



Members of New Election Watch (NEW) in Sierra Leone celebrate their partnership with members of the NDI Elections team.

## Civic Update: Localization and Partnerships

Citizen Participation & Inclusion Team | March 2024

Democratic development is an inherently local issue. The countries and communities where NDI works are shaped by unique histories, people, power dynamics, and political structures that are specific to each context. In recognition of local diversity and the independence of local actors, initiatives should rely on the knowledge, assets and lived experience of those actors when determining development priorities and interventions. This edition of the Civic Update examines the relationship between locally-led development and vibrant partnerships. This Update builds on the Partnerships Civic Update (2020) by adding a perspective on locally-led frameworks that can contribute to more just, effective and sustainable development outcomes.

Over the past several years, evidence has emerged around the need to shift the design, implementation, and ownership of development initiatives to local actors driving change in their own countries and communities. Major donors, such as USAID, are

taking concrete actions to operationalize locally-led development and shift power to local actors. Despite an increased emphasis on locally-led development, however, the challenge of how to move beyond policies and symbolic actions to authentic local ownership remains. To truly embody local ownership, determining development program priorities, activities, directions, and financial decisions should involve local actors at every step. In this regard, NDI has some unique experiences that help localize programming. This issue of the Civic Update explores ways NDI staff are giving more ownership to partners and approaching NDI's work through a localized framework. Included are principles for establishing strong and vibrant partnerships, methods to clarify expectations with local actors and structure program decision making, and practices that increase flexibility and capture partner feedback. At its core, local ownership is about balancing the power differential between NDI and local actors.

An intentional shift toward greater localization must also recognize that local actors operate in complex systems comprising a multitude of structural relationships, political power dynamics, public attitudes and expectations, and social behaviors that can modulate the actions and influence of NDI and its partners. Under such circumstances, driving and sustaining positive change requires a systems approach that considers the different factors that combine to advance or inhibit change. Likewise, it requires understanding the related complexity of the problems being addressed through the individual and collective action of NDI's partners. From fostering greater transparency of government decision making, to ensuring better public service delivery, to eliminating violence against women in politics, these challenges require solutions that intersect with and affect different systemic variables. The Institute supports partners' efforts to shift harmful power imbalances by standing in solidarity with communities, organizations, and individuals who are often excluded from power and politics. Helping build the power of partners and transforming the way a local system operates are mutual aspects of NDI programming.

As part of NDI's ongoing subgrant reform efforts, an internal working group developed a set of partnership principles that help center local ownership.

In establishing and maintaining local partnerships built on openness, trust and mutual respect, NDI strives to uphold the following principles:

1. Respect a partner's local knowledge, motivations and assets.
2. Interact honestly, transparently and ethically.
3. Clarify mutual expectations about a partnership's scope and structure, including the roles each partner plays.
4. Communicate in a regular and timely manner.
5. Facilitate participatory joint decision making, with attention paid to a partner's expressed needs and interests.
6. Emphasize mutual accountability and active two-way feedback that leads to iterative learning and improved relationships.
7. Facilitate partners' ownership over program methods, results and achievements.
8. Work with diverse groups and accommodate varying ability levels.



ERA Fund partners, the Association of People with Disabilities of Padang City, stand in front of a sign.



In addition to these guiding principles, NDI also applies a “do no harm” principle, by making every effort to prevent programming from inadvertently reinforcing barriers to inclusion or putting the lives or safety of individuals at risk. Due to the disproportionate levels of violence and persecution these communities face, NDI carefully evaluates potential threats to local partners’ safety to determine what is possible or prudent in each context. NDI also operates under “nothing about us without us,” a principle that communicates the idea that no policy should be decided without the full and direct participation of members of the group(s) affected by that policy. It emphasizes that self-determination is essential for achieving true equality and supports marginalized communities to make their own decisions, rather than being passive recipients of decisions made on their behalf. This concept is especially important when working with marginalized communities in a development context. Marginalized communities are experts in their own issues and have unique perspectives to offer that can benefit both development programming and society as a whole.

**Respect a partner’s local knowledge, motivations and assets:** NDI’s work is guided by partners’ understanding of local contexts, not only including defining what democratic development goals should be, but in deciding what interventions are needed to reach those goals, as well as how they should be implemented, and by whom. In particular, NDI is intentional in supporting all local actors as part of the drive towards localization. To ensure that development goals and interventions reflect the needs and interests of all citizens, the Institute engages a diverse group of partners and is purposeful

in including communities that are traditionally excluded from these kinds of efforts.

**Interact honestly, transparently and ethically:** NDI seeks to begin partnerships from a place of mutual trust and good faith, and upholds this trust throughout our work by maintaining honesty, being transparent with information regarding programming, and upholding a code of ethics. This includes clarifying mutual expectations about a partnership’s scope and structure, including the roles each partner plays, and communicating in a regular and timely manner.



ERA Fund partner VoteLGBTQ attends a peaceful rally in Brazil.

**Clarify mutual expectations about a partnership's scope and structure, including the roles each partner plays:**

When entering into a partnership, it can be helpful to develop a memorandum of understanding that clearly outlines roles, responsibilities, and expectations. This can help to examine and mitigate power disparities by using collaborative models of problem solving when differences arise. NDI staff should recognize that partners may have other funding relationships and work with them to reconcile differences in what NDI might expect in comparison to other funding resources.

**Communicate in a regular and timely manner:** When establishing a new partnership, it is best practice to establish regular check-ins and encourage an “open-door” policy for questions that may arise during the implementation phase. Naming a specific point of contact and making necessary introductions can help partners feel at ease when reaching out for guidance. When it comes to requesting information from local partners, clearly explain the purpose and make yourself available to answer questions about the request. It can also help to build trusting

relationships with partners by checking on the partner's stress levels and offer well-being support when necessary. Lastly, it can be mutually beneficial to share information about NDI's work and relationships in the country and region and look for ways to bring the partner into conversations.

**Facilitate purposeful and participatory joint decision making, with attention paid to a partner's expressed needs and interests:**

Advancing local ownership requires shifting away from historical structures and modalities that have elevated the power of international actors and often undermined the influence of local actors. Shifting power dynamics requires engaging partners in decision-making processes throughout program design, implementation, and reflection. This includes conversations around what resources are necessary for successful program implementation, when they need to be available, and how they are allocated. NDI pays particular attention to power dynamics when working with marginalized communities, ensuring that the Institute's approaches to engaging partners do not perpetuate existing power imbalances.



ERA Fund partners and disability rights activists, Tonga Leitis Association pose for a group photo between two signs outlining their campaign actions.





**Emphasize mutual accountability and active two-way feedback that leads to learning and improved relations:** In ensuring successful programs, NDI is not only accountable to donors, but accountable to partners. NDI shares honest feedback with partners and seeks to establish a dynamic of openness and trust where partners have formalized opportunities to share feedback with the Institute in turn.

**Promote a partner’s ownership of program results and achievements:** Beyond engaging partners in contextual and risk analysis and program design, NDI ensures local leadership throughout implementation, including during work plan development, reflection

sessions, risk analysis, and in presenting their work to donors and the international community. This includes taking steps to elevate partners’ achievements and help them gain recognition for their successes.

**Work with a diversity of groups and accommodate different ability levels:** NDI works to convene local actors around joint goals, and provides support to partners to achieve their objectives. When providing technical assistance, NDI adapts its approaches to meet different partner needs and levels of capacity. This approach seeks to open space for newer groups and actors to affect change on a more even playing field with those who have historically held power.

## **Special Considerations for Partnering with Marginalized Communities**

Forming partnerships with marginalized communities requires particularly careful consideration, sensitivity, and a deeper commitment to equitable and inclusive practices. Some key considerations are:

- 1. Cultural Competency:** Understand the nuances and values of the community and consult individuals from within the community to bridge cultural gaps.
- 2. Authenticity and Trust-Building:** Prioritize building trust through open communication and transparency while demonstrating a genuine commitment to the community's well-being.
- 3. Inclusivity and Diversity:** Recognize and respect intersecting identities and the diversity within the marginalized community.
- 4. Needs Assessment:** It can be helpful to conduct a needs assessment that involves community members in identifying priorities and solutions. This avoids assumptions about what the community needs without proper consultation.

**5. Equitable Distribution of Benefits:** Ensure that the benefits of the partnership are evenly distributed to avoid situations where the community is being exploited or received minimal benefits. (See our examples on how MOUs can facilitate mutual understanding and agreed upon terms.)

**6. Participation and Engagement:** Involve community members in decision making processes and establish mechanisms for ongoing feedback and collaboration.

**7. Adaptability and Flexibility:** Be open to adapting strategies based on community feedback and recognize that community needs and priorities may change over time.

**8. Ownership:** Foster a sense of ownership by encouraging active leadership roles for community members and avoid imposing external solutions without considering the perspectives of those with lived experiences.

**9. Legal and Ethical Considerations:** Ensure that partnerships adhere to the relevant local legal and ethical frameworks for any given country. Respect the rights of community members by obtaining informed consent before sharing stories externally.





Youth members of Jovenes Macao, an NDI partner in Colombia, gather outside during one of their campaign activities.

## Memoranda of Understanding

Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) can be used to structure equitable and respectful working relationships between partners by outlining roles and expectations and establishing a framework for mutual accountability. For example, the Elections Team at NDI develops MoUs with local citizen election observation partners, especially when a partner is implementing the Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT) methodology. Establishing an MOU is a way to reduce the power differential, by giving ownership to the local partner and allowing them to negotiate their own terms. The Elections Team has found that the process of negotiating the MoU is particularly helpful in building trust and setting the stage for open and accountable follow-on interactions and decision-making.

In order to establish and maintain equitable partnerships, NDI and partners build language into the MoU that outlines how challenges can be solved together to find mutual solutions. In the case of elections work, the MoU is also designed to allow the local organizations to have ownership over election data, while simultaneously outlining NDI's role in supporting the partner as they analyze their data and make decisions on how to communicate about it. By building this language into the MoU, the partners can safeguard against sensitive data being published without mutual consent. To further support NDI staff and local groups in the process of creating more equitable partnerships, the Elections Team has developed a guidance document for structuring MoUs.



Under the CEPPS program ELECT for the 2023 elections in Sierra Leone, National Election Watch (NEW) implemented a PRVT and NDI provided technical assistance to NEW throughout the process. NEW is a local organization working to ensure transparent and accountable elections, and strengthen democratic governance in Sierra Leone. Early in the program cycle, the Elections team sent a draft of the MoU, which allowed NEW to make comments and negotiate the terms of the partnership. Marsella Samba-Sesay, NEW's Chairperson, shared that her team appreciated the approach of negotiating the terms of the MoU as opposed to imposing strict rules or guidelines around the program. She and the team felt free to add input and work with the team at NDI to reach an agreement together.

The MoU process became particularly important when a third partner became involved - International IDEA. Marcella shared that adding a third party can make things more complicated for a local organization since it creates additional dynamics for partners to navigate and reaching consensus can be more challenging. However, the MoU process helped clearly define each organization's role in the program while also leveraging as much expertise as possible from each organization. It was especially helpful to understand how decisions would be made and mutually agreed upon by all three organizations. James Lahai, National Coordinator at NEW, shared that

the MoU process was a successful way to establish an agreement between all partners, and was especially helpful in outlining procedures around how issues and challenges should be handled. He appreciated NDI's approach to partnerships, recognizing that NDI was not interested in building a relationship that further exacerbated power imbalances. He shared that the MoU not only maintained good working relationships during the program, but also helped NEW build capacity in the PRVT methodology, as well as the subgrant and reporting process.

Because NEW's PRVT revealed manipulation in the tabulation process for the 2023 election, decisions made during this particular program were high-stakes. The MoU then served as a crisis management tool, where team members and partners could reference agreements made during the negotiation process. Ultimately, the MoU ensured that each partner had accountability, no matter the circumstances that arose around election day. Given that there are so many uncertainties when it comes to democracy and governance programming, negotiating an MoU can give assurance to all parties that decisions and changes will be made collectively. Others at NEW added that the MoU process helped to create a partnership of equals where each partner's knowledge, expertise and experience was valued evenly.



Youth partner FACE Initiative uses sports activities to educate young people about civics and voting in Nigeria.





NDI partner FACE Initiative does campaign outreach at the local level.

## Putting the Partner First with a Flexible Funding Approach

Securing local partner trust and ownership are key factors in ensuring they get the most out of a collaboration with NDI. Under the Equal Rights in Action Fund (ERA Fund) global small grants program, flexibility and centering partner needs and preferences are at the heart of the approach.

Since 2018, the ERA Fund has provided small grants and capacity strengthening support to groups around the world led by LGBTQI+ communities and people with disabilities. ERA Fund grants and technical assistance have supported 116 LGBTQI+ organizations and 43 disabled persons organizations (DPOs) in 80 countries. NDI identifies partners through annual competitive call for applications in partnership with local embassies globally. The Fund operates with three broad objectives: (1) Safe and Secure Environments; (2) Political Participation; and (3) Empowered & Inclusive Movements & Organizations. The language of these objectives is

purposefully broad in order to give space for local groups to submit proposals that best address the challenges they are facing. During the application period, NDI provides written guidance on how to submit a competitive application (see an example at this link). NDI also provides application forms in multiple languages and answers questions from applicants in real time.

After NDI selects partners, the Institute works extensively with each organization to update their plan and budget. This starts with explaining that NDI intends to meet them where they are and offer as much flexibility as possible so that they have significant ownership over their work. To this end, NDI offers partners the chance to revisit budget and planning documents to ensure they have an alignment of time, people and money needed to implement their proposals.





NDI and National Elections Watch hard at work during the 2023 Sierra Leone National Elections.

Additionally, NDI structures all ERA Fund subawards as Fixed Amount Awards (FAAs), in order to focus the partnership on organizing and activism rather than on the financial management of a grant. Although FAAs can seem rigid once milestones are established, there are ways to build flexibility into the milestone schedules that allow partners to pivot. For example, local ERA Fund partner Queer Center Skopje in North Macedonia received funding for an advocacy campaign focused on legislative reforms to legal gender recognition procedures. Over the course of the program, the political environment in the parliament shifted in a way that prevented Queer Center from having formal hearings and votes that were originally planned. However, the language included in the FAA milestone schedule was flexible, only requiring an “Agenda and meeting notes from legal gender recognition advocacy meetings.” This framing allowed NDI to continue funding Queer Center even though they pivoted to holding side meetings with allied MPs to create a new strategy for the initiative.

Alongside the funding for activism, ERA Fund partners receive additional resources for capacity strengthening. NDI structures this component of the program in a way that also prioritizes buy-in and full ownership of the partner. This starts with a general self-assessment questionnaire that partners fill out covering a variety of areas of their work. Using the questionnaire allows partners to self-identify priority areas for improvement and how the organizational change should occur. This increases the partners’ enthusiasm and engagement in their organizational change processes. In most cases, NDI provides partners with financial support that they can use themselves to strengthen capacity. This approach also enhances ownership. When an external expert or consultant might be needed, NDI works with partners to find the best fit and this is often someone from a group’s extended network. This is especially important when delivering support to marginalized communities to ensure their safety and account for the unique challenges they face.



NDI partner New Generation Girls and Women Development holds a community meeting in Nigeria.





Young members of NDI partner, Libyan Debate Club participate in a debate activity.

## Actively Seeking and Incorporating Partner Feedback

In order to establish more equal and trusting partnerships, NDI makes an effort to gather formal and informal feedback from partners. Listening to partners is essential for improving programs, ensuring that NDI's support stays relevant and responsive to the partner's evolving needs, and maintaining mutual accountability and openness.

As an example, NDI distributes a survey to partners in the ERA Fund after each round of grantmaking. The purpose of the survey is to gain a better understanding of grantees' experiences and perceptions of the program. The questions are

specifically aimed at assessing the efficiency of the grantmaking process; grantees' overall satisfaction with their NDI relationship; and the extent to which the grants made under this program contributed to organizations' mission.

A Google Form is used to collect the responses and surveys are made available to respondents in English, Spanish and French. The survey includes thirteen questions that invite respondents to indicate their agreement with certain statements using Likert scales measuring the range between very good to very poor, for instance.

The last round of surveys was conducted with LGBTQI+ partners who completed grants throughout 2022 and 2023 and results indicated that, on average, surveyed grantees had positive experiences with all aspects of the Equal Rights in Action Fund. While the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, some grantees indicated room for improvement in different aspects of the program. Some respondents indicated that they found there to be a learning curve to understanding how FAAs work, but appreciated the support and guidance from NDI. Others expressed a desire for more funding or the ability to renew for up to two more years to provide stability. At the same time, the majority of respondents noted their appreciation for the overall flexibility of both the FAA mechanism and NDI's responsiveness throughout both the negotiation of the grant and implementation of their initiatives.

NDI also includes open-ended questions that enable grantees to elaborate on their views. Recent feedback indicated that:

*The ERA Fund's genuine interest in the outcomes of our project was evident through their regular check-ins and willingness to adapt based on our progress and challenges. Once the team identified our capacity weaknesses, they recommended technical support and capacity building initiatives and provided additional funds for the same. This level of engagement reaffirms our confidence in the Fund's dedication to building real impact on the ground . . . where human rights initiatives particularly focusing on marginalized communities often struggle with limited resources and complex issues, the ERA Fund's partnership has given us so much hope. ERA Fund has been more than a funder; but a catalyst for transformation. As we continue our journey to create a more just and equitable society, we are deeply grateful for the ERA Fund's support, guidance, and shared vision for a better world."*



ERA Fund partner, Filles a Besoins Speciaux por la Reforme in Haiti, holds an information session on supporting women and girls with disabilities.

Establishing strong partnerships based on mutual trust and transparency is critical to shifting power and enabling local ownership among NDI partners. As illustrated by the examples in this Civic Update, NDI staff can contribute to localization efforts and shift power to local actors by utilizing these methods to clarify expectations, structure decision making, increase flexibility, and capture feedback from local partners.