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Senator Morais Welcomes CSO Critique of Legislation | Focus Group Research to Hear and Mobilize the Voices and Concerns of Ordinary Citizens

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## NDI-Liberia E-Newsletter

Working for democracy & making democracy work

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### To Raise CSO Voices in Southeast Liberia, NDI Concludes Introductory Training of Regional Activists



On October 26, 2013 NDI-Liberia concluded a three-day legislative advocacy training workshop for civil society activists based in Southeast Liberia. The region has historically been the most marginalized in the country. But civil society activists from southeastern counties are increasingly exercising their voices and calling for greater accountability from their elected officials. This workshop is part of a series of capacity building trainings for local advocacy groups to build their skills in targeted and results-driven legislative engagements. In April and May this year, similar workshops were conducted in Monrovia and were followed by a workshop in Gbarnga in August.

Over 35 grassroots organizations, representing three CSO coalitions, sent participants to the City Hall of Harper where the workshop took place. After the event was opened by the Mayor of Harper, Regina Sampson, the fifty participants focused the first day on the functioning of the Legislature and how to identify and

use access points to increase citizens' participation in decision making. They also discussed how to improve their advocacy skills and lobbying strategies.

During the following two days, NDI's advocacy partners presented their past and ongoing activities. John Jukon (CSO Network on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene - WASH) highlighted the experience of his organization in building coalitions as an important tool for advocacy. He emphasized the need to engage media, lawmakers, experts and government officials from the very beginning of a campaign, to take their concerns seriously, to keep them informed and to invite them to specific events, such as dinner meetings, to keep them on track.

Marah Suku (Southeast Women Development Association - SEWODA) fleshed out the lessons learnt in the Southeast, where SEWODA works in 62 communities to mobilize village people, especially on gender related issues. She emphasized that it is very important to work closely with the community, to engage with key actors, to plan activities together with them, to assign specific tasks to small groups, and to pay full attention to follow-up.

Maxim Kumeh (NGO Consortium on Natural Resource Management - NRM) explained how his new consortium is working on education and awareness raising through cooperation with regional and local organizations. In this way, NRM can organize joint community actions that aim to improve citizen participation in the management of national resources in the country.

Other sessions addressed media outreach, the need for legislative monitoring, and strategies to improve women's participation in politics. Marayah Fyneah, the National Coordinator of the Women's Legislative Caucus, and Ophelia Williams, a women's activist from the Southeast, emphasized the urgent need for a successful strategy to have Southeast women elected in upcoming elections. At present there is not one woman legislator representing the voters from any of the Southeast counties. They discussed various actions to be taken, such as building issue-specific coalitions and networks, identifying and training female candidates, and advocacy for gender-specific laws.

The three-day workshop closed with a "Town Hall Meeting" with Maryland Senator Dan Morais (see below). At the close of the workshop's twelve sessions, one participant stated: *"I learned about the roles and responsibilities of lawmakers to their voters, and I now understand better that we as CSOs can use different tools and strategies to make them accountable for what they are doing."*



*Participants of the legislative advocacy training workshop in Harper*

## **NDI's Civil Society Program: Building Citizen-Centered Political Engagement**

NDI, with support from the Embassy of Sweden (EoS), is implementing a multiyear program to foster greater interactions between citizens and the Legislature and other public institutions. The program works to:

- Increase citizens' participation in the political process;
- Partner with CSOs and the Legislature to create more opportunities for citizens to engage in the legislative process; and
- Assist CSOs to identify strategic entry points in the legislative and budget processes to engage with lawmakers and conduct broader advocacy campaigns.

## **Maryland County Senator Dan Morais Welcomes CSO Critique of Legislation**

*“Criticism from civil society organizations on the work of the Legislature is crucial to any democratic process”.* This was one of the remarks made by Senator Dan Morais of Maryland during the Town Hall Meeting that closed NDI’s three-day workshop in Harper.

Speaking to around fifty activists, the Southeast Senator admitted that it is no easy task to craft legislation for the benefit of the people. *“Laws we make are sometimes wrong and sometimes right”*, he acknowledged. *“Civil society organizations have the biggest constituency base because your work does not target political interest, that is why your work with us as legislators is important”*.

The Senator underlined that the quality of law will be enhanced



when the Legislature creates venues and spaces for interventions by CSOs. But Senator Morais was also constructively critical of CSOs: *“Most times your interventions in national policy are either belated or lack empirical grounds for consideration”*, he said. He also encouraged civil society activists to make fuller utilization of the court system if they consider that laws are not meeting the needs of the people.

Senator Morais promised to work along with WASH, SEWODA and NRM on future activities on Capitol Hill.



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## NDI’s CSO Advocacy Partners

NDI presently sub-grants to three networks of civil society organizations (CSOs) as advocacy partners. Through awareness raising, community organizing, and policy- and legislative advocacy, these networks conduct campaigns to protect

and fulfill human rights to water, sanitation and hygiene, citizen participation in sustainable and peaceful natural resource management, and women's social, political, and economic empowerment. These partners are: the Liberia CSO WASH Network, the Southeast Women Development Association – SEWODA, and the CSO Consortium on Natural Resource Management.

## Focus Group Research to Hear and Mobilize the Voices and Concerns of Ordinary Citizens

This November NDI is conducting focus group research discussions to aid our partners to better understand the policy concerns of ordinary citizens, from rural and urban areas, and the organizing tactics that would mobilize their engagement with the Legislature. During two weeks in the second half of November, focus group discussions will be convened in Ganta, Voinjama, Zwedru, Barclayville, Bopulu, and locations in Montserrado county and Monrovia.

In each venue, two groups of eight persons have been selected to discuss the situation in Liberia and their views on the performance of the government and citizen participation. The focus will be on what they experience in their daily lives on issues like water, sanitation and hygiene, the management of natural resources, and the position of women, among others. The composition of the

marginalized populations (such as persons with disabilities) are convened in one group, so that participants have a common background and feel at ease to speak out frankly.

The discussions are being led by Liberian moderators who are recruited and trained by the Center for Justice and Peace Studies of Liberia (CJPS). CJPS is being assisted by NDI's international expert on focus group research, Christine Quirk, who has led similar focus group work and public opinion polling elsewhere in Africa and in conflict and post-conflict settings such as Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq. The results of the focus group research will help NDI's CSO partners to deepen and improve their advocacy campaigns. It will also help partners to identify ways to involve citizens in the policymaking and lawmaking processes in Liberia. As one of the participants

focus groups is homogeneous. For example, only women, youth, elderly people, rural dwellers, men, ex-combatants and

in Lofa County said: '*The government can't do it all, we also have to do something.*'



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