

Civic Forum: An Action Civics Model for New and Emerging Democracies

Abstract

Organized and politically active citizens are instrumental in driving democratic and socio-economic development. In new and emerging democracies, the National Democratic Institute has helped citizens play these roles through a guided, iterative process called Civic Forum. The process combines educational discussions, experiential learning and citizen-led collective actions to address local-level community needs. Results have included increased citizenship competencies, space for participation and accountability relationships with public officials.

Introduction

There is a dynamic interrelationship between citizen participation and the development of legitimate, functioning democracies. Long-term democratic development requires informed, organized and active citizens that can shape political priorities and hold government to account. Citizens must therefore understand ideas about citizenship, politics and government. They need knowledge to make decisions about policy choices and the proper use of authority, along with the skills to voice their concerns, act collectively and hold public officials (e.g., elected representatives, civil servants, and appointed leaders) accountable. They also need access to information about government actions, and need to be free to organize without government harassment or interference.

As used in this paper, the term citizen has an inherently political meaning and defines a certain type of relationship between people and the government. Citizens have a set of rights and responsibilities, including the right to participate in decisions that affect the public welfare. Citizens are essential to democratic governance. They give life and meaning to democratic principles and the institutions designed to create pluralism, accountability and limits on government power. The esteemed US Supreme Court

Justice Louis Brandeis¹ once said, “The most important political office is that of the private citizen.” Without the active involvement of citizens in political life, government power can be abused and used to benefit only narrow segments of a society.

For more than 30 years, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has supported democratic development around the world. NDI is an international nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working with local partners in over 100 countries to help democracy deliver better outcomes for citizens. In part, this involves helping citizens exert influence over decisions that directly impact their welfare. The strength and credibility of a democracy depends, to an important degree, on how its institutions work in practice and whether they address issues affecting all citizens’ daily lives in areas, such as employment, health, education, public safety and infrastructure.

NDI has learned that citizen-led activism – driven by real community needs and interests – is a powerful transformative force; it can help transform how politics is practiced and the quality of life in communities. Citizens the world over want to improve their wellbeing and are often willing to take peaceful political action, when they believe that they can make a difference. Citizens that care about an issue and have the opportunity to express their “voice” in decisions, will readily participate in efforts to foster positive, lasting change. Instead of bypassing government, parliaments, parties, and politics altogether, NDI helps citizen groups take actions that engage these institutions. Whether advocating for specific policies, providing information on economic challenges, monitoring the implementation of a policy, or raising awareness about public needs, citizens can contribute to policy making and change the way politics is practiced.

To increase local-level citizen participation in new and emerging democracies, NDI has developed a program approach named *Civic Forum*. The approach has been used in more than a dozen countries to educate and activate citizens, and it typically coincides with an unfolding democratic transition. Through a guided, iterative set of processes, *Civic Forum* helps increase citizenship competencies, the space for public participation

¹ Louis Brandeis served as the first Jewish member of the US Supreme Court from 1916-1939. He is credited with developing the body of law that deals with individual privacy rights and was a renowned champion of free speech.

and accountability relationships between citizens and public officials. Recognizing that there is no fast track to democracy – that democratic political norms, values and procedures evolve over time in fits and starts and with inevitable setbacks -- the approach emphasizes participatory practices that enable citizen engagement beyond the life of the project.

The remainder of this paper will provide a more detailed explanation of *Civic Forum's* key features and methodologies. To illustrate how the approach works in practice, NDI's programs in Jordan and Moldova will be featured. These two examples show how *Civic Forum* can be adapted for different types of communities and demographic groups.

The Civic Forum Methodology

Civic Forum takes a longer-term, building-block approach, using small-group discussion to lay the foundation for collective action. The formative process can be divided into four phases (described below) that typically take place over an 18 to 24 month period. Locally-recruited facilitators, trained and managed by NDI, enter communities, form small citizen groups and then guide each of those groups to organized, political engagement. The groups typically comprise a diverse mix of citizens interested in solving everyday problems in their community.

From a methodological perspective, *Civic Forum* combines educational discussions, experiential learning and citizen-led campaigns to address local-level community issues. The approach represents a form of “action civics” (Gingold 2013) and is focused on achieving behavior changes. Specifically, *Civic Forum* is designed to make local politics more participatory, by changing the way individuals, groups and communities approach problem solving and decision making.

Civic Forum's underlying principle is to put the desired behaviors into practice in ways that are meaningful and practical for citizens. This starts in the small groups where individual citizens discuss democracy and deliberate how it should function. Over a series of discussions, they work together to develop a shared understanding and vision for democracy in their community. This sets the stage for collective action, as the groups begin to use newly acquired knowledge and skills to address an agreed-upon

community problem. At this point, they move outside of the small-group setting and begin leading change efforts that engage other citizens and public officials. Through this process, new perceptions and expectations emerge about participation, the roles that citizens should play and their relationships to decision makers. Over time, this translates into new norms that support regular citizen engagement.

The entire approach rests on experiential learning and requires the citizens involved to take ownership of the processes. *Civic Forum* provides structure and support, but the citizens themselves must have an interest in the welfare of their community and be willing to take voluntary action on self-identified issues. For this reason, not all groups move to action at the same rate.

Likewise, the ability of the *Civic Forum* facilitators to move unimpeded in and between communities, and of citizens to meet openly in small groups, are important elements of the approach. If, for instance, local authorities prevent citizens from assembling or traveling, or citizens do not believe that they are free to discuss political issues, then the program would not be workable.

Civic Forum has been most successful in countries transitioning to democratic rule or seeking greater citizen input into public policy making. This creates the space needed to fully implement the approach.

The four phases of *Civic Forum* each have specific methodological considerations. The phases include 1) preparation, 2) education, 3) organizing and 4) engagement. The last two phases are intended to be replicated and repeated by the citizens themselves after *Civic Forum* concludes. The following provides a thumbnail description of the phases.

Phase One -Preparation

The initial step is to identify the communities where *Civic Forum* will operate and then hire and train the cadre of local facilitators responsible for delivering the program across communities. An initial assessment is undertaken for each of the locations being considered. The assessment helps determine the program's primary content, as well as the potential scope. As part of this groundwork, a baseline study is undertaken,

typically using focus groups, to gauge citizens' knowledge of local democratic processes, experience with and attitudes toward participation, as well as to test the use of discussion-based activities.

Following this planning step, communities for the program are selected and facilitators are recruited from those areas. The local recruitment ensures that the facilitators understand the community sensibilities, as well as language differences and political dynamics. When recruiting, considerations are given to balancing gender and other demographic variables.

The facilitators receive extensive training in civic education, small-group process, issue organizing and political action. This training starts with a "boot camp" to introduce concepts, and the basic skills and understanding needed to begin work in communities. However, the training of the facilitators continues over the life of the program, so that they are involved in a continuous process of learning and reflection.

When facilitators enter their respective communities, their first job is reaching out to existing community-based organizations (CBOs) (e.g., youth clubs, pensioners association, disabled soldiers, women's groups, etc.). From within the ranks of the CBOs, discussion groups are formed comprising 15 to 20 citizens interested in the *Civic-Forum* opportunity and willing to make a voluntary commitment to the process. Each facilitator typically work with three to five groups concurrently. These may be located in different neighborhoods of a city, or in different villages of a municipality, for instance.

Phase Two: Education

The facilitator works with the group members to pick a convenient time and location for the series of educational discussions. The group members also set ground rules and make a mutual commitment to participate actively in discussion. The facilitated sessions are held at regular intervals (e.g., every two weeks) and generally last approximately two hours. This phase of the program might take two to three months as the citizens develop the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to begin taking actions outside the groups.

The *Civic Forum* approach does not prescribe a fixed civic education curriculum. Instead, it connects fundamental democratic principles to information about real-time, concrete political developments in a country. Although *Civic Forum* programs around the world are designed with similar objectives, the content and sequence of discussions differ. This corresponds to the political realities on the ground, and to the needs and interests of the particular citizens involved. Programs that coincided with the first post-conflict elections have introduced the election's purpose and process early in the program. On the other hand, programs begun after an election focused upon the idea of government accountability. The differences should not mask the fact that the same fundamental democratic issues and ideas underlie the discussions in each case. For instance, it is impossible to examine the purpose of elections without discussing the role played by citizens in determining the composition of government. Likewise, it is impossible to separate the accountability of elected officials from whom they are accountable to and why.

Based on this flexible approach, topics are selected and discussed in ways that help the groups learn about their democratic institutions, processes and local political realities. Groups come to understand the "political cycle" and begin to identify different entry points for citizen involvement. The discussions evolve into deliberations about community needs and interests. At the same time, the facilitators introduce skills and techniques, such as community mapping and power analysis, to help the group gather information, identify and analyze issues, and consider what decision maker is responsible for the issue.

Throughout this phase, the group members are building relationships with one another and establishing a shared understanding of their democratic roles and responsibilities. This sets the stage for the groups choosing an issue that they want to work collectively to solve.

Phase Three: Organizing

When citizens are first invited into the program, they are told that the *Civic Forum* process is designed to help them voluntarily organize and take action to improve their

communities. When groups reach the organizing phase, the knowledge, skills and confidence gained during the preceding months are actively applied and the promise of the program starts to become tangible.

During this phase, the facilitators help the groups conduct a more in-depth assessment of community needs and challenges, and identify issues that require some level of government involvement to resolve. This involves naming problems and thinking about: Who is affected?; What would be different if the issue is solved?; How does that benefit the community?; Does anyone stand to lose if the issue is solved? The groups might consider a range of issues and then make a decision about the one they want to organize around.

Group members are expected to gather information about the issue and build consensus about what a solution would look like. Once a preferred solution to the selected issue is determined, the groups develop a campaign strategy and campaign plan designed to achieve the solution through collective political action.

A strategy and plan are needed, because it is not enough for the citizen groups to have a clearly defined problem and a willingness to act. In most cases, there are power imbalances that favor government and the public officials. Real and perceived barriers exist that prevent citizens from having significant influence. For this reason, *Civic Forum* deals explicitly with power dynamics, in terms of understanding them and transforming them. Having a strategy is about overcoming barriers to participation by developing and using power, as much as it's about solving a concrete community problem.

This is not to imply the need for confrontation. Rather, it is about understanding politics in terms of building the power needed to influence and persuade those with the authority to make decisions and enforce rules. For instance, there can be power in numbers, resulting from citizens acting collectively. This is one of the reasons why *Civic Forum* is built on citizens learning to work together in a group. These groups have an inherent power that individual citizens do not possess.

Phase Four: Engagement

With the strategy and campaign plan in hand, the groups start taking actions to bring attention to the issue and develop the support needed to bring about a solution. The engagement phase is about groups actually doing politics. They use different strategies and tactics depending on their issues. The facilitators are responsible for providing guidance and helping the groups connect with a range of stakeholders. At the same time, additional skills are put into practice, including communication, negotiation and reflection.

One of the starting points is often mobilizing other citizens with a stake in the issue. This can involve getting them to turn out at a public forum, sign a petition or give an in-kind donation to support the campaign. It can also involve, building alliances with likeminded groups.

One of the communication techniques that groups learn at this junction is how to frame their issue and craft messages for different audiences. Framing the issue means describing it in terms that resonate with the particular target audience. This techniques helps the groups as they begin to also reach out to public officials to discuss the issue and convince them why it should be of interest.

Often by necessity, groups learn negotiation and compromise during this phase. As campaigns encounter resistance, or political realities that force changes in approach, groups need to make timely adjustments. Facilitators help the groups regularly reflect on how things are going and make determinations about what they should be doing differently.

Ideally, the initial campaigns results in problems being solved (and many do). However, there is also value in citizen groups becoming directly involved in the problem solving and decision making of their communities. Politicians and public officials are not always in a position to give groups what they want immediately, but campaigns can still claim success when they establish working relationships with decision makers. Groups can build on these relationships and work to insert themselves into the political discourse.

Country Examples

NDI's *Civic Forum* programs look somewhat different from one country context to another. Besides differences in educational content, number of groups or duration of the program, other differences include the type of communities targeted and the demographic make-up of the groups. In Jordan, NDI is implementing a version of *Civic Forum* on university campuses with young adults, whereas the Moldova program is implemented in villages with older adults. In both cases, however, *Civic Forum* has run through multiple cycles with an expanding number of groups.

Jordan: Ana Usharek (I Participate)

Young Jordanian men and women, who make up more than 70 percent of the country's population, have had few opportunities to engage in politics and public decision making. This stems, in part, from socio-cultural norms and perceptions that identify youth as irresponsible and lacking the life experience required to participate in serious deliberations. This is reflected in the formal education system, which has not traditionally informed young people about political processes or encouraged their active participation. Likewise, educational practices focus on rote memorization and repetition and the system often discourages individual analysis, which can undermine youth confidence in sharing their own ideas and opinions. Moreover, there have been no mechanisms for young people to learn how public decisions are made, what their rights are as citizens, and where and how they can access political processes. Young women face additional barriers to political participation due to socio-cultural norms that have discouraged women from being assertive and playing leadership roles.

To help better position young people as active citizens and to open Jordan's political processes to their participation, NDI has partnered with 25 Jordanian universities and the Ministry of Education to implement a *Civic Forum* program with university students across the country. Since 2010, more than 20,000 young women and men have completed a semester-long, extracurricular series of educational discussions on democracy, human rights and citizenship. More than 4000 of these students have then

advanced to organize issue-based campaigns, participate in a national debate competition and hold policy dialogues with politicians and public officials.

The Jordan program involves a large number of students in the education phase, but then works more intensively with a smaller number during the organizing and engagement phases. During these phases, select students begin to join forces with one another to campaign on an issue. Typically, these women and men are selected based on their: level of participation in the preceding discussions; expressed interest in solving a problem in their communities; willingness to lead a change effort; and ability to commit the time and energy.

Through the program, young people have carried out nearly 100 campaigns to address a variety of public issues, including accessibility for people with disabilities on university campuses, improved local-level transportation services and infrastructure, and greater freedom of expression. Facilitators help the youth coalesce and organize their campaigns. Many of the campaigns feature the use of social media to mobilize support among broader segments of the youth population. They also typically involve forming partnerships with adult “champions” that are also concerned about the issue.

As part of the approach, the *Civic Forum* facilitators also assist the young women and men with organizing meetings with public officials and political leaders to inform them of pertinent policy issues. This is done in the form of a “policy dialogue” with small groups of national and local leaders. The young people prepare for the dialogues by gathering information and evidence related to an issue, and then provide the leaders with policy alternatives.

To augment their work on campaigns and policy development, the young people participate in regional and national debate competitions, managed by NDI, that are aired on television and radio. Politically significant public-policy issues, such as the legal status of children from mixed nationality marriages, are debated. This is intended to help the young people raise awareness of the issues. The debate component of the program starts with intensive training for debate teams at various universities, who then compete with other universities in their region of the country. Ultimately, the champion

debate team from each of the four regions compete with each other in a national debate competition. The national debate competition is aired on one of Jordan's main national television channels. The debate competition adds another element to the *Civic Forum* that allows youth to build their policy analysis and civil discourse capacities, while developing a public profile as knowledgeable political activists and raising awareness of issues they care about.

Given the situation of youth, the Jordan *Civic Forum* program has emphasized the creation of a more supportive environment for youth political activism. This has meant helping young people demonstrate the contributions they can make to politics, through meaningful policy debate and dialogue for instance. It has also meant helping them bridge inter-generational divides, by building working relationships with adult leaders as part of their campaign strategies. The result has been growing space for youth participation and a growing recognition that young women and men can play constructive roles in public-policy making.

Moldova: PUNE UMĂRUL (Civic Initiative)

In 2009, mass protests and the resulting "Twitter Revolution" brought an end to the last popularly-elected Communist government in Europe. This began a rocky democratic consolidation process with a tenuous national-level commitment to democratic development, widespread corruption and captured government institutions. At the same time, citizens lacked any real experience with democratic politics and participation, outside of protest. Nonetheless, citizens remained supportive of democracy and began looking locally for solutions to pressing socio-economic concerns.

Against this backdrop, NDI began a *Civic Forum* program in 2012 to help citizens at the local-level participate in decisions about socio-economic issues. Since that time, *Civic Forum* facilitators have helped form and activate 128 groups in 107 communities throughout Moldova.

An initial assessment at the start of the program indicated that citizens did not believe they could directly influence change in their communities. Despite having many complaints about things that needed to change, citizens did not know what they should

expect from local government or how to get it. As discussion groups began to meet, members took great interest in learning about the possibility of working purposefully to help local government address problems. This was an awakening for many citizens who had lived most of their lives under communist rule and never considered it to be their right and responsibility.

With this realization, groups chose to move more quickly to action and only spent a modest amount of time in educational discussions. NDI focused more on helping the groups learn about community organizing and they quickly began canvassing their communities to identify issues. To determine the highest priority issues, the citizen activists employed a number of tools, such as questionnaires, door-to-door canvassing, and town-hall meetings, through which organizers and civic leaders could talk with citizens.

The groups initially focused on less contentious issues, such as park improvements or sidewalk repairs, but, as they continued, *Civic Forum* facilitators helped them identify more complex issues and work in coalition across communities. For example, groups formed a regional coalition to deal with traffic safety and road construction. At the same time, groups expanded their range of tactics and types of interactions with public officials.

The 2015 local elections also marked an important evolution in the relations between *Civic Forum* groups and elected officials. The activists organized large scale voter education events and successfully refocused the electoral debate on local issues. Candidates made campaign promises to address the issues. After the elections, this allowed the groups to then work with the newly-elected officials to follow through on the promises.

New *Civic Forum* groups have been added every year. They follow a similar path by participating in a few educational discussions and then starting to organize around basic community needs. The groups now follow a ten step plan for organizing, and more seasoned groups help mentor the new groups. They also hold an annual gathering of organizers and activists to share stories and reflect on their experiences.

In Moldova, *Civic Forum* groups are becoming a permanent part of the political landscape. Groups move from one issue to another and are increasingly being consulted by local government officials. At the same time, more citizens are becoming active through the organizing campaigns, by joining a town hall meeting, signing a petition or attending a candidate debate. This is all leading toward transforming the way citizens and local government approach community problem solving and decision making.

So What Changes?

As previously discussed, *Civic Forum* is designed to make local politics more participatory, by changing the way individuals, groups and communities approach problem solving and decision making. A description of these levels of change concludes this explanation of NDI's *Civic Forum* approach.

At the *individual* level, citizenship competencies develop as program participants put new knowledge and skills into action. They better understand their rights and responsibilities, and learn to play different roles including those of civic organizers, leaders and activists. Along the way, they begin to think critically and gain the confidence needed to approach public officials. They also build relationship with other citizens and learn the value of working collectively.

At the *group* level, social capital increases as new relationships and networks form around tangible cross-cutting community interests. Community members practice organized collective action and develop the political know-how required to analyze problems, deliberate policy alternatives and negotiate trade-offs. This strengthens the voice of citizens and the power and influence they have over local decisions.

At the *community* level, the program expands space for inclusive citizen participation and cooperation with public officials, beginning to reshape accountability relationships and the norms and expectations surrounding citizen participation.

References

Gingold, Jessica (August 2013) Building an Evidence-Based Practice of Action Civics: The current state of assessments and recommendations for the future, CIRCLE Working Paper 78, Tufts University http://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/WP_78_Gingold.pdf

About the Author

Mr. Aaron Azelton serves as the National Democratic Institute's Director of Citizen Participation programs. He is a civic engagement specialist who has helped to manage, design, and implement inclusive political participation programs at NDI since 1992. In his current position, Mr. Azelton supports NDI initiatives by providing guidance on all aspects of community organizing, advocacy, government monitoring and nonprofit organizational development. He frequently serves as a facilitator for civil society programs throughout the world. In this capacity, he has helped local organizations develop strategic outlooks, plan political actions, structure partnerships, and carry out internal reforms in more than 30 countries. Mr. Azelton helped design NDI's *Civic Forum* program, a unique approach to promoting civic action in developing societies.