

Civic Update

Democratic Sustainability

Citizen Participation & Inclusion Team | October 2021

NDI's mission is to “strengthen and safeguard democratic institutions, processes, norms and values to secure a better quality of life for all.” The work of NDI should also contribute to sustainable democratic change. However, what happens when programs end and partners continue to fulfill their mission without NDI support? Do political institutions and processes hold, or better yet improve? NDI staff across regions are continually thinking about the long-term impact of programs and whether NDI's efforts are contributing to sustainable results. However, there isn't one consistent definition of sustainability in relation to democracy support. What is sustainable democratic change and how do we know when we're achieving our goal?

Although each context is different, there are commonalities when it comes to achieving lasting change. Achieving sustainable change in democratic governance starts with local ownership, and supporting the democratic aspirations of partners, while simultaneously strengthening political institutions and confronting undemocratic forces intent on maintaining the status quo. Impactful programming also requires understanding the iterative and inherently political nature of democratic transitions and the need to think and work long-term, across multiple electoral cycles and other political processes, to help cultivate and deepen democratic behaviors.

In large part, democratic development is about *systems change*. Influencing how a system functions and performs over time means looking beyond interventions that simply “strengthen capacity” or “increase participation” to determine how these types of changes add up to change other systemic factors. These can include (1) redistributing political power, (2) enhancing public trust in democratic institutions and processes, (3) shifting political norms and practices, and (4) establishing inclusive networks and collaborative political relationships. Through a combination of desk research and staff interviews, this edition of the Civic Update discusses the relevance of systemic factors in contributing to sustainable

democracies. This Civic Update does not seek to provide a definition of sustainability, but rather, explores the thinking around sustainability, including as described by staff supporting programs in Algeria, Ethiopia, and Nepal. These perspectives shed light on how external factors, including NDI programs, have the potential to contribute to or deter sustainable democratic outcomes and key considerations when thinking through the design and implementation of programs.

The Evolving Concept of Sustainability

The forest and natural resource management movements began using the term “sustainability” as a way to describe the ability of ecosystems to respond to shocks and stresses triggered by economic growth, natural disaster and environmental degradation. For ecologists, the concept of sustainability not only captures the ability for ecosystems to respond, but also considers how to meet basic human needs without triggering major ecosystem collapse. Based on this thinking, members of the United Nations came



NDI supported a voter registration and voter education program carried out in a local musical performance format in Nepal.

together to author the Brundtland Report (also known as *Our Common Future*) calling for sustainable development paths that prioritize both the environment and human development. The report defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Since the report’s release in 1987, the thinking around sustainable development has evolved to be more holistic to include, among others, notions related to gender, equality and peace and security. There have also been corresponding shifts in development approaches to emphasize cross-sectoral collaboration and broad public participation in decision making. Under the Millenium Development Goals, the United Nations further expanded on the notions of sustainability, presenting sustainable development as a systems approach which acknowledged that economic development, social development and environmental protection are all intertwined and must be addressed simultaneously for sustainable development to be achieved. Building on the systems approach to sustainable development, member states adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 to serve as a call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity. All 17 SDGs are integrated and recognize that for development to be effective, it must protect and promote human rights while balancing social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Sustainability vs. Resilience

According to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), “sustainability refers to the ability of a local system to produce desired outcomes over time. Discrete projects contribute to sustainability when they strengthen the system’s ability to produce valued results and its ability to be both resilient and adaptive in the face of changing circumstances.” Although often conflated, sustainability and resilience are slightly different. In line with the USAID definition, sustainability refers to continuity and the ability of systems to organically replenish without artificial, external support. Resilience as a component of sustainability is defined as “the capacity of a system, be it an individual, a forest, a city or an economy, to deal with change and continue to develop.” Resilience is viewed as the ability of a system to prepare for threats, absorb impacts, recover and adapt following persistent stress or a disruptive event, such as a health pandemic or a natural disaster. While sustainability and resilience often overlap and can reinforce each other, contributing to both requires distinct considerations and are likely to have distinct outcomes.

Redistributing Political Power

Power dynamics, and more specifically power imbalances, act as a major obstacle to achieving sustainable democratic outcomes. Power imbalances often serve as barriers to meaningful citizen participation by keeping decision-making power concentrated in the hands of a few elite actors and restricting opportunities to organize collectively. Developing greater power and influence are acute needs for groups who have been historically marginalized and are struggling to combat discrimination and inequality. Securing their rights involves gaining power over political decision-making. Powerful actors, such as governments, often control decision-making processes, resulting in benefits for dominant groups, which may also hinder the development of social capital in communities. Amidst the backdrop of COVID-19, malignant actors seized opportunities to consolidate power which diminishes trust in government institutions and weakens social contracts. Exclusion and marginalization also sow seeds for future conflict, which creates an environment where programs and initiatives may have limited positive impacts on sustainability.



The United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals, intended to be achieved by 2030.

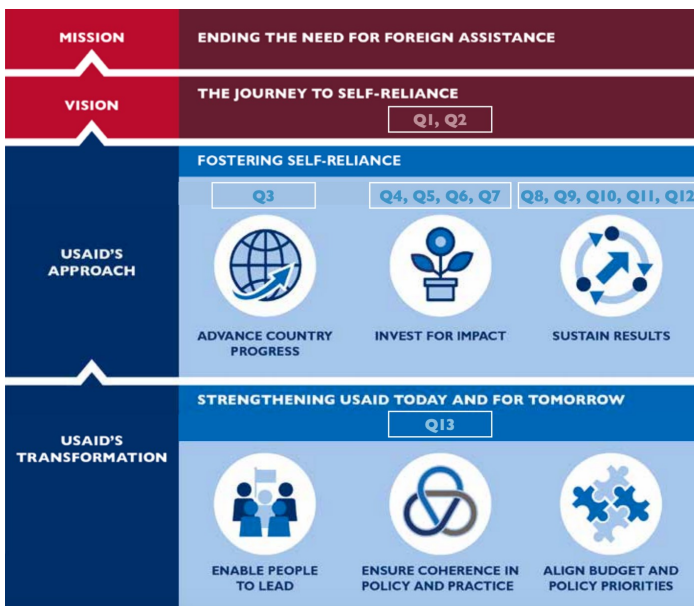
USAID's [Journey to Self-Reliance](#)

The Journey to Self-Reliance is indicative of USAID's goal of ending the need for foreign assistance by fostering more stable, resilient, and prosperous countries. USAID's definition of self-reliance entails a country's capacity to plan, finance, and implement solutions to local development challenges. In accordance with this approach, USAID reoriented their strategies, partnership models, and program practices to achieve greater development outcomes. The Journey to Self-Reliance underscores the importance of resilience and sustainability as key components of development. Countries that are self-reliant have stable, efficient and responsive systems in place that strengthen their ability to chart their own path to development. The Journey to Self-Reliance also aims to restructure USAID's approach to development by redefining relationships and centering the needs of countries as partners instead of beneficiaries. These efforts are being realized through several initiatives, including the [New Partnership Initiative](#), which helps to elevate local leadership, foster creativity and innovation, and mobilize resources across the Agency's programs. According to USAID, external aid investments are more likely to catalyze sustained development processes when they reinforce a country's internally determined development priorities

Participatory processes, such as deliberative democracy, are part of the growing trend of approaches that embrace values of inclusion, collaboration, transparency, trust, and dialogue. Participatory processes contribute to sustainable democratic development through the empowerment and meaningful engagement of diverse state and non-state actors to solve complex policy problems.

Enhancing Public Trust in Democratic Institutions and Processes

Trust in government is one of the most important foundations upon which the legitimacy and sustainability of political systems are built. For example, increased trust may help governments to implement structural reforms with long-term benefits. Reforms often involve sacrificing short-term satisfaction for longer-term gains. This requires broad social and political consensus to be effective and sustainable. Improved government transparency and accountability also correlate with increased citizen trust. Efforts to open government and institutions to citizen engagement and foster a greater flow of two-way information has the potential to encourage increased responsiveness. Likewise, an emphasis is placed on facilitating substantive political interactions on policy and reform issues, recognizing that democracy is more likely to be demanded and defended when it peacefully delivers for all.



The self-reliance learning agenda linked to USAID's policy framework.

The lack of accountability and responsiveness of elected officials to citizens' concerns is an oft-repeated democratic deficit worldwide and negatively affects public trust. Improving processes that center the inclusion of citizen voice sets the stage for greater government accountability over time. Improved social norms and more responsive institutions can emerge and contribute measurably to public confidence and the meaningful inclusion of all groups, including those experiencing historical marginalization. A renewed focus on trust in government can bring diverse perspectives to collaborative governance and enhance the role of the citizens. At an institutional level, this reinforces the social contract between citizens and the state. To gain this support from citizens, governments need to be more inclusive, transparent, receptive and efficient. Recognizing the critical role that trust plays in effective public policies and the necessity of public trust as a contributor to sustainability, practitioners should assist governments in facilitating substantive political interactions between governing institutions, public officials, and citizens.

Shifting Political Norms and Practices

Norms consist of informal, agreed-upon expectations and rules within a society that are developed and maintained by the collective views of its members. These deeply rooted perceptions shape individual and collective action and interactions and are a powerful predictor of behavior. Too often, prevailing norms impact the ability to achieve sustainable democratic outcomes by limiting types of participation, excluding voices from political processes, and creating perceptions that political practices such as vote buying, withholding of public information, or coercion are normal and acceptable. Certain actors also benefit from maintaining the status quo and are therefore incentivized in upholding certain norms that lead to fragility and undemocratic outcomes.



An individual holds up a LGBTQI+ pride flag at the annual KyivPride march in Ukraine.

Shifting deeply rooted political norms and practices can be challenging, but is necessary to the development of democracy and its ability to realize sustainable democratic outcomes. Changing norms doesn't happen overnight and requires NDI staff to have an understanding of why certain political norms persist and to intentionally design programs that mainstream norm change into programs alongside the building of democratic institutions and political processes. Norms are important precisely because they ensure that democratic institutions work in practice and become sustainable. NDI programs should also seek to introduce democratic practices, such as inclusive dialogue and deliberation, as a means of establishing behavioral

precedents that can be replicated. In shifting norms and practices, it creates social pressure for adherence to democratic standards while changing the beliefs, perceptions and expectations of citizens about what is acceptable and permissible political behavior.

Establishing Inclusive Networks and Collaborative Political Relationships

Inclusive collective action is a fundamental means of addressing pressing political, social and economic problems and is a critical dimension of a functioning democratic ecosystem. For groups who have experienced marginalization, collective action provides the space to strengthen their agency which enables them to identify, articulate and demand their rights. In working towards these objectives, groups of diverse identities and backgrounds are reclaiming their citizenship identity as a starting point for strengthening and sustaining accountability. Sustaining inclusive collective action requires a common agenda, mutually reinforcing priorities and a shared vision for change. Although groups may not agree on every issue, the practice of finding common ground and working together builds relationships and reinforces political civility and learning. This can extend to strengthening transnational networks and alliances working to address climate change or securing the rights of LGBTQI+ communities. In other instances, support for organized, non-violent collective action is a means to challenge the status quo and prevent democratic backsliding. Over the last decade, transnational advocacy practices and networks have evolved as activists are learning from a wealth of experiences and as they respond to a changing global political and digital environment. Although these networks are facing new challenges, the transnational advocacy ecosystem continues to adapt, which includes the emergence of new structures, strategies, and relationships that have the potential to expand the role and impact of transnational networks.

Collaborative political relationships have the added benefit of creating opportunities to build mutually beneficial partnerships between civil society and political actors. These relationships create opportunities to come together around common interests and share decision-making power. This collaboration also strengthens relationships by establishing mutual understanding, trust and respect. Over time, this can contribute to developing norms of greater openness and inclusion. Through the facilitation of civic, political and private sector partnerships, learning how to collaborate and work

in tandem to achieve mutual objectives, and building on clear evidence and shared lessons across all sectors, partners can establish crucial political relationships and networks that contribute to sustainable democratic outcomes.

Country Perspectives:

Algeria—Kamel Meziani, Resident Program Manager

Following President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's February 2019 announcement of his intention to run for a fifth consecutive term and decades of increasing public discontent with the government, a popular protest movement, the Hirak, emerged in Algeria. Citizens peacefully took to the streets throughout the country in record numbers to express their discontent, ultimately driving Bouteflika to resign. Since Bouteflika's departure, Algeria has elected a new president, Abdelmajid Tebboune, who expressed his commitment to hold dialogue and reforms. Despite these promises, Tebboune has initiated limited, non-inclusive reforms that do not stray far from the status quo maintained by his predecessor. Due to the lack of meaningful reform, citizens continue to call for more liberties, rule of law, and protection of rights, as well as demand a massive housecleaning of the ruling class from the government. The period following the Hirak public uprising and Tebboune's election presents a critical juncture for Algeria to foster and advance more responsive, representative, and accountable governance, while setting the foundation for sustainable democratic outcomes in the country.

When operating in a country that has experienced citizen-led protests and online movements for over two years, exploring the topic of what sustainable outcomes look like can be complex, and according to NDI staff, calls into question whether traditional forms of democracy can be effective in advancing the necessary reforms in a country. However, for democratic outcomes to be sustainable, support to political stakeholders must move beyond one-off consultations and focus on authentically integrating and involving citizens in decision-making processes. By building the capacity of elected officials to listen to citizens and effectively address their needs, citizens may begin to gain trust in leaders that represent them and the institutions that provide services and consider dialogue as a viable way to move issues forward. Citizen participation is essential to sustainable democratic outcomes; however, this can only be achieved when their

participation is encouraged and citizens have the skills to engage decision-makers. Therefore, support to citizens must be deliberate in building confidence and knowledge of the various mechanisms and avenues for direct political engagement, and the government must work to shift away from their current rhetoric that discourages citizen participation as a whole.

Challenges remain to the integration of sustainable democratic change in Algeria. NDI staff have noted that despite having new faces within the political scene, the former regime has regenerated itself, not allowing for the calls for change envisioned by Algerians in the streets to come to fruition. The current government has expressed a baseless desire for dialogue, but the lack of political will for engaging with citizens is clear in the government's series of perfunctory reforms. This is anticipated to lead to Algerian's continued distrust of the government and its ability to respond to citizen needs, prompting a culture of sustained discontentment and leaving room for protests to reemerge in the future. Another challenge is citizens' high expectations for drastic and immediate change. NDI staff noted that change that results in sustainable democratic outcomes takes time, and it can be difficult to reconcile expectations with reality.

Asia—Sneha Moktan, Program Director

Over the past decade Nepal has faced significant challenges including a stalled peace process following a decade-long civil war, a prolonged constitution drafting process and major natural disasters. Despite these challenges, Nepal has remained resilient, adopting a new constitution in September 2015, subsequently leading to an improvement in government effectiveness, increased social inclusion and cohesion, and increased responsiveness of the country's representative institutions, such as parliament and political parties. Given the country's susceptibility to natural disasters and shocks that can easily distract from the longer-term issues facing the country, NDI has found that keeping the focus on these longer-term issues and showing the inherent links between good governance and strong democratic institutions is not only necessary to successful post-disaster responses but the sustaining of democratic progress in the country. This approach has not only required NDI and its partners to focus on defining what true reform looks like in the country but has also resulted

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE | CIVIC UPDATE

in sustainability being a priority for donors and a key aspect of all program design.

When an 8.1 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal in 2015, killing nearly 9,000 people and displacing many more, it threatened to completely derail the rewriting of a new Constitution already in its fifth year of drafting. In this setting, priorities shifted to immediate day-to-day needs and away from the foundational issues that have existed for decades and directly impacted the efficacy of a government to respond. Understanding the potential for backsliding, the international community stressed the importance of transparency and political stability when discussing commitment of relief and reconstruction support. This quickly ended the political jockeying and partisanship, with the Constitutional Assembly, just five months after the earthquake struck the country, approving a new constitution.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, NDI stressed and demonstrated the links between good governance and disaster response and supported organizations representing diverse citizens to contribute to post-disaster response activities. This provided citizens space to ensure their voices were amplified in recovery discussions and create new political norms and precedents in disaster response in the country by bringing government officials responsible for the reconstruction efforts closer to the earthquake affected citizens through town hall meetings and visits to the affected communities. NDI implemented these programs in conjunction with continued support for town hall meetings with members of parliament and their constituents as well. While it is hard to predict what Nepal's political future would have looked like if the earthquake had not struck the country and forced its government to agree on a new Constitution, Nepal has shown that disaster could be a catalyst and not always a detriment to sustainability.

Operating in a country such as Nepal has enabled NDI to have transparent and candid conversations with donors about sustainability and what is required to produce sustainable outcomes. NDI has noted the need for donors to fund longer-term and multi-year programs that focus on institution building and targeted support to policy reforms that are informed by citizen needs. NDI has also noted the need for continued support to the same partners to enable them to build the necessary skills and capacities to sustain democratic progress. This not only leads to stronger buy-in from partners in continuing the work but also overcomes challenges



Women leaders from 10 major Nepalese political parties at an NDI organized campaign training.

associated with programs that are short-term and switch priorities from year-to-year. In cases where NDI is able to sustain programs and partnerships long-term, it has enabled the team to think more strategically about NDI's support and how best to ensure that whatever is left behind in the form of relationships, skills, tools and resources meet the needs of partner and will actually be used beyond the scope of a program.

An intentional focus on citizen participation and inclusion have also been key to more sustainable outcomes in Nepal. With 75 being the average age of political leaders, empowering young people to shift political power has been critical to building strong and more responsive political parties and parliaments. Through youth leadership academies, young people have been able to expand political space for themselves both within and outside of political parties. Supporting women leaders, both political and non-political, has been essential in shifting norms around women's participation and establishing strong, unified relationships where women are able to collectively advocate for common gender issues across multiple sectors. Supporting these networks and empowering women to see their power through collective action has resulted in networks exploring the possibility of becoming their own entities and being able to move forward without NDI support. The Nepal team has also focused on mainstreaming the voices of marginalized groups such as the historically socially and politically disadvantaged *Dalits* in parliamentary strengthening programs enabling members of parliament to tailor and design legislation to the needs of these communities and passing laws that are more inclusive and therefore more likely to sustain even in times of uncertainty and transition.

Sustainability in Closed Spaces

Over the past decade, there has been a notable increase in legal and political restrictions targeting civil society. While achieving sustainable democratic outcomes is a challenge in every context, operating in closed and closing spaces presents additional complexities. This is due to a multitude of factors, including restrictions on CSO registration, limited access to foreign funding, overly burdensome reporting requirements, messages disseminated by government controlled media that delegitimize civil society organizations, and even threats and attacks on the physical and digital security of organizations and individuals. One NDI staff member noted that engaging in “big politics” or national-level politics has become too dangerous for local partners and citizens. Therefore staff support partners as they target local issues and encourage participation in local political processes, which may be more effective in supporting citizens to take ownership, while contributing to shifting political power at the local level. Accordingly, if people can build their skills and feel as though they have a sense of ownership of processes at the local level, they can then multiply resources and scale up and replicate efforts on their own, resulting in more diverse and sustainable decision-making spaces. Another NDI staff member describes closed space programming as “locally-driven and nationally-owned,” with NDI staff members taking the role of “back-seat drivers,” providing guidance, directions, and ensuring the application of equitable and inclusive participation. While the challenges to achieving sustainable democratic outcomes in closed spaces seem varied and immense, patience and endurance, both of which are key metrics identified by NDI staff, are necessary if any success is to be realized.

Ethiopia—Franklin Oduro, Resident Program Director: Election Programming

In 2018, Prime Minister Dr. Ahmed Abiy initiated sweeping changes that brought to Ethiopia long-awaited political, economic and security reforms as well as an end to the 20-year war with Eritrea. The reforms sought to not only bring peace to the country, but establish a more inclusive and representative democracy for all Ethiopians. These reforms enabled NDI to open operations in the country to support initiatives to expand civic space, promote broad inclusion of citizens’ views and participation in political processes, support domestic citizen-led election observation, and strengthen the capacity of political parties to effectively contribute to a peaceful transition process. Although intercommunal violence and new regional conflicts pose a challenge to the trajectory of Ethiopia, creating space for civil society to reemerge and expand will be key to sustainable political reforms and democratic outcomes in the country.

Acknowledging the fragility of political space in Ethiopia and the underlying movements that seek to undermine progress in the country, NDI has heavily focused on supporting the rebuilding of civil society to champion democratic progress and ensure they have the capacity to sustain progress made once a program comes to an end. To do this, the team is utilizing a two-pronged approach. First is providing civil society actors practical and experiential capacity building opportunities to engage in political

processes including election observation and engaging political parties to build their capacities to fully participate in the political processes. Second is raising awareness of civil society groups on the ways they can be politically engaged to maintain and expand civic space. This includes looking outward to other examples from international partners and civil society actors in the region to learn from their successes and lessons learned as it relates to civil society roles and contributing to transitional processes that result in sustained democratic progress.

In addition to a strong civil society, the team in Ethiopia has also prioritized citizen participation, seeing citizens as central actors to ensuring sustainable democratic outcomes. Internal conflicts and the slow pace of transition is leading to an increase in mistrust in the political reform processes and civil society. Therefore the team has proactively included citizens in various ways including through citizen election observation and advocacy campaigns that result in broader societal benefits. Creating spaces for inclusive citizen participation enables ownership and support which leads to sustainability. When people feel consulted, heard, and are given the ability to vote in a credible process they are more likely to buy into democratic processes and champion democratic objectives.

Perhaps one of the hardest aspects of achieving sustainability in Ethiopia is the shifting of social and political norms, particularly when it comes to increasing inclusivity. Due to Ethiopia, previously



Two women engaging in election monitoring work at a data center during the June 2021 Ethiopian general elections

being closed off both democratically and socially to the outside world, NDI has found that partners are reluctant to embrace more progressive norms and paradigms that are necessary for sustained progress. In addition, because of ongoing conflict in the region and donor approaches being unpredictable, if there is a significant shift in funding priorities that could severely impact on gains made this can also affect the possibility of achieving sustainable outcomes. Similar to other staff perspectives, in order to achieve sustainability, continued investment in the same partners and priorities for a significant period of time payoffs.

Resources

1. [Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development](#)

This USAID framework contributes to the ongoing transformation of the way the Agency does business by defining clear and practical steps toward realizing a vision of development that is locally owned, locally led and locally sustained. The framework also defines how to advance aid effectiveness and serves as the basis for deeper collaboration with partners to support sustainability through local systems.

2. [The Online Handbook for Transnational Activists](#)

This publication is focused on both the theory and practice of transnational struggles for equality and justice in the past, present, and future. The handbook includes articles, interviews, videos, photo stories, infographics, and other resources on topics such as grassroots movement building, institutional revolutions, and direct action and civil disobedience.

3. [Social Norms Exploration Tool](#)

This tool is a team-based, qualitative process to gather information at the community level and quickly develop a preliminary understanding of the social norms operating in program communities that are influencing how people act or behave from a program perspective. The findings of the social norms exploration are intended to help adjust components of programs to be more norms-aware.

4. [Deliberative Futures Toolkit - Toward 'future-oriented' communities and decision-making](#)

This toolkit includes a series of guiding pieces which offer advice on good practices around participatory, deliberative, and inclusive approaches to engagement with a future-thinking lens.

Resources Cited

1. The Politics of Sustainable Development (2016). *Annual Reviews*. Retrieved from: bit.ly/3mHbM2G
2. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future (1987). *United Nations*. Retrieved from: bit.ly/3mFNlxa
3. Sustainable Development Goals (2015). *United Nations*. Retrieved from: bit.ly/3ayaAZY
4. Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development (2014). *U.S. Agency for International Development*. Retrieved from: bit.ly/3ADX4OO
5. Resilience and Sustainable Development. *Stockholm Resilience Centre*. Retrieved from: bit.ly/3oVwD4Z
6. Citizen Participation and Accountability for Sustainable Development (2015). *Institute of Development Studies*. Retrieved from: bit.ly/3v7oIQo

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

Lead writer and researcher:
Donovan Bendana

For more information, comments or suggestions contact:
Rachel E. Mims | Program Manager | Washington, D.C.

202.728.5406 | rmims@ndi.org