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CIVIC UPDATE

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CONTEXT MATTERS

This issue of Civic Update presents an opportunity to reflect on the importance of context and provides concrete advice and tools to better understand local environments. Countless experiences illustrate how cookie-cutter methods often fail. Although there are fundamental, perhaps universal, aspects to development work, having a firm grasp of 'on-the-ground' realities in each of NDI's program countries helps implementers conduct programs that are better informed and more effective. In conversations with NDI staff in DC and the field, the Citizen Participation team identified the following two areas in which local knowledge can lead to more relevant and timely programs: 1) assessment tools for national and local contexts; 2) strategies for working in challenging environments. Additionally, tapping into, and subsequently building, national staffs' skills and abilities is a cornerstone of NDI's years of successful program implementation.

The articles in this edition focus less on why context matters and more on advice from within NDI to determine ways in which to more fully take context into consideration. We highlight several tools for developing a comprehensive view of a local context, including contextual analysis and community mapping tools, as well as reviewing strategies used in locations where political space is limited or where activities may be restricted due to high security risks. In each, local context proves quite useful.

-Aaron Azelton,
Director,
Citizen Participation Programs

Assessing National and Local Contexts

Developing practices to better understand historical, traditional, and cultural influences that shape the places where NDI works is fundamental to designing and implementing effective programs. Influences at the national, state, and local levels can inform who we work with, how we work with them, and the types of activities that will help local partners create change most effectively. Undertaking assessments to analyze local context provides a way to test assumptions and anticipate possible hindrances. They also help to identify stakeholders and determine where to conduct a program based on knowledge of local resources and whether or not a supportive environment exists. This article highlights various methods used by NDI offices and partner organizations.

Recently, NDI's CEWA team conducted an environmental scan in Burkina Faso to better understand the realities on the ground. An environmental scan is a method of contextual analysis. Koebel Price, Senior Advisor to NDI's Citizen Participation programs, describes contextual analysis as a "deliberative, consistent tool to identify places most conducive to program success." Koebel recently helped NDI Burkina Faso develop a plan to identify 20 local communes in which to increase women's participation in local councils for poverty-reduction initiatives. Based on the program's particular theory of change, the office formulated criteria to establish how to achieve program goals. They then developed a list of questions to ask local actors, including local government officials and civil society organizations. These questions aimed to obtain information to provide a 360-degree view of the environment and how it would complement the program's dimensions. Field staff then conducted a training for national staff about the program, its goals, and how to conduct interviews. Later, staff held in-depth group interviews with the identified local actors. Once all data was in, staff then synthesized and analyzed the information.

Assessing National and Local Contexts—continued

Beyond gathering information for developing a program, a contextual analysis has numerous other benefits. Conducting interviews with a wide range of local actors allows NDI to begin building relationships with potential partners and informs them about NDI's work. According to CEWA Team Program Officer Walarigaton "Walas" Coulibaly, who conducted the recent environmental scan in Burkina Faso, potential partners immediately felt involved in the process, thus creating potential program participation buy-in. Walas also adds that the group interview process created a dialogue among local actors, enabling some to meet for the first time and share knowledge about their community.

The Mayor of the Boulmiougou commune of Burkina Faso sending off two NDI staff members after a very productive discussion.

Involving national staff in program development, and training them on how to conduct interviews for research builds their capacity. Conducting contextual analysis also enables NDI to concretely justify why it is working in one location versus another. Furthermore, although its purpose is not to establish a baseline survey from which to evaluate a program's objectives, the information obtained in a contextual analysis can also be used later as part of baseline data.

Whereas the environmental scan helps understand context more thoroughly at the macro-level, there are also a number of community assessment tools useful at the micro-level. For example, community mapping is a participatory tool that allows community members to create a visual representation of their community space. It helps facilitate a discussion of different individuals' or groups' perceptions of the community and identifies key people and places. For those working on advocacy campaigns, a stakeholder analysis helps delineate sources of power necessary for reform and to better understand how and where decisions are made.

Other examples of community assessment tools include seasonal calendars and transect walks. Seasonal calendars help identify work patterns, resource availability, and weather patterns. They help to identify when potential participants will most likely have the time to participate in activities. In a transect, or community walk, community members walk researchers through their community to identify important locations. According to the World Bank, a transect walk helps identify major problems perceived by different groups, assists with site selection, and informs researchers about local practices. Kourtney Pompi, Senior Program Officer for NDI's Citizen Participation team, utilized a transect walk while conducting research on service delivery and good governance in East Timor. By having research teams visually observe the community infrastructure about which they had just surveyed citizens, they were able to glean additional information. For example, research teams could gather data by visually inspecting the distance to the water distribution points, the number of users, and the condition of the infrastructure. This information, if gathered only from the respondents, may be inaccurate, biased or skewed. This additional level of independent data collection increases the knowledge and understanding of local contexts.

Assessment tools for understanding and analyzing contexts better position NDI for effective program implementation and design.

Contextual Analysis Sample Questions from Burkina Faso

Section 1
- How frequently does the local council hold meetings?
- Does the council take regular meeting minutes?
- What is the level of participation of the councilors?
- Does the council collect taxes? Does it have enough tax money for council activities?

Section 2
- What is the number of women councilors?
- What are their positions?
- Have they benefited from any trainings?

Section 3
- What are some of the challenges in developing the local development plan?
- What are the main priorities of the plan?

Section 4
- What has been done for poverty-reduction?
- What women have been involved in this process?
- How were these projects initiated?
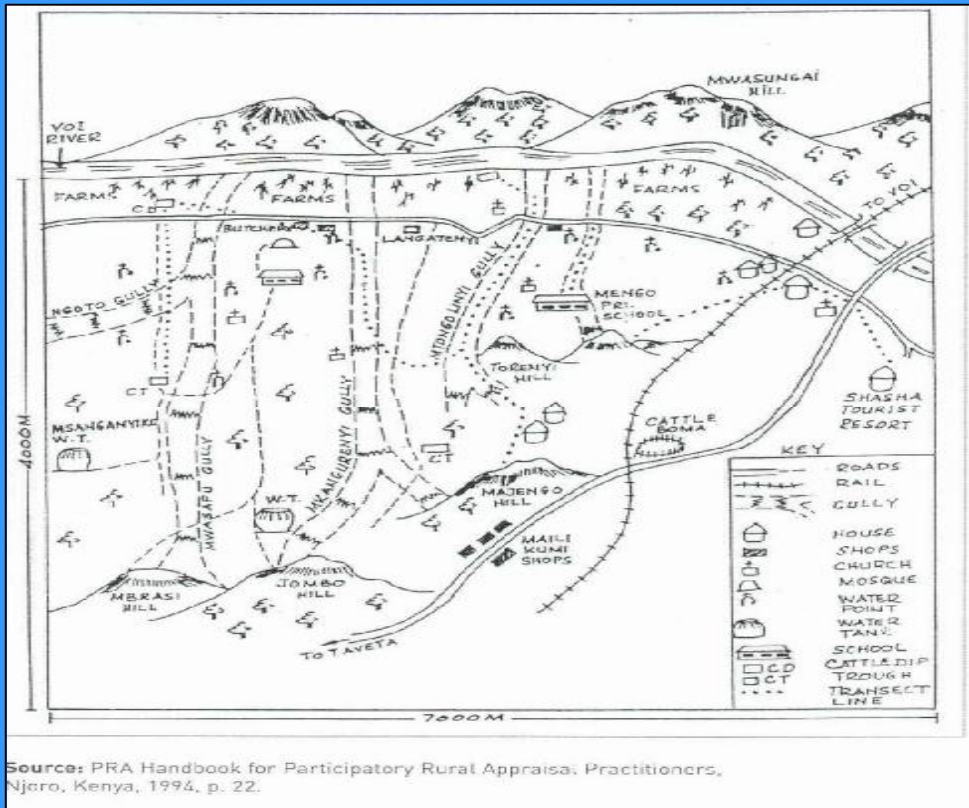- Who are the beneficiaries?

Section 5
- What are the civic groups in the community that collaborate with councils?
- What is their main purpose?
- Would they be willing to work with NDI?

Section 6
- What are the transportation options from the capital to the commune?
- Where is the nearest police station?
- Are there spaces to host more than 50 people for a training?

Tools For Assessing National and Local Contexts

An example community map

Source: PRA Handbook for Participatory Rural Appraisal Practitioners, Njoro, Kenya, 1994, p. 22.
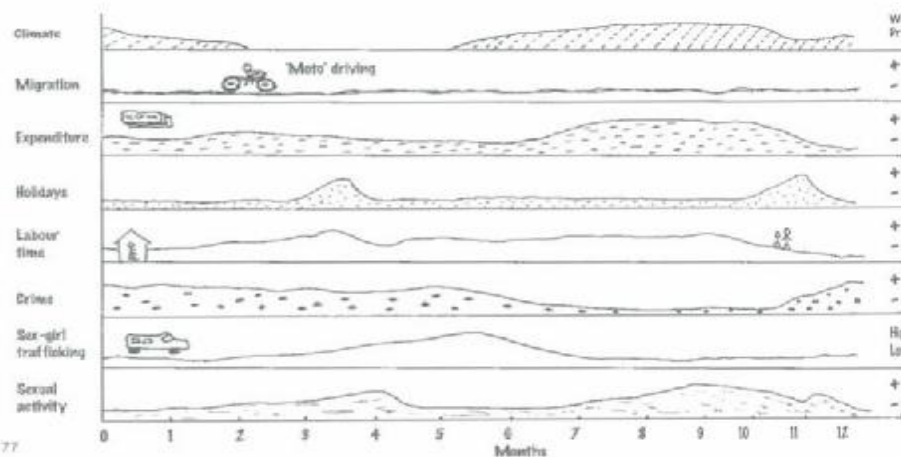
Participatory Tools

For more information and examples of participatory tools for mobilizing communities, see the International HIV/AIDS Alliance's *Tools Together Now!* manual, available at

http://www.aidsalliance.org/graphics/secretariat/publications/Tools_Together_Now.pdf.

An example seasonal calendar

Source: *Tools Together Now!.*

Working in Challenging Environments

NDI works in countries with varying degrees of political space and freedom. Some of NDI's most innovative programs have taken place in countries considered to be restrictive. A theme from NDI's 2007 global retreat, 'challenging environments' are defined as countries in which governments severely restrict civil, human and/or political rights; and seek to hinder the work of individuals and organizations who seek to expand or protect those rights. Oftentimes, NDI also conducts programs in places with high-security risks or the likelihood of a rapidly changing political environment (that often results in political space shrinking in the face of program activities).

In spite of the challenges that such complex environments pose, NDI continues to find creative ways to support local democrats. Sometimes, NDI must operate with a low profile and a more limited capacity, such as in Egypt. In other instances, such as in Zimbabwe and Burma, NDI largely or entirely works from the outside in partnership with internal civic organizations. NDI also operates in volatile countries, such as Lebanon and Iraq. Through discussions with NDI staff and local partners working on the ground, the Citizen Participation team has identified essential tips for successfully conducting programs in challenging environments.

Given such environments' unpredictable nature, many NDI offices take thorough precautionary measures and create contingency plans to protect local partners and staff alike. In order to stay on top of unfolding events, the NDI Lebanon office has conducted weekly political strategy sessions with a local partner organization. According to Resident Senior Program Officer Sally Abi Khalil, "Nobody could really forecast the developments. NDI helped CCER [Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform] devise specific action plans

for each political scenario (resolution of the crisis, prolonged stalemate, deterioration of the security situation, etc.)." The NDI Nicaragua office conducted a similar exercise around the recent elections, taking into consideration the safety of staff and partners. They also considered implications on program activities, which was particularly important with the outbreak of clashes over election results.

In addition to understanding the situation on the ground and planning for political scenarios, NDI staff working in challenging environments must also face obstacles when implementing programs. Ferdos Majeed of NDI's Iraq office who is the 2008-2009 Andi Parhamovich fellow cites the security situation in Iraq as the principal challenge to providing democracy assistance. As the Iraq Women's Participation Program Officer, Ferdos attempted to bring twenty-five women from across Iraq to Erbil for multiple training sessions. However, due to the unpredictable security situation, not all participants were able to attend for reasons ranging from the inability to secure transportation to threats against a participant. Ferdos therefore stresses the importance of always having a 'Plan B' to ensure that programs can continue to operate to the

best of their ability given the circumstances.

Because of narrowed political spaces, NDI offices at times operate with a limited or low profile. In spite of this inability to operate at full capacity, Lila Jaafar, Resident Senior Program Officer with NDI Egypt, demonstrates that NDI can still have a substantive impact in the field. Although NDI has now been waiting over three years for its registration papers to clear, it chose to continue working in Egypt despite lacking legal status. According to Lila, "This was crucial for us to build and strengthen relationships with current and new partners, while allowing us the opportunity to explain more about the nature of NDI's work and address misperceptions of our activities and goals." For instance, NDI Egypt did outreach to rural NGOs who were more interested in benefitting from NDI's assistance than their Cairo-based peers who have much higher profiles. Although unable to provide hands-on training, NDI provides these partners with Arabic manuals and one-on-one consultations. Furthermore, in order to provide technical support for domestic election monitors across Egypt while maintaining a low profile, NDI Egypt utilized and deployed experts from Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Kazakhstan in Egypt's 2005 parliamentary elections and 2008 municipal elections.

Another key component to success when working in a challenging environment is building relationships with local actors. NDI Egypt has created a practice of regularly communicating with state officials in order to develop relationships. According to Lila, upholding transparency has been essential to

Egyptian partner organizations participate in a training with their expatriate

Working in Challenging Environments - Continued

*CCER volunteers in front of the Lebanese Parliament building holding letters
in support of electoral reform*

building trust and enhancing credibility with the government. At the same time, however, NDI Egypt purposefully avoids media attention to maintain its lower profile until registration is complete.

Lila also describes how NDI Egypt has been successful in dispelling suspicions of its democracy programs simply by providing materials to organizations as well as holding one-on-one consultations. According to Lila, potential partners soon learn that NDI's work is technical rather than political: "They come to realize that what we offer is practical, useful, and harmless." Lila also stresses the importance of not imposing activities on partners—another factor that contributes to dispelling suspicions and earning trust: "They understand the political environment better than we do and usually have more at stake. We are very conscious of not putting our partners at any risk. . ."

Ferdos's experience working on the Iraq governance program in 2005 echoes Lila's experience in Egypt. Ferdos found that many political parties were at first suspicious of anything American, yet once they participated in NDI's trainings and recognized their usefulness, they could not get enough of NDI's assistance. Ferdos recalls receiving phone calls from parliamentary offices asking for additional trainings, even if brief trainings

during lunch were all that could be provided. She also recounts how an extremist political party denounced Americans on television, vowing to never work with them again, but then in private told NDI that its members would of course continue working with NDI.

NDI also works with local partners in countries where political space is even more restrictive, such as Zimbabwe and Burma. The Women's League of Burma (WLB), the 2008 recipient of the Madeline K. Albright Award, exemplifies the importance of maintaining solidarity internally as an organization and externally with allies in countries with little to no political space.   The WLB is an umbrella organization working towards women's empowerment and participation in the Burmese democracy movement.

With twelve member organizations around Burma consisting of women of different ethnic backgrounds, the WLB is continuously mindful of its purpose: to enhance the lives of women. If there are disagreements among the organizations, members ask themselves what course of action will lead to a better life for women – instead of focusing on their ethnic or religious differences. WLB also promotes a decision-making process based on consensus as well as majority rule, which helps them maintain a cohesive movement despite

their differences. Representatives of the twelve sub-organizations do not make decisions for their communities, but rather must discuss the issues with their constituents to ensure that everyone understands the problems at hand. Only after they relay their communities' decisions back to the WLB can the WLB take action by majority opinion. WLB's commitment to its principles and its decision-making process has fostered an inclusive as well as empowering environment for its members. Furthermore, the WLB identifies strategic partnerships in order to more easily access to resources and ensures the safety of its members. It is essential that the WLB build trust with these allies to garner information to ensure that they can safely avoid government crackdowns. Through building solidarity as a close-knit network of women and gaining the trust of strategic actors, the WLB has been able to sustain a fortified front for advancing women's rights and democracy from within and outside Burma.

NDI's dedication to local individuals and organizations even in the most challenging, complex, and uncertain environments makes NDI a vanguard for supporting democracy movements around the world. Sharing accounts from these experiences enables NDI to better confront these unique circumstances.

The Essential Role of National Staff

Arguably NDI's greatest resource for understanding local contexts is its national staff in field offices across the world. National staff provide insights into local circumstances that are vital to overseeing the successful undertaking of NDI's projects. With context being so fundamental to development work, NDI continues to overcome its complexities and complications by encouraging staff development.

A striking aspect of NDI's success is the growth in the number of national staff and the rise of national staff to leadership positions. According to Training and Staff Development Manager Erica Breth, seven out of ten NDI employees are national staff, and of those not national staff, a number of them once were. As expatriate staff come and go, national staff remain, maintaining critical relationships with elected officials and civic leaders. Many national staff have risen to management positions in their home countries as well as in other countries. Karina Espinoza, who began as an administrative assistant with NDI in Venezuela and is now the acting director, says, "It has been an advantage for our work in Venezuela to have the knowledge that I have as a national of the context of the country and of its political leaders combined with my professional position and my nonpartisanship. Also, [it is important] for designing programs that specifically address the needs of the local political leadership." Other examples include Kosovars Edmond "Edi" Efendija, who is now a Resident Senior Program Officer for the Somalia Parliamentary Program, and Arianit "Niti" Shehu, who is a Resident Senior Program Manager in Jordan. Some national staff even go on to run for office or become leaders in other capacities in their societies. For example, Honorine Muyoyeta, formerly NDI's Sierra Leone Country Director, plans to run in the 2011 Zambian parliamentary elections.

National staff provide details on the political system and its leaders, the principal civic organizations, and the history of NDI programs. Differences in resources, cultural practices, and societal norms across the globe make national staff essential for contextualizing the expansive knowledge NDIers hold relating to democracy assistance. Expatriate staff who head to the field recognize that they could not perform their jobs without national staff assistance. For example, Brianne Lute, a Program Officer on the Governance team, spent six months working in NDI's Montenegro office. Brianne quickly learned from national staff that business practices there are vastly different from those practiced in D.C.: "Who knew that you can't call someone after 2:00 pm or schedule a meeting more than a day in advance? It's considered rude in the Balkans." Although a seemingly minor detail, this type of information ensures that NDI upholds good relations with its partners and that it can run its programs more effectively.

> "In my more than ten years at NDI what gives me the most personal satisfaction is watching current and former staff excel at democracy-building. . .And really, given that they're national staff, when they add those skills to the knowledge they have of their own countries, they can be better at this work than expatriates. That is immensely rewarding to see."
>
> —Stephanie Lynn, Resident Senior Program Director for Burma and Malaysia

With the tremendous role that national staff play in achieving NDI's mission, it is evident how important it is to take opportunities to build staff capacity. Ferdos Majeed, the Iraq Women's Participation Program Officer, recounts the frustration she felt as a national staff member when she organized NGO trainings but was unable to participate in the trainings herself. As Erica points out, "We're so often focused on helping our partners gain knowledge and skills that we forget to invest in broadening our own in-house expertise—which in the long-term helps NDI to better serve our partners." Although NDI organizes study missions, delegations, and trainings for its partners, national staff are not always afforded equivalent opportunities. Ferdos is now the first recipient of the Parhamovich Fellowship and is working in the D.C. office for three months to enhance her skills to advance women's participation in Iraq.

By building staff capacity, NDI can implement its programs more effectively and better position national staff for advanced career opportunities in the future. Staff development opportunities include new assignments (the person applies existing skills and knowledge to a different area), stretch assignments (the person takes on a project in the course of which he/she will gain new skills), working on a team (either for the first time instead of working alone, or in a leadership role), training, and horizontal exchanges (short to medium term assignments on another project, in another country, or on another team).

Recent efforts to bolster NDI's commitment to staff development include the creation of Erica's position and the exemplary work of NDI Lebanon in designing a multi-track approach to staff development. The Training and Staff Development Manager position within Human Resources is a way for NDI to begin to develop Institute-wide approaches to staff development. Currently, Erica is developing an orientation for new resident directors that can be adapted to any new staff. She is also investigating how online applications can open up learning opportunities when budgets do not allow face-to-face participation, enabling a richer exchange of knowledge and experience among NDI's staff around the world. The staff development intranet page also lists free and low-cost opportunities for development outside of NDI.

National Staff—Continued

Lebanon's Resident Senior Program Manager Nicole Rowsell's approach to staff development reflects the direction in which the Institute is going. Building on an approach Nicole first applied in Iraq, the program has the following three central goals: 1) build knowledge on core democratic principles and practices; 2) develop standards of professional work and ethics based on democratic values, such as transparency and inclusive decision-making; 3) enhance staff and team morale through a commitment to individual professional development. Mindful of NDI's practice of 'learning by doing,' the program consists of staff learning sessions, regular team working sessions, and expert 'shadowing.'

A particularly unique experience is for national staff to travel to other countries or regions. According to Jordan's Resident Director Roula Attar, "Most local staff [in Jordan] have the opportunity to travel in the region and assist with NDI programs in other MENA countries, which proved immensely valuable to their skills and knowledge development." With sixty-five offices around the world, it is extremely challenging to share this immense amount of information and experience. As of yet, it is not the norm for NDI national staff to talk and interact with their peers in other countries.

Expatriate staff visiting the field can also be pro-active in finding ways to build national staff capacity. For instance, Brittany Danisch, a Senior Program Officer on CEWA, organized an audio recording training session in Sudan. NDI staff in Sudan organize discussion groups with citizens that they sometimes record and later play on the radio along with broadcasts of NDI's civic education radio program. However, staff did not have expertise in audio equipment or how to handle the challenges of recording in an environment like Sudan. According to Brittany, "Audio recording isn't rocket science, but it does require a little training to get the hang of it. And in a place like Sudan, sometimes you have to figure out how to edit unusual sounds like falling mangos pounding on the metal roof." Brittany therefore arranged a training session with NDI staff on how to record and edit the listening groups so it could be aired later on the radio.

Before heading to the field, expatriate staff can consult with senior-level field staff about existing knowledge gaps and devise a plan to fill some of those voids through a presentation or training. For example, when working in Iraq, Nicole asked Dave Larson, formerly a member of the Citizen Participation team, to assist with the design of a youth participation program. She specifically requested in his Terms of Reference that he prepare and give a general presentation on youth participation for field staff. Furthermore, Roula suggests that expatriate trainers encourage national staff to shadow them or assist them with the trainings in more than just a logistical capacity.

By encouraging staff development, particularly for national staff, NDI can further enhance its ability to design and implement successful programs.

Team Update

Lacey Kohlmoos is joining the Citizen Participation Team as the new project assistant. She is currently earning her master's degree in American University's International Development Program with a concentration in community development. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Virginia in 2005 with a double major in the Studies of Women and Gender and Drama. After graduation she backpacked around the world for 10 ½ months, followed by a year teaching English at an elementary school in a tiny Costa Rican town. Upon return in December 2007, Lacey worked with Women Thrive Worldwide which later led to a summer internship in Honduras where she worked with Thrive's newest partner, COMUCAP, to begin an advocacy campaign for the inclusion of women in MCA-Honduras policy and programming.