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NDI-Liberia E-Newsletter
Working for democracy & making democracy work
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Elections Law Reform: House and Senate Take First Step in Action Plan

In March, bills were introduced in both the Senate and the House of Representatives to amend the national Elections Law. Introduction of those bills is only the first formal step in a legislative action plan being led by Senator Jewel Howard Taylor, Chair of the Senate Committee on Independent Agencies and Commissions, and Representative Gabriel Smith, Chair of the House Committee on Elections and Inauguration. The action plan was developed by the committee chairs with technical assistance from NDI and financial support from the UNDP.

The next step in the legislative action plan calls for public hearings including testimony by civil society groups and other stakeholders. The hearings are expected to take place in different counties in April and May and are being supported by Sida, the UNDP and NDI. The plan anticipates mark-up of the bills and votes in both chambers of the Legislature during the course of its current session.



The bills now pending in both chambers emerged from the collaborative work done earlier this year by the two legislative committees and the National Elections Commission (NEC). That collaboration was preceded by many months of work by the NEC to gather public input and to consider needed amendments to the existing law following experience gained in the 2011 referenda and elections. If passed, the amended law would be implemented in time for the upcoming 2014 senatorial elections.



Upcoming Activities:

- Follow-on technical assistance to legislative drafting staff of the Legislature.
- Introductory workshops on legislative engagement and advocacy for Liberian CSOs.
- Public hearing and CSO testimony on the pending Elections Law reform bill.
- A final Policy Seminar with legislative committees. Stay tuned!

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NDI's New Program: Building Engagement between Civil Society and the Legislature

The new three-year program of NDI will conduct its first training activity in mid-April with civil society organizations (CSOs) from around the country. The new program is designed to increase engagement between civil society and the Legislature, to build CSO legislative advocacy skills, and to support the Legislature in its ongoing efforts to provide greater public access.

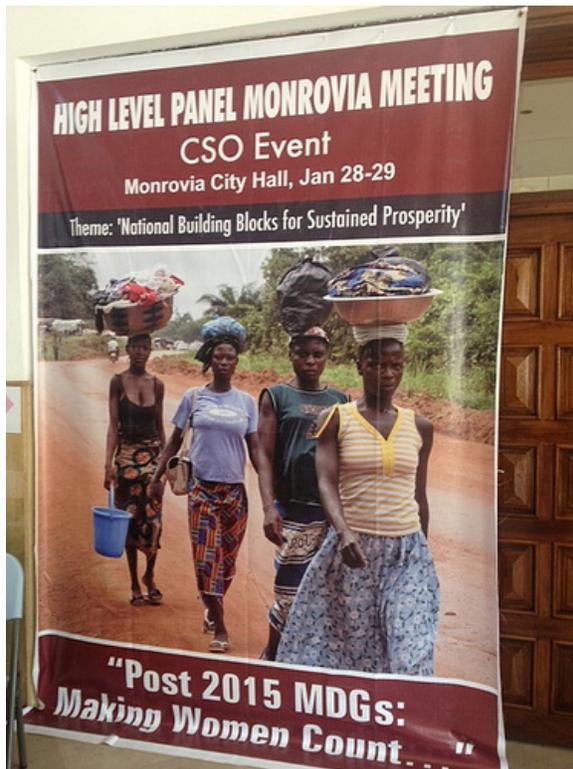
Participants in the introductory CSO training will learn about the roles and responsibilities of the

The banner below welcomed civil society participants at the recent UN High Level Panel meeting related to the post 2015 Millennium Development Goals, which was hosted by Liberia.

Liberian Legislature, the processes of lawmaking and legislative oversight, and entry points for civil society input and influence. The interactive training program will include presentations by experienced advocates, videos, group discussions and working groups, interviews with former legislators, a visit to the Capitol Building, and tips on the art and practice of legislative advocacy.

A second and more in-depth workshop for more specialized CSO actors will follow in May. In the May workshop, case studies on past legislative advocacy initiatives will be explored and participants will help to analyze the challenges, opportunities, potential strategies and tools for future CSO-Legislature engagement.

This new NDI program is being supported by Sida (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency). More skill-building sessions will follow later in the program on specific techniques and skills needed at specific



stages in the legislative process, such as presenting evidence-based testimony at hearings and using radio and social media as advocacy and organizing tools. In addition, training will assist CSOs in developing advocacy campaigns and in citizen and community organizing. National Issue Forums and Lobbying Days are also planned on topics of interest to Liberian CSOs. Through this program, NDI also expects that civil society organizations will become key actors in supporting and advising legislative committees in conducting Investigation Missions throughout the counties.

Did you know?

- Liberia has 1,452 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)
- 46 of them receive funding from the Liberian Government
- 318 CSOs are active in the agricultural sector
- 183 CSOs rated themselves as excellent
- 163 CSOs are based in Margibi County

These and many other interesting facts about the civil society sector in Liberia can be found in “*Analysis of the Mapping Study of CSOs in Liberia*” and its related directory, published by the National Civil Society Council of Liberia (NCSCCL) and the Governance Commission.

Successful Legislative Spotlight Radio to Return

As heard on Legislative Spotlight:

“Senator Jewel Taylor is right about the money the people put in the budget for us, the women in this country. All the time they only talk about empowering us but we don’t see anything. I hope they will listen to her this time and do something for us.”

“Dr. Bhofal Chambers’ bill is good

The topics discussed by lawmakers and their constituents included the National Budget, the Gender Equity Bill, Youth Policy, Decentralization and Local Governance, the Education System, Affordable and Adequate Housing, Coastal Line Defense, Elections Law Reform, Land Policy, and Extractive Industries, among others. Lawmakers had the opportunity to unfold their views and initiatives and they were

but this bill should also push for improvement in incentives for health workers”.

These are two of the many public opinions expressed about legislative developments during the call-in portion of Legislative Spotlight Radio during the 53rd Legislature.

Twenty two editions of the program were aired with legislators Wednesday mornings on Truth FM. Besides these live weekly shows, six editions were broadcast live from community venues in and outside of Montserrado County, six monthly editions were presented in Liberian English, and six talk shows were done in vernacular languages.



confronted with critical questions by callers. The radio programs were produced by the Liberia Media for Democratic Initiatives (LMDI), as part of NDI’s now-ending Legislative Strengthening program, which has been supported by USAID.

Asked about his experience with Legislative Spotlight, LMDI director John Kollie said: *“LMDI, as a pro-democracy group and an advocate for justice and equal rights, appreciates the opportunity to have participated in this project. The Legislative Spotlight contributed in an interactive way to create public awareness on important activities of the 53rd Legislature of Liberia and to establish a link between Lawmakers and their constituents”.*

Legislative Spotlight Radio paused in January. But it now prepares to return as part of NDI’s new program, with new versions that include both legislators and CSO representatives as they discuss important legislative topics to build democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and social-economic development in Liberia. Stay tuned!!

Freedom Fone Ready to Launch

With the recent donation of Freedom Fone equipment, the National Legislature is now prepared to put this new system of public access into operation when it returns from its Easter break. The service allows radio journalists, civil society and others to use a single call-in number to access up-to-date legislative news and recordings with the use of a mobile phone. The related training and hardware was provided by NDI through its grant from USAID. Freedom Fone will be provided by the House and Senate Press and Public Affairs Offices.

As it is used elsewhere in Africa, the Freedom Fone system can exchange

information for the benefit of Liberian citizens by capturing and storing public hearings, debates, and regular sessions of the Legislature. Such information can be shared with community radio stations over the Freedom Fone system. Citizens throughout rural Liberia, even without internet connections, will be able to hear interviews with their elected lawmakers and receive information about what's happening in their Legislature. Rural radio stations will be able to use Freedom Fone when conducting phone-in programs, allowing their listeners to participate in discussions on important policy issues of the day.



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