NDI and came up with action plans that detailed the steps needed to reach out to the relevant decision makers and seek the resources needed.



The new citizen-installed water supply system in Kashka Suu

For instance, after conducting a survey of citizens in Baitik village, the local group in Chui Oblast identified the installment of a new water supply system in the village as priority issue. As the existing water supply system has not been updated for more than 30 years, local inhabitants did not have access to clean water. So, the group conducted research on this issue, and developed an action plan for their campaign and a budget for the cost of updating the water supply system. The group addressed letters to the village council and held multiple meetings with the head of the council to seek a solution to this community problem. Despite challenges in the early stages of the project, such as lack of responsiveness from local government officials and skepticism from villagers about their ability to foster change through political means, the group started to gain support from local authorities by repeatedly reaching out to village officials to discuss the consequences of the outdated water system on the health of local citizens. Consequently, the administration of Baitik

village council allocated a small amount of money to make estimates for the construction and maintenance of a new water supply system in Baitik village.



Citizens examine the water supply system

The Citizens in Action project has demonstrated that citizen organizing can be effective and successful in delivering small-scale changes to communities to address long-standing concerns and influence change. Despite resistance from some community and political leaders with opposing interests, the activists and citizens remained engaged in the process, and ultimately gained a government response to allocate funds to explore the installation of a new water supply system. This area of work offers a significant opportunity for citizens to engage within communities by working collaboratively with local decision makers to find solutions to local issues, despite being contrary to precedent in Kyrgyzstan and a low historic level of philanthropic behaviors and volunteerism. Through the project in Baitik village, in particular, the group's interaction with local administration and municipalities has enriched citizens' understanding of how to participate in solving issues of concern through constructive political means.

Nicaragua: Democratic Leadership Development Program

Over the past five years, the NDI-supported Certificate in Leadership and Political Management program (CLPM) has trained more than 2,000 young Nicaraguan civil society and political party activists from diverse backgrounds on political leadership and advocacy skills. Many CLPM alumni have moved on to conduct local- and national-level advocacy and public

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awareness raising initiatives on a variety of issues, and roughly a quarter have been elected or appointed to leadership positions in their communities.

In a context where national polls indicate a significant popular demand for participation in decision-making, and where political space has closed for national advocacy efforts, NDI has invested in providing youth leaders with technical and financial assistance to implement grassroots organizing projects. Since late 2015, NDI has assisted select CLPM alumni and youth-led community organizations to design and implement projects to solve local-level issues in diverse regions of Nicaragua. The Institute trained local staff to serve as community organizing coaches who now collaborate with CLPM alumni to identify and research solutions to strategic and widely-felt issues in their communities and design projects to address them. Assistance provided includes helping groups refine their values and objectives; develop messages for their campaigns; identify who their target audience is and what communication channels they can use; and plan how to manage their limited resources when implementing their strategies.



NDI staff train young community organizers in Nicaragua

Currently, NDI is supporting three local groups in two different cities. During spring 2016, NDI assisted a group of youth between the ages of 17-21 in one municipality in walking through their community to survey citizens on issues affecting them. Through the interviews, the group identified sanitation issues, including open sewers and poor waste management, as priority issues to be addressed. NDI helped the group choose these issues based on the criteria that they are winnable, widely felt, well-

defined and there are clear decision makers with authority to solve them. The open sewers in the city, as well as unreliable waste pick-up and management, attract mosquitos, which has led to an increase in mosquito-born illnesses. Building on these initial steps, this group is planning a campaign to solve this issue. Their plan includes activities to raise awareness of the hazards of open sewers to expand citizen support for their work, which will allow them to engage local political party leaders and government authorities to seek their response and support for solving this problem. The group is proposing that the government allocate resources to develop a new, closed sewage system and instate regular waste pick-up.



Community organizers walk through their neighborhoods and survey citizens on community issues

Through grassroots campaigns to address community problems, young activists are utilizing skills gained through the CLPM program to seek tangible political change to improve citizen welfare in their municipalities. This work is enabling young people to take initiative in organizing citizens around issues they care about, and to become capable community leaders who can make important contributions to development. The purpose of the work is not just to convince local decision makers to address important issues, but also to encourage community members to take a more active role in improving their communities. Therefore, it cultivates a stronger sense of community among citizens, and enables them to proactively advocate on behalf of larger communities.



Organizers survey community members to identify their needs in Nicaragua

West Bank: Civic Participation in Municipal Government

NDI has supported community organizing in the West Bank since establishing the Civic Forum Institute in 1995, which works to bridge the gap between average citizen and decision makers by building citizens' understanding of democratic concepts and community leadership skills thereby. NDI is currently working with two local partners - Omniah Youth Center (Omniah) in Jenin and Qatabiya and Al-Qamar Charitable Association (Al-Qamar) in Jericho - to increase citizen involvement in improving community issues and transform the dynamics of the relationship between the citizens and elected officials in affecting change in the communities. From 2013 to 2015, NDI also partnered with Palestinian Vision, a civil society organization based in Bethlehem. The partners have conducted community surveys to identify citizens' needs, established citizen action committees, facilitated public events to enable citizens to engage with decision makers and advocated for community priorities to be addressed by local officials. Since then, NDI has continued assisting its partner organizations by implementing community development projects in additional municipalities.

In 2013, NDI provided technical assistance to Omniah in forming citizen action committees in Jenin and Qatabiya to identify citizens' concerns through door to door canvassing surveys and a radio call-in show to collect local opinions on community priorities. Then, they reviewed survey results and met with the mayor and municipal council members to

address them. The committees also conducted citizen outreach through the media, Friday sermons, face-to-face meetings and phone calls. In Jenin, the group was instrumental in "Clean Jenin City" day which brought hundreds of citizens, including the mayor, together to clean the street and pave the roads in the center of the town. It also conducted an education campaign to inform citizens about a device that accurately measures water consumption, to prevent them from overpaying for clean water.



Qatabiya committee members review and prioritize citizen needs in the West Bank

During Ramadan, in summer of 2013, Palestinian Vision hosted a radio show featuring the mayor outside of the city center to elicit direct citizen feedback in identifying community needs. After analyzing the outcomes of the radio show and community surveys, the group hosted a town hall meeting with city officials and roughly 75 citizens to present the results of their work and discuss how to resolve community issues. The group's research and the community meeting raised a variety of issues: paving roads, addressing accessibility issues for citizens with disabilities, improving traffic safety, and resolving an ongoing building permit dispute. Then, an action committee was formed to work with the municipal council, mayor and the administration to follow up on issues which are yet to be addressed.

An important element of NDI's and local partners' strategy has entailed building constructive relationships with local decision makers to facilitate project implementation. Even in very challenging political environments, the work in the West Bank demonstrates that community organizing is a way to start working with citizens to take political action for positive change that will not get stalled by national level

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politics. Organizing at the local level generally provides more opportunities to expand citizen participation in community development projects. As people see other citizens advocating for their daily needs and achieving solutions, they are more likely to realize the importance of citizen participation in addressing community issues and improving service delivery. Citizens have joined these causes in the West Bank because they saw that the work was for the good of their communities rather than for profit or for the benefit of special interest groups.



Jenin Mayor cleaning streets on "Clean Jenin Day"

Moldova: Strengthening Political Accountability and Civic Participation

NDI has trained community organizers to work across Moldova to mentor community-based citizen groups as they identify and address local concerns. Training provided by NDI informs the activists about the structure and functioning of the public administration and its interaction with citizens; the process of decision-making at the local and regional level; the creation of local budgets; and how to communicate community needs to public officials. The citizen groups identify issues affecting their communities through going door to door in their communities to survey citizens on problems they are facing. They use the information gathered through canvassing and community surveys to develop strategies for engaging their fellow citizens and elected officials in addressing these issues. The organizers in Moldova follow a 10-step plan, which is plan employs a number of tools, such as questionnaires, door-to-door canvassing, and events, through which organizers and civic leaders can talk to citizens about their priorities:

10 Step Plan for Local Civic Action

1. Local issue identification (talking to citizens)
2. Planning civic engagement around issue
3. Mapping power in the community
4. Developing relationships with local decision makers
5. Drafting leaflets to inform the community about the issue
6. Strategy development for approaching decision makers
7. Outreach to decision makers
8. Results letters to community about progress
9. Follow-up to decision makers acknowledging and discussing actions
10. Evaluation

Currently the Institute works in 32 communities assisting 37 civic groups around Moldova. NDI provides assistance to these groups, which have different levels of organizing experience and skills, at various stages of their civic campaigns ranging from issue identification and developing action plans to lobbying local government officials to support their efforts.



Community organizers going door-to-door in Soroca

For example, a community organizing group in the city of Soroca, formed by members of the Association for Blind People, identified multiple traffic lights with broken audible crossing signals for pedestrians as a

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critical problem in their community. Functioning audible signals are important to help blind pedestrians safely cross the street. After gauging the depth and causes of this issue, the group collected citizen signatures to petition traffic police and the municipal police office about resolving this issue. However, the authorities did not react immediately. The activists sought to increase pressure on officials to address this problem by displaying public bulletins about their activities and inviting local journalists to write about the issue. After second and third petitions were sent, and the mass-media attended public discussions and helped draw public attention to the problem, the authorities took action to repair the audible signals. Blind residents are now able to safely and independently cross the street. Building on this success, the campaign is now lobbying to have sidewalks and streetlights repaired to facilitate mobility for blind people in the community.



Members of the Association for Blind People meeting to discuss their needs and concerns

The 10 step plan shows activists how community organizing requires a series of linked actions to be successful. It is important to note, however, that these steps are not always linear. Groups may need to start at different steps and move through them in different ways depending on their level of experience and support and response from citizens and government authorities. Throughout this process, citizens gain momentum in community organizing through small victories such as establishing the new traffic lights system and bus stop. Through projects in Chiscareni and Soroca, these civic groups have demonstrated greater determination and self-confidence while reaching out to public authorities for support. If they do not receive a response at the local level, they are no longer hesitant to contact the next level of government.

Additional Resources

Azelton, Aaron, 2016. "A Grassroots Perspective on Thinking and Working Politically in International Development."

<https://www.demworks.org/grassroots-perspective-thinking-and-working-politically-international-development>

European Community Organizing Network, 2015. "Handbook on Citizen Participation: Community Organizing as A Tool of Citizen Participation"

http://www.econnet.eu/media/handbook__online.pdf

National Democratic Institute, 2014. "Local Level Citizen Participation in the West Bank"

http://www.ndi.org/files/local_level_citizen_participation_west_bank.pdf

[https://Stoecker, Randy, 2001.](https://Stoecker,Randy,2001.) "Power or Programs? Two Paths to Community Development"

<http://comm-org.wisc.edu/drafts/twopathsb2.htm>

Civic Update is a production of NDI's Citizen Participation Team

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