NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

Civic Update

Community-Led Participatory Action Research

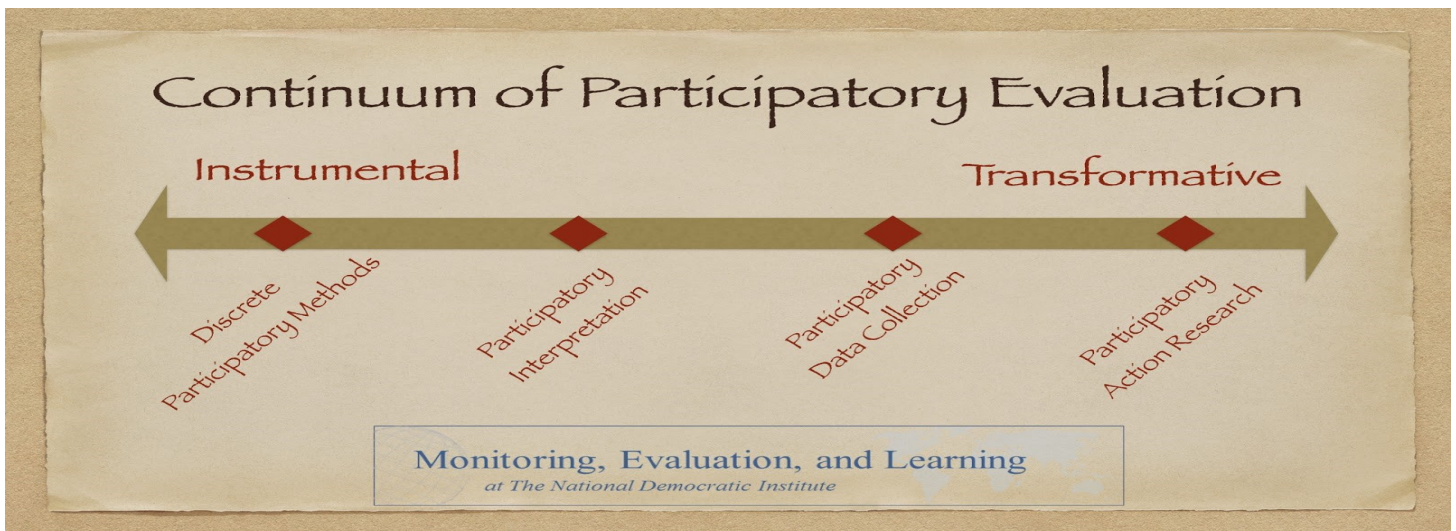Citizen Participation & Inclusion Team | September 2020

NDI programs have often used research tools to better understand local contexts and help partners organize and act. Research and data collection can provide a deeper understanding of a community and help identify challenges and potential solutions. However, when research takes an extractive approach and is led by external stakeholders who do not understand the needs or the priorities of local communities, the process can reinforce norms of exclusion. Action-based research is a collective, participatory research process that puts communities at the center and results in action-oriented change. Community members are the experts when it comes to lived realities and they have first-hand knowledge of policy and program impacts. When they are supported in conducting research, particularly research that contributes to problem-solving, citizens are better positioned to influence positive change through engagement with public officials and other segments of their community.

This issue of the Civic Update focuses on Community-Led Participatory Action Research (CLPAR), a tool that relies on the knowledge and expertise of local communities as a first step toward collective problem-solving. This Update features variations of CLPAR in Côte d'Ivoire, Iraq, the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), Slovakia, and Sri Lanka.

Defining CLPAR and the Continuum of Participation

CLPAR is an approach to research that challenges traditional power dynamics by positioning community members at the at the forefront of the process as experts and researchers. CLPAR is grounded in the needs, issues, and concerns of communities, with the ultimate goal of fostering stable, resilient, inclusive, and self-reliant communities (2011). CLPAR is **community-led:** community members lead the research effort, with support from process-experts. CLPAR is **participatory:** the research process directly engages communities and relies on community knowledge. And CLPAR is **action-based:** once the research is conducted, results are used to organize community change.

Continuum of Participatory Evaluation

Instrumental — Transformative

Discrete Participatory Methods · Participatory Interpretation · Participatory Data Collection · Participatory Action Research

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
at The National Democratic Institute

WORKING FOR DEMOCRACY AND MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

Citizen participation in research activities fall along a continuum, ranging from answering questions during one-off consultations to leading the entire process from the design phase, through data collection, analysis, and action (2011). CLPAR falls on the transformative end of the spectrum, aiming to shift traditional views about who is and who isn't a researcher and move away from research practices that tokenize communities or extract information without providing any benefit to those involved in the research process. CLPAR also aims to generate new pathways for citizens to gain influence and political power.

NDI's Voice, Space Accountability (VSA) theory of change rests on the intrinsic right of all citizens to participate and recognizes that informed and organized participation can drive change. VSA posits that increasing the organized participation of citizens in political processes enhances political voice, opens civic space, and strengthens accountability relationships between citizens and public officials. CLPAR can activate citizens and contribute directly to organizing initiatives.

Voice: CLPAR empowers citizens to express their preferences, prioritize issues and find solutions to common problems. It shifts power relationships and democratizes the knowledge process, reinforcing the value of community members' knowledge and understanding of local problems as important information that can affect change on local and national levels (2018). CLPAR also equips researchers with knowledge, leadership, and organizing skills to continue their political engagement in the future.

Space: CLPAR creates new opportunities for dialogue and deliberation between citizens and decision-makers. Data derived from CLPAR has cultural and social relevance to the community and reveals important starting points for addressing an issue, contributing to a greater likelihood of sustained change (2018).

Accountability: CLPAR allows citizens to engage decision-makers concertedly and from positions of power. Researchers can

utilize data collected on community issues to influence decision-makers and hold them accountable. The CLPAR approach also allows community members to evaluate and adapt different strategies to influence positive change.

CLPAR Process

While the timeline and sequence of events for implementing CLPAR vary depending on the context, there are key elements and considerations that are defining features of the CLPAR process. CLPAR is also an iterative and reflective process, with some steps being repeated and adapted based on the context (2017).

1. Identify a local partner organization to lead the process, ideally a partner with community-based research experience. The partner organization is responsible for supporting the research process and recruiting community researchers. The selection criteria for researchers is driven by the goals and targets of the program, but can encompass factors such as age, gender, and research or leadership experience. NDI can support the partner organization in determining selection criteria.

2. Once researchers are selected, the partner organization trains the researchers in participatory action research (PAR) methods and research tools. In some cases, the partner organization may need additional technical expertise or training support. For example, a partner may need gender sensitivity training or guidance in supporting youth researchers. Training is based on the needs of the program and the researchers and should provide ample time for researchers to test tools and methods prior to implementation.

3. Identify risks and create a security plan. Use a Do No Harm approach and include a security plan in the research design for the safety of all participants, including the community. NDI can support partners to develop a risk analysis and security plan.

4. Community members and researchers

collaboratively determine the research topic. Several methods can be used to underline determine the topic, such as a problem prioritization where researchers write community-identified problems on notecards and ask community members to rank the cards according to their importance (2014). Resea-rchers would then facilitate a discussion to determine which problem is the highest priority.

5. Once the research topic has been selected, the researchers collect data to gather more in-depth information and identify root causes of the issue and potential solutions. CPLAR does not require the use of specific data collection tools, however, a mixed-methods approach including focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires is common and useful for capturing a nuanced understanding of the issues within a community.

6. Analyze the data by pulling out key issues and trends. The data should be compiled in a secure location and analyzed in line with the research tools used. Additional training on data analysis may be necessary.

7. Present data results to community members and other stakeholders and provide space for participants to reflect and share their thoug-hts, opinions and recommendations as well as identify solutions. If necessary, hold sepa-rate sessions with specific stakeholders to either prepare them to participate in the community meeting or gather their feedback separately. The partner organization and NDI can provide facilitation support.

8. Design and carry out an action plan. In collaboration with community members and other stakeholders, determine specific acti-ons to influence the issue and create positive change. The partner, in collaboration with NDI, can offer training on how to best design an action plan. Depending on the research topic, researchers may need additional technical support to develop an action plan.

9. Reflect on and assess the impact of the

Progressive Problem Solving with Action Research
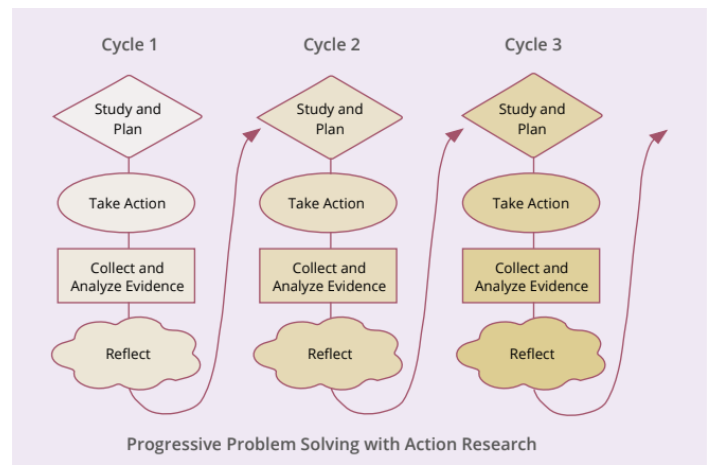
Source: Centre for Collaborative Research, 2014.

action. If the action did not result in the desired outcome, researchers should consult with the community to determine a new approach.

Considerations for Programming

Relationships

Relationships and trust are the foundation of an effective CLPAR process. Relationships are cri-tical at every stage, from identifying partner organizations and implementing the research to facilitating discussions with government officials. Mutually cooperative relationships between com-munity members, partner organizations and NDI staff also encourage sustained collaboration, which is necessary for implementing community-based action plans.

Time and Resources

In comparison to non-participatory forms of research, CLPAR is a time and resource-intensive process that requires sustained effort and engage-ment from researchers and the community throu-ghout the process. When designing a program that includes CLPAR, it is important to build in enough time for all aspects of the process and allow for flexibility in the timeline and activities.

Do No Harm

Recognizing that community-based research may explore sensitive topics and engage marginalized community members, a Do No Harm approach

should be integrated into the CLPAR process to prevent and mitigate inadvertent harm. NDI staff and local partners should consider the following as a starting point: the sensitivity of the research topic; protocols for data security; and the implications of researchers going into communities to collect information. For example, a researcher's identity or their previous engagement in the community may elicit a negative response from community members or government officials. If research is conducted in conflict or post-conflict settings, the research design should also be conflict-sensitive and include a security plan that is revisited and adapted as needed. Everyone involved in the research process should be aware of the security context and trained on how to navigate and respond in high-risk situations.

<u>Inclusion and Working with Groups who Experience Marginalization</u>

Representatives of marginalized communities, including women, young people, persons with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) communities, and ethnic and religious minorities, should be mainstreamed throughout the CLPAR process as researchers and research participants. These commu-

nities can contribute perspectives and experiences that enrich the research process and ensure a more inclusive set of data and follow-on actions. The most effective way to ensure the inclusion and participation of marginalized communities is through partnering and collaborating with organizations that represent and are led by mem-bers of these communities. It is important to remember that researchers from marginalized groups will be working against stereotypes and may face discrimination and violence, requiring their full participation in designing the research and data collection tools to mitigate these types of harm. Furthermore, additional accommodations may be needed to ensure the full participation of these communities such as accessible research materials and separate interviews or focus groups in secure, private locations.

<u>Bias</u>

Citizens have a certain set of perspectives and beliefs about their community that can influence the results of the research. Therefore, any CLPAR process needs to evaluate and take into consideration the role of bias. Researchers should be trained to mitigate bias as much as possible and ensure that data is recorded in a uniform process. In some cases, it may be more

Gathering Data During a Crisis

Although crises created by natural disasters, pandemics, and man-made disasters require immediate action to prevent suffering and hardship, they also present opportunities for positive change. Historically, crises have created important moments to reset politics, economies, and public health systems. Different types of collective action, such as CLPAR, can contribute to greater social cohesion and resilience over time, which are necessary for organizing and taking political action after a crisis and for mobilizing during the next crisis. Data collection is particularly vital during a crisis, as it allows researchers and practitioners to understand the impact of the crisis on different populations and identify the needs of communities. In many places where national and local governments have lagged on collecting and sharing data about the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society organizations and citizens have worked to identify and meet the urgent needs of their communities. Restrictions on in-person gatherings have required NDI and partner organizations to reimagine data collection approaches. Although access to technology and connectivity varies depending on the context, remote research can still take place utilizing various methodologies, such as online platforms and smartphone technology as well as SMS and phone calls. It may also be necessary to adjust the focus of the research based on new or exacerbated issues that arise during the crisis. By leveraging NDI's networks and relationships with CSOs, community leaders, and government officials, NDI staff can stay up-to-date on the rapidly evolving context and help coordinate a safe, remote, community-led research process. For more information, see NDI MEL Team's <u>guidance on best monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices during COVID-19</u>.

difficult for the community or government officials to respect the research findings and accept them as unbiased due to widespread views or stereotypes of researchers' identities. In contrast, the identity of the researchers could legitimize the data in the eyes of the community and government officials. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the context at outset and anticipate how beliefs and attitudes may influence the CLPAR process.

NDI Program Examples

The following NDI program examples fall within the "family" of PAR and on different points on the continuum of participation. While CLPAR is the overarching model described above, each example differs somewhat from the model based on the context and the program design and implementation phases. In some examples, the research process was designed to be participatory and community-led from the beginning, while in other examples, the program evolved to include community members at different stages, such as after the research topic was determined or to collaboratively decide on solutions.

Additionally, several program examples take place in post-conflict and conflict-affected communities. The CLPAR process described above can have a tangible impact on the reduction of both inter- and intra-community conflict and foster a shift towards the peaceful resolution of community-based tensions. CLPAR can also be used to inform a holistic response to conflict by examining the conflict in relation to other issues, such as power and governance, and highlighting the need to tackle various dimensions of the conflict rather than dealing with one facet in isolation.

Côte d'Ivoire

Over the past two decades, Côte d'Ivoire has witnessed armed conflict and human rights violations paired with an incomplete reconciliation process, leaving much of the country feeling marginalized and excluded. As the October 2020 presidential election approaches and the feelings of exclusion go unaddressed, there are concerns that the country could relapse into violence, with Ivoirian youth instrumentalized by political actors.

Despite the establishment of the Ministry for Youth Promotion, Employment, and Civic Services in 2016 and a National Youth Policy, Ivorian youth continue to face systemic barriers to political participation, leaving many young people skeptical of the effectiveness of political engagement as a means to create change. Recognizing the exclusion of many young people from formal political institutions and processes, as part of the USAID-funded Political Transition Inclusion program, NDI and local partners supported a group of young people in conducting PAR to inform advocacy projects on community issues and empower young leaders to participate politically.

NDI and local partners hosted a series of community meetings, during which citizens prioritized key areas of concern and possible solutions. From there, 60 young women and men across 15 communities were recruited to utilize PAR to explore the issues identified. Issues included conflict prevention; manipulation of youth by politicians and decision-makers; social cohesion; and political participation of young people and women. The researchers used a variety of methods to gather qualitative data and engage with community members, facilitating focus groups and conducting interviews. Following these discussions, they completed problem trees and a chronological analysis of the history of the issue. The researchers also reviewed relevant documents that offered additional information on the issue. The majority of the young people had prior research experience, enabling NDI and its Ivorian civic partners to focus on PAR methodologies and providing technical support throughout the data collection and analysis stages. Based on the information collected, the researchers determined definitions, causes, contributing factors, impacts, and recommendations for each issue, which they then brought back to community members for additional discussions and analysis. From there, NDI and its partners supported the researchers in prioritizing recommendations, which are being utilized to launch advocacy campaigns.

One research team explored the role of Baoulé and Malinké youth in fostering intercommunal understanding and conflict resolution in a town called Béoumi that recently saw an increase in inter-group tension and violence. Research data and feedback from community members highlighted the important role youth play in maintaining peace and violence prevention. The feedback underpinned the research team's recommendation that young people need space to discuss their own understanding of 'community' in order to identify the type of community spaces, dialogues and relationships they want to build. The researchers also identified the need to establish dialogue mechanisms for different ethnic groups. The research team's findings inspired community youth leaders to create a communication system that enabled them to anticipate and respond to conflicts in the market, including providing their contact numbers to local merchants and liaising with local authorities. The implementation of evidence-based recommendations resulted in an effective plan to decrease conflict in communities and reinforced the role of young people as community leaders.

NDI staff shared that at times it was difficult to provide support to a large group of researchers across multiple communities on a wide range of research topics. To mitigate some of these challenges, staff recommend ensuring enough staff and resources are available to provide support throughout the PAR process. Given the post-conflict context and concerns about safety in border regions, NDI staff also emphasized the importance of continuous communication with researchers and frequent reinforcement of safety standards throughout the process.

The Sahel

Violent extremist attacks and disputes between ethnic groups are on the rise in the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), resulting in an increased presence of security services in communities where state presence is generally weak. National and international observer groups have accused some national security services of human rights abuses, negatively impacting their image and preventing citizens from engaging the services out of fear of being labeled a collaborator by

Map of Côte d'Ivoire

armed groups and putting their lives at further risk. As a result, interaction and dialogue between citizens and security services is scarce, inhibiting opportunities to collaboratively improve security. Recognizing that cooperation between security services and citizens in the Sahel is essential to strengthening community resilience to violent extremism, NDI partnered with three civil society organizations, the Action-Research Group on Human Security (Groupe de Recherche-Action sur la Sécurité Humaine – GRASH) in Burkina Faso, the Alliance for Rebuilding Governance in Africa (L'Alliance pour Refonder la Gouvernance en Afrique – ARGA) in Mali, and the Africa Obota Center (Centre Afrika Obota – CAO) in Niger, to build trust between citizens and security service members and engage women and young people as central actors in drafting and implementing security policy. One component of the program engaged young community leaders to lead PAR to further explore the root causes of community vulnerabilities, analyze how young people and women interact with justice mechanisms, and collect actionable recommendations to strengthen the community-security sector.

Young leaders from eight conflict-affected areas

Presentation of the PAR findings with women's organizations in Mali.

were selected by NDI's partners and received intensive training on PAR methodologies, which included opportunities to practice facilitation of community discussions, conducting interviews, and assessing differing views community members have on a singular issue. The young researchers engaged a diverse cross section of community members when collecting data, including local authorities, religious leaders, young men, and women of all ages. With the support of GRASH, ARGA, and CAO, the data was analyzed and synthesized into results shared at community fora and public restitution workshops with other young people, representatives of local security services, persons with disabilities, religious leaders, women and civil society representatives. Utilizing the data, participants identified potential solutions and specific actions to address the issues. For example, participants from Kantchari in Burkina Faso, recommended organizing open door days to sensitize the population on the security services' mission and role, training service members on their professional obligations, sanctioning service members who violate these obligations, and raising awareness among citizens as to which documents to keep on their person and the importance of respecting safety and security protocols. In addition to contributing to overall objectives around strengthening collaboration between security services and communities, the research process challenged pre-existing notions of who is considered an expert and a leader within a community as well as negative perceptions of young people as being

violent extremist organization supporters and members.

Given violent extremist attacks were a continuous threat to both researchers and research participants, NDI in collaboration with its local partners, developed a conflict risk mitigation plan, enabling rapid responses and adaptations due to security threats. In addition to the security situation, NDI also needed to consider the socio-cultural factors in regards to the equitable participation of both young men and young women. This required NDI and its CSO partners to ensure thorough sensitization of and buy in from community leaders on the research and its overall objectives and, in some cases, getting the support of the husbands of the young women researchers who were married. The young researchers continue to work with NDI and its CSO partners to put recommendations into action and build additional organizing, leadership, and activism skills.

Slovakia

For most people in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the fall of communism signaled a new beginning, open borders, equal opportunities, and economic prosperity. However, the Roma population in those countries was largely excluded from these changes and instead faced growing disenfranchisement, socio-political and economic exclusion, and entrenched barriers to political participation. These challenges presented additional barriers for Roma to engage in building emerging democratic institutions and use political participation to address critical issues facing their communities. To counter these trends, NDI began working with the Roma in 2004 to mainstream their political engagement in CEE. The Institute focused on providing Romani civic and political activists with the skills to advocate for their rights, compete for elected office, build coalitions with mainstream political parties, and actively integrate into political institutions. Recognizing substantial shifts in Roma participation in political systems between 2004 and 2015, NDI's Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) and CEE teams designed and implemented a two-year participatory evaluation program that utilized a
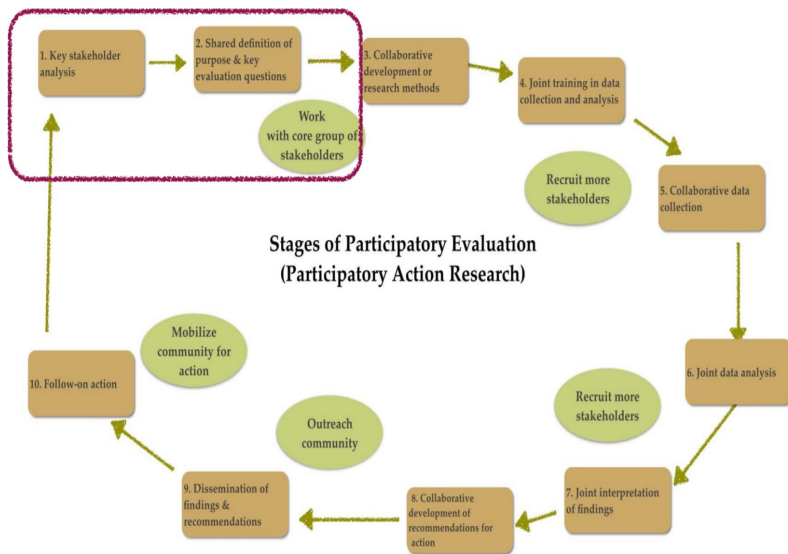
Stages of participatory evaluation adapted to the research process in Slovakia

community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach to evaluate the cumulative and downstream impacts of the regional program. The participatory evaluation program engaged Roma leaders and activists as analytical partners in the design, implementation, and utilization of the evaluation. The goal of the participatory research was to hold NDI accountable not only to itself and its donor, but specifically to its democratic partners. Slovakia was selected for the evaluation due to NDI's long-term technical assistance efforts and breadth of programming in the country, making it an informative case study for other countries in the CEE region.

NDI began the CBPR process with a scoping study, holding participatory analysis sessions with Roma activists and politicians to discuss factors that helped or hindered Roma political mainstreaming over the past ten years. Following the scoping study, NDI established a Roma Advisory Committee (RAC) to guide the research design, and to recruit Roma research assistants (RRAs) who would implement the data collection in teams. Research assistants were selected based on their research skills and a demonstrated commitment to engaging community members who were more margin-

alized than themselves. NDI and the RAC trained the RRAs in PAR methods and piloted PAR in two Roma settlements, resulting in PAR methods that were more reflective of the socio-cultural, linguistic, economic and political contexts. From there, RRAs collected data from activists, citizens, and elected officials utilizing an assortment of contextually driven methodologies including transect walks to document community needs and assets through photographs and interviews, a matrix ranking tool to identify priority problems in each community, a participatory timeline analysis to analyze Roma political engagement over time, and researcher reflection journals for the RRAs to record their findings and insights. NDI's MEL team analyzed and visualized the CBPR datasets, and worked with program staff and RAC to hold a two-day data interpretation and reflection session with the RRAs, Roma activists and elected officials who had participated in the CBPR study. The final evaluation report - A Theory-Based Evaluation of Roma Political Voice, Space and Accountability in Slovakia: 2005-2015 - reflects the findings, interpretations and recommendations from the two-year participatory evaluation program.

NDI's program team disseminated the CBPR findings to Roma communities across Slovakia and based on their discussion, the RAC and Roma communities developed advocacy campaign topics including campaign finance reform, independent election monitors, and the elimination of education thresholds for Roma to hold office. They developed recommendations for actions Roma citizens and civil society could take immediately, including filing complaints when Roma rights are violated, using the media to put pressure on authorities, and increasing voter education efforts. The findings also demonstrated that NDI's programming in the region increased the legitimacy of Roma leaders at the local level, but that additional support was needed to counter the rise of nationalism that was undermining the political progress of Roma communities across Europe.

In reflecting upon the CBPR research, Roma

Sri Lankan fellows and coordinators during a training on problem analysis and issue identification.

activists and leaders were concerned that decision makers would attempt to delegitimize the study, appealing to stereotypes that Roma were not capable of such an endeavor. Acknowledging this risk, NDI Slovakia reaffirmed its commitment to work in solidarity with Roma leaders to disseminate the findings and advocate for the recommendations. Community-led research alone does not shift long-standing stereotypes, but it does contribute to incremental shifts in perceptions. When government officials are reluctant to take a group or their research seriously, partner organizations should leverage existing relationships with decision-makers to give community researchers a platform to share their findings and legitimize their leadership. Most importantly, the core group of Roma activists that NDI trained formed a sustainable network of like-minded political activists who were still working together after more than a decade. NDI's approach of empowering Roma activists as trainers and researchers not only facilitated the replication and reach of the program, but contributed to dismantling barriers of distrust in Roma communities and promoting their political engagement.
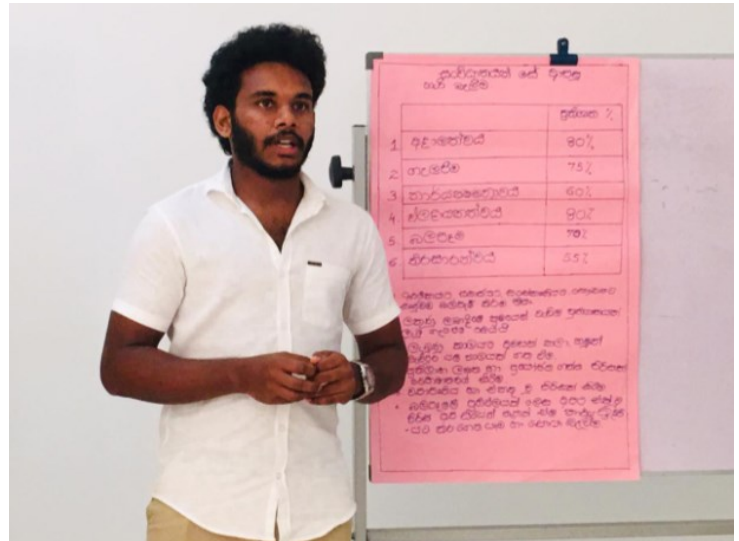
Sri Lanka

Following the 26-year civil war, Sri Lankan civil society experienced a period of fragmentation and uncertainty. In 2018, a political crisis heightened existing tensions and underlined the need for citizens to work together and hold decision-makers accountable ahead of the 2019 presidential elections and the 2020 parliamentary elections. Additionally, young people continued to experience exclusion from formal political participation and had few opportunities to practice political skills. This is especially true for young people outside Colombo, young women and young people from specific ethnic and religious groups. In 2019, NDI launched the Leadership and Participatory Governance program to engage young leaders at the local level to better understand and advocate for the needs of their communities. As part of this program, NDI worked with civil society partner Sarvodaya to support young leaders in carrying out issue-based campaigns in their communities, promote new norms of engagement and expand political space for young people.

At the start of the program, a geographically diverse, gender-balanced group of 30 fellows were selected based on their past political engagement, prior leadership experience and their political aspirations. Sarvodaya also recruited and trained ten coaches to work with the fellows and provide guidance throughout the program. Fellows were trained by a

consultant in participatory methods before returning to their regions to conduct research. In addition to PAR methods, the training focused on being a change agent, issue-based advocacy, building power and influence and leadership. After the training, the fellows and coaches returned to their communities and began collecting data using door-to-door interviews and focus groups. The fellows also met with and requested information from local government organizations, members and officials. Based on the data, each fellow selected their issue of focus, ranging from building and road infrastructure to agriculture. They then met with community members to gather more information, narrow their focus and develop action plans to address the selected issues. The fellows engaged local and provincial stakeholders, including mayors, agricultural officers, civil society organizations and youth clubs to present their findings on the issues and identify collaborative solutions.

The conversations and engagement through the research process helped develop and strengthen the fellows' relationships and networks, contributing to new opportunities for future political engagement. Sarvodaya staff and coaches noted that some fellows faced different levels of opposition from community members and political leaders. This was particularly pronounced for young women researchers, as conducting research and holding a leadership role is less common or accepted than for their male counterparts. For example, a fellow in the southern province aimed to provide access to clean water at a school. Political leaders promised to fix this problem for several years, but never followed through. After identifying this as the main issue for her community, the fellow spent several weeks mobilizing support from parents and the principal through community meetings and a petition. Political leaders in the community were resistant to the young woman leading such an initiative and attempted to convince the community that someone else would be better suited to lead the project. The fellow persisted, leveraging her skills and relationships, and successfully identified a

Research fellow presenting on his advocacy campaign in Kandy District, Sri Lanka.

clean, sustainable water source for the school. As the projects progressed, communities became increasingly involved and felt ownership over the project. Their commitment and engagement inspired the fellows to continue the projects, not only for themselves, but for the benefit of the community as a whole. The fellows were also able to leverage community support and apply pressure on political leaders to either stand behind their initiative or dissuade them from obstructing the process. This support also provided a sense of security for the fellows. Overall, the PAR process allowed the fellows to learn more about their community and begin to establish themselves as politically engaged community leaders.

Iraq

Over a decade after national reconciliation was declared a priority in Iraq in 2003, there was little evidence of progress. Within Iraq's political structure, there existed competing reconciliation efforts, all of which were generally characterized by distrust, political disagreements, and limited strategic vision. Across these initiatives there was also a notable absence of women. In order to create a national reconciliation platform that represented the needs of all citizens in post-ISIS Iraq, it was important that members of marginalized groups

had the opportunity to participate in and influence political discussions on national reconciliation issues. In 2017, NDI piloted a program to increase Iraqi women's access to decision-making spaces on national reconcile-iation issues. Between 2017 and 2018, 40 women peace activists diverse in age, sect, and ethnicity from the previously held ISIS provinces of Anbar, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salahaddin, conducted research in local communities to develop a gender-sensitive national reconciliation platform. Given the success during the pilot phase, the Institute expanded the program in 2019 to include 20 additional women peace activists from Baghdad and Diyala.

At the start of the program, the activists worked with NDI to assess conflict in their regions and learn conflict transformation techniques. The women were also trained in research methods and inclusive citizen outreach in cross-province workshops and targeted provincial level train-ing to inform them as they gathered citizen input for the gender-sensitive national reconci-liation platform. At the beginning of the resea-rch process, participants met with government officials and citizens to get an overview of important issues. They then divided into six issue focus groups based on the issues discussed in their workshops and in meetings with decis-ion makers: 1) security and safety; 2) trust and confidence; 3) women; 4) youth and education; 5) victims and survivors; and 6) governance and distribution of resources. Two new chapters were added to the strategy platform in 2019, developed by the second cohort of women from Baghdad and Diyala. The first chapter, on Health and Environment, was drafted before the global COVID-19 pandemic and has been given new urgency by the spread of the coron-avirus. The second chapter, on Agriculture, deals with the crucial issue of food security, as well as ways to bolster the agricultural sector to diversify Iraq's economy and create more jobs.

The women returned to their provinces to collect information on the needs of their communities and build grassroots support for their platform. During the research process, the

Women's National Reconciliation workshop.

activists mainstreamed inclusion by centering the voices of women of many ages from diverse socioeconomic, educational, and professional backgrounds. The women also included inter-nally displaced persons (IDPs) in their outreach efforts. Activists interacted with many people outside their own ethno-sectarian affiliations, exposing them to different perspectives and increasing understanding across ethno-sectarian lines. The activists relayed informa-tion from marginalized community members to decision makers and vice versa, facilitating communication between these groups and increasing inclusion of marginalized voices in decision-making processes. In one reporting quarter, one participant from Salahaddin engaged over 790 citizens, decision makers, and other stakeholders to discuss youth and educa-tion. Through community meetings, dialogue sessions, and interviews she met with teachers, principals, parents and government officials to explore the challenges and potential solutions to improving the quality of education in Iraq based on recommendations outlined in the platform. Across the program, in total, over 21,000 citizens, stakeholders, and decision makers were engaged through over 1,600 community outreach activities and high-level meetings with government officials.

Male-dominated political leadership is a barrier to women's political participation in Iraq and while the women were ultimately successful in their engagements with decision makers, their

gender made it more difficult for them to find entry points for engagement. The women had to use male connections or letters of support through NDI to initially set up meetings with decision makers. When conducting PAR, it is important to be aware of cultural factors like this that may impact program approaches. Additionally, because the activists came from diverse backgrounds, it was important for NDI and partners to provide a safe, neutral space for the women to learn and work. NDI staff were sure to carefully manage sensitive conflict dynamics and the dynamics of the group by establishing expectations for engagement and creating an environment of trust and openness for all participants. NDI and its partners were able to overcome obstacles that came up during the program using contingency plans, such as alternative locations or altered timelines for activities and events, allowing NDI the flexibility to ensure that all program events and activities were secure, context-specific and relevant in a changing environment. By the end of the program, in addition to increasing their leadership and research skills and political participation, the activists created A Strategy for Peace in Iraq: A Gender-Sensitive National Reconciliation Platform, which includes 50 policy recommendations to serve as a roadmap for a national reconciliation process that is gender-sensitive and reflective of the needs and priorities of Iraqi citizens.

Resources

1. International Accountability Project: Global Community Action Guides including:

A. Community Action Guide on Community-Led Research

B. We're Experts Too! A Checklist to Support Community-Led Research

C. Survey Template for Community-Led Research

2. M&E Thursday Talk—Community-Based Participatory Research with Marginalized Communities

3. Tips for Collecting Data in a COVID-19 Era

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