

BUILDING PUBLIC TRUST THROUGH A RESPONSIVE PARLIAMENT

A Quick Guide to Constituency Outreach



National Democratic Institute

BUILDING PUBLIC TRUST THROUGH A RESPONSIVE PARLIAMENT



**A Quick Guide to
Constituency Outreach**

ABOUT NDI

The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that has supported democratic institutions and practices in every region of the world for more than three decades. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to establish and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. NDI has worked with Iraqi Members of Parliament (MPs) to open constituency offices across Iraq since 2010. In the 2014–2018 parliamentary mandate, these offices received almost 100,000 visits from constituents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This guide was prepared by the National Democratic Institute - Iraq with funding from the U.S. Department of State. Sarah Beckerman, Resident Senior Program Manager, and Aamir Botani, Program Manager, compiled and drafted the main text of this document. NDI would like to thank the following members of parliament and their constituency outreach assistants for contributed to this manual. The MPs include: Abdulqahar al-Samarrai, Vian Dakhil, Saleem Shawqi, Khalid al-Mafraji, Sabah al-Tamimi, and Najat al-Obeidi. The constituency outreach assistants include: Abbas Fadhil, Faisal Abdulhadi, Naji Abdulhasan, Sozdar Rasheed, Omar Aws and Oqba al-Naseri. The guide was edited by Jennifer Rowland, Resident Senior Program Officer.



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 5

**TIPS AND TOOLS FOR
EFFECTIVE CONSTITUENCY
OUTREACH 6**

**CONSTITUENCY OUTREACH
OFFICE CASE STUDIES 12**

**BEST PRACTICES &
LESSONS LEARNED 20**

Direct communication with citizens is key for elected officials to effectively represent and respond to their constituents' needs in the legislature. This quick guide provides tips and tools to help parliamentarians enhance their constituency outreach efforts for more responsive and inclusive governance. Included in the guide is an overview for how to set up a constituency outreach office, guidelines for conducting outreach and policy discussions, and case studies from NDI-Iraq's Constituency Outreach Program. Many of these case studies highlight the efforts of members of parliament (MPs) and their Constituency Outreach Assistants (COAs) in provinces liberated from ISIS in order to draw out lessons learned and best practices for how to remain connected and responsive to constituents during times of conflict and transition.

INTRODUCTION

When NDI launched the constituency outreach program in 2010, Iraq was in the early stages of its transition to democracy. The principles and values that shape a democratic nation were still new and were struggling to find a foothold. At the time, democracy was seen as a system that merely held elections, and the representative, oversight, and legislative roles and responsibilities of elected officials were viewed as a formality. This created an environment where NDI's constituency outreach program was met with skepticism and reservation by many MPs. Despite this reluctance, NDI saw an opportunity to pilot the program with minority MPs and political parties within the Council of Representatives (CoR), namely the Christian and Yezidi components, given that these groups had established linkages with their constituents.

Initial engagement with minority MPs proved to be effective as they quickly grasped the approaches and techniques for

how to engage their constituents in order to strengthen lines of communication and foster a constructive relationship between citizens and government. NDI worked with MPs to open constituency outreach offices (COOs) in their provinces, as well as on-board COAs to serve as the daily 'face' of MP relations in their community.

Witnessing the impact of the program and the improved constituency relations enjoyed by these MPs, other political parties and parliamentary blocs began to express cautious interest in the program and eventually nominated MPs to participate. As the program gained momentum and garnered positive results for participating MPs, political parties began to request additional support for more MPs to open constituency offices across the country. So what was initially met with apprehension and doubt was now being sought after and viewed as a vital element to effective governance. For example, as NDI-supported MP Khalid al-Mafraji (Mutahidun, Kirkuk) said, "Meeting constituents in my constit-

uency office or at their homes, I found out that even if I could not solve their cases, they were happy to see their representative by their side and working for them.”

By 2018, NDI had worked with 48 MPs across 16 provinces. In that time, they met with 159,517 constituents, solved 26,281 cases addressing a range of issues from employment to service delivery, and conducted over 8,200 outreach activities. However, at the height of the program, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took hold of one-third of Iraq’s territory and brutally occupied this area for almost four years. With domestic and interna-

tional attention focused on defeating the insurgent group and providing humanitarian aid to millions of Iraqis, NDI adjusted its programmatic approach to ensure it was providing the necessary support to MPs from these areas, including relocating their offices to support internally displaced persons (IDPs). Following the defeat of ISIS, NDI continued to work with MPs from liberated areas to support them as they navigated post-conflict dynamics and devised strategies and policies to overcome new governance-related challenges, such as the timely and equitable provision of services and resources, security, and reconstruction.

TIPS AND TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE CONSTITUENCY OUTREACH¹

Through the use of constituency outreach activities, elected officials can become better informed and therefore better positioned to address the needs of their constituents in a timely and consistent manner. By connecting with citizens and getting involved with their day-to-day challenges, elected officials can demonstrate the government’s commitment to respond to the needs and problems of citizens. In addition, listening to the concerns of citi-

zens, MPs can solicit valuable information to develop more responsive and inclusive policies and legislation.



Setting Up a Constituency Outreach Office

Constituency outreach offices can help streamline constituency services and improve the efficiency of outreach activities. These offices provide citizens with a safe space to meet with an MP to share their needs and concerns, as well as provide a centralized location for dealing with casework or individual requests for help from citizens. An office can also help increase an MP’s visibility in his or her constituency, and convey a positive message to citizens about their commitment to the community.

¹ Information adapted from the following resources by the National Democratic Institute: “Moving Closer to Citizens: A Manual on Outreach for Elected Representatives in Morocco,” 2016; “Practical Guide on Constituency Outreach For Members of Parliament and Constituent Outreach Office Assistants,” 2013; and “Constituent Relations: A Guide to Best Practices,” 2008.

- The constituency office should be located in an area that is easily accessible. Consider the personal safety and security of constituency office staff and citizens when deciding on the location of the office, including accessibility for women and people with disabilities.
- The constituency office should be separate from other offices, or it could, for example, be located in a municipal building. Constituency offices can also be located in political party offices, which can be a good first step to building party outreach practices and increase the visibility of the party in the area. However, the office should be seen as accessible to all citizens regardless of political affiliation. All constituents, including those who voted for the legislator and his/her party and those who did not, need to feel comfortable visiting and discussing their concerns.
- The office should be large enough to accommodate a desk with a computer, filing cabinet, and a table and chairs for meetings.
- Put a visible sign outside the office with the name of the constituency office, working hours, and contact information.
- If and where appropriate, organize an official opening of the constituency office including a press conference and/or press release, and continue to promote the office to raise awareness of its existence and purpose among citizens.



Running an Effective Constituency Office

- Try to establish permanent working hours of the office. For example, every workday for at least four to five hours. It is recommend that offices hours be in the afternoon (15:00 to 19:00) so citizens could visit the office after their work day ends.
- Try not to change the location of the constituency office or change working hours.
- Try not to change the day reserved for meetings between the MP and constituents (for example, every other Saturday and/or when the parliament is not in session).
- The MP should try to work from the constituency office at least once every two weeks for several hours. Put a sign outside the office indicating when the MP would be available, for example, every other Saturday of non-session weeks from 10:00 to 14:00.
- Look for skilled constituency office assistant who has experience in communication, politics and/or government.
- Constituency office assistant must keep good records of all visits to the office. This information will be critical for follow-up on constituency cases and to support policy and legislation development. This data and information will also be useful to communicate with citizens during the election campaign.

- Use forms for tracking and registering constituent cases.
- Arrange for the constituency office assistant to take and record notes in meetings with citizens. This way, you can focus on what citizens are saying.
- Direct meetings with citizens (constituents) are more effective than correspondence through letters or emails; however, try not to allocate more than 15-20 minutes per meeting with a single constituent. This would enable you to meet with more citizens.
- It is more efficient and time effective to schedule meetings with citizens in advance.
- It is recommended to introduce an “open door policy” so all citizens, no matter who they are, feel welcome to visit the office. You can only benefit if more people come to your office and meet with you.



Conducting Constituent Casework

Receiving, responding to and tracking progress on solving citizens’ problems can be broken down into a multi-step process called casework. Casework means working through the public administration to help solve individual problems (cases) of citizens.

Accepting the case

If you accept a citizen’s case you should inform them about the steps you are planning to take to solve the issue. Keep the

constituent informed about any progress you make while attempting to solve the case. Keep records of the meetings, phone calls, and letters you sent in the process of solving constituent cases.

Forwarding the case

If a particular issue or case raised by a constituent is something you cannot address directly you should refer the case and citizen to the appropriate institution responsible for solving those issues. In that situation, inform the citizen that you are referring their case to the institution, contact a representative at the institution to alert them about this particular case and provide instructions to the citizen(s) about how to best handle their problem. All referred cases should be marked in your records as solved cases.

Rejecting the case

Often, you will have to say no to constituents and reject their cases. For example, members of parliament should not accept cases that fall under the jurisdiction of the judicial system or requests for employment that an MP cannot fulfill. It is better to say no rather than to promise to do something and then not to do it.

Record Keeping

In each constituency office, it is very important to keep detailed records of all constituent visits, meetings, cases, and the progress made towards solving each constituent case. Constituent outreach offices should develop a comprehensive filing and documentation system. Effective and accurate record keeping is also important for

analyzing what issues are of greatest concern to constituents. Information about constituent cases can be useful when parliamentarians and their respective political parties are designing particular policies on key issues facing the country and deciding on campaign strategies.²



Conducting Constituency Outreach Activities

Elected representatives may use a combination of different, yet interrelated, constituency outreach methods, such as policy discussions, constituent questionnaires, special events, and other formal and informal methods for reaching out to constituents. Regardless of the outreach method, the fundamental goal is to create an ongoing dialogue between MPs and the citizens they represent.

Activities for Members of Parliament

- Bi-weekly face-to-face meetings with constituents.
- Work on solving individual constituent cases.
- Holding public meetings with citizens outside the constituency office.
- Visit constituents living in remote locations who do not have easy access to the constituency office.

² “Practical Guide on Constituency Outreach For Members of Parliament and Constituent Outreach Office Assistants.”

- Work in the parliament according to initiatives received from constituents, such as submitting MPs questions, drafting legislation and amendments, and writing letters to members of the executive and other officials from the state institutions.
- Participate in TV and radio shows.

Activities for Constituency Office Assistant

- Develop a constituency outreach strategy in consultation with the Member of Parliament.
- Work from the constituency office every work day for a minimum of five hours.
- Receive constituents, register their issues, and make appointments for meetings with the Member of Parliament.
- Keep and secure records of every individual constituent visit and case.
- Work to solve cases according to the instructions given by the Member of Parliament.
- Inform constituents about progress made on solving their cases.
- Develop and distribute promotional materials for the constituency office, newsletters, and constituency questionnaires.
- Provide assistance to the MP on tasks such as research projects, constituency related assignments, and their work in the parliament.

- Organize policy discussions, listening tours, and special events with citizens for the Member of Parliament.
- Prepare media events (press conferences) for the Member of Parliament.



Organizing a Policy Discussion

A policy discussion is a meeting held for the general public where people can exchange opinions and ideas on a particular issue.

Policy discussions are the most common way for government officials, elected representatives and citizens to come together to discuss matters of public concern. They typically address a specific problem or issue and are often organized by a local organization or government agency. They are particularly useful for opening up lines of communication between citizens and government, stimulating discussion, helping define problems, and developing solutions to them.

CHECKLIST FOR ORGANIZING A POLICY DISCUSSION

Before

- List of participants developed.
- Registration form developed, includes all necessary information.
- Invitation drafted, includes all necessary information, such as the location, time, and objective.
- List of contact information (email and cell phone numbers) for participants prepared.
- Room for the policy discussion identified.
- Layout of the room arranged as advised; seating arrangement.
- The section for observers/general public identified and clearly marked.
- Main table arranged for MP and/or moderator, located in the center of the room.
- Designated and clearly marked the area for media representatives.
- Located positions for TV cameras and photographers.
- Microphones in place on the table.
- Information package with relevant information (draft law, complaints, research papers) prepared for the MP.
- The equipment for recording of proceedings is in place and functioning, if needed.

- “No cell phone” signs printed and placed on visible places.
- Sign in sheet prepared and printed.
Promotional banners printed and placed on appropriate locations.
- Talking points prepared for MP.
- Invitations sent to participants.
- Participants receive follow-up call for confirmation of participation and email receipt.
- Registration forms filled and received from all confirmed participants.
- Venue checked one or two days before the event.

During

- Begin and finish on time.
- Ensure that the chairperson establishes the purpose of the forum and introduces the speakers.
- Make announcements about future activities.
- Take questions but avoid speeches from the audience.
- Make sure the chairperson is firm but fair.
- Make sure the journalists do not interrupt the event by pulling participant away for interviews.

After

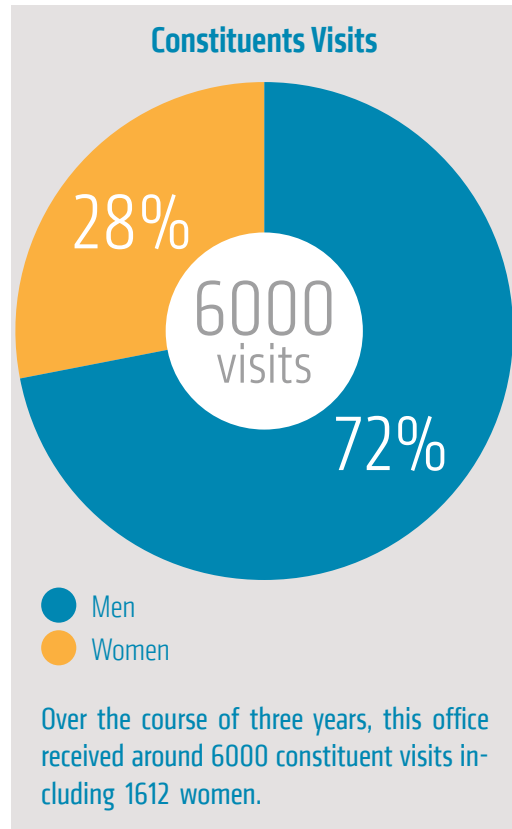
- Thank your guest speakers and volunteers in writing.
- Write to attendees and non-attendees to share the policy discussion report.
- Phone target journalists and tell them about the policy discussion.
- Deal with costs of hall rentals and other incidentals.
- Follow up on what action needs to be taken as a result of the policy discussions.
- Arrange for a small group of supporters to evaluate the success of the forum and plan for the next one.

CONSTITUENCY OUTREACH OFFICE CASE STUDIES

Abdulqahar al-Samarrai, Mutahidoon, Salahaddin

In 2015, NDI began supporting MP Abdulqahar al-Samarrai and worked with him to open an office in his hometown of Samarra in Salahaddin. Shortly after opening the office, ISIS overran the province, forcing thousands to flee their homes. Trying to engage and provide assistance to a constituency scattered across the province and even throughout the country proved to be a major challenge at first, but the MP quickly adapted to the new reality and started to meet his constituents wherever they were relocated and displaced. Applying one of the core principles of constituency outreach -- “get out of the office” -- the MP and his assistant began to implement a rigorous outreach schedule to meet with displaced citizens across the province. Listening to his constituents’ concerns and learning about the lack of services in the displaced areas led the MP to increase his efforts liaising and coordinating with humanitarian and security officials to ensure IDPs received basic provisions to ease their suffering.

Following the liberation of Salahaddin in 2017, IDPs were hopeful and believed that they would be able to quickly return home. However, a devastated infrastructure and inadequate support from the government to rebuild and reopen its agencies hindered the return process. The MP played an important role in exerting public pressure on the government through the media and through his oversight capacity in the CoR to expedite



the return of IDPs. As a result of his efforts, MP al-Samarrai facilitated the reopening of government agencies in the province such as the Identification Directorate, the Water Department, and the Pension Directorate, all of which helped ease the return process. In addition, the MP started to address new challenges that emerged with the return of IDPs, namely security-related issues involving the various military groups in the province. An increase in checkpoints hindered citizens’ freedom of movement, which led the MP to advocate to security commanders on behalf of his constituents and exert public pressure on the Ministry of Interior to create a better security environment in Salahaddin.

After receiving cases from across the province, including remote and rural areas, the MP also realized that he needed to be more accessible to his constituents during this vital transition period of reconstruction and as IDPs return home. He decided to open two more offices, one in Tikrit and the other in Baghdad, where IDPs from the province still reside. NDI trained two additional COAs to manage offices.

In addition to supporting MPs and their assistants in post-conflict transition efforts, a primary focus of NDI's constituency outreach program was to support MPs to implement inclusive and responsive constituent relations processes and public policies. In this context, to support MP al-Samarrai's extensive outreach efforts across the province, NDI consistently encouraged him to broaden his efforts to include constituents from different ethnic, sectarian, and ideological backgrounds. Like many other aspects of the constituency outreach program, this approach was met with apprehension at first; however, over time, the MP and COA discovered that constituents responded very positively to them as the MP and COA were listening to their concerns regardless of their backgrounds or affiliations. "At the beginning, we did not notice the importance of the program," the MP said. "However, the more we were indulged in the details of its components, the more we realized its importance especially when we started to reach out to different groups who stood with us in elections," he added.

Similarly, when NDI introduced the concept of policy discussions -- using the town-hall

format to gather citizen insights on issues in a structured manner -- the MP and COA resisted the idea at first. But once they put it into practice, the MP and COA immediately recognized the benefits of such structured discussions. "Policy discussion allowed us to get to the roots of the problems since the participants were more open in such a setting, unlike other formal settings", the MP said. "Knowing the roots of the problems allowed us to find the suitable solutions for them," he added.

Vian Dakhil, Yezidi, Ninewa

The occupation of Ninewa by ISIS brought with it utter devastation and destruction, including a targeted and systematic genocide of the Yezidi community. Whole villages were destroyed, thousands of men were killed, and women and children were kidnaped, including the over 3,000 Yezidi women and girls who remain missing. Amidst all this, MP Dakhil refused to remain silent. As the only Yazidi elected official in the CoR, she delivered an impassioned statement on the floor of the parliament to direct efforts to address the plight of the Yazidi community. Her speech, which ended with her collapsing on the floor of parliament, received global recognition and resulted in an immediate response to provide rescue and relief. Following this, she accompanied the Iraqi Army on a mission to provide humanitarian aid to Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar. Her advocacy efforts to represent and speak on behalf of her community also helped her get the Kurdistan Regional Government to establish an agency focused on saving Yazidi women kidnaped

by ISIS and providing them with psycho-social support.

With her constituency spread out across the country and in IDP camps, the MP began to diversify her outreach efforts to ensure she was engaging as many citizens as she could. While initially resistant to the idea of holding policy discussions, she soon realized the benefit of this type of engagement as it allowed her to communicate and interact with her constituents in a more meaningful way, and provided her with the opportunity for more in-depth insight and analysis into a situation. For example, after facilitating a few policy discussions on the role of women in peacebuilding, she learned that Muslim women from her constituency were also suffering as they were being targeted and falsely accused of being ISIS supporters simply because they were Muslim, and recognized that before these engagements she was not getting the full picture of the situation. As she told NDI, “These discussions provided a comfortable space for all voices to be heard.” In response, the MP increased her engagement with this community to demonstrate her commitment to serving their interests, and worked within the Yazidi community to combat negative misconceptions and shed light on the situation of Muslim women.

As part of her outreach efforts, the MP and her assistant were made aware of the poor learning conditions in IDP camps. In response, the MP worked to open a library in an IDP camp under the slogan “Reading in the Time of Displacement.” NDI do-

nated thousands of publications to support her initiative. The MP also opened a child-friendly space in the Sharia IDP camp near Dohuk where kids could learn to read and write, draw, and play music.

While unable to re-open an office during displacement, the MP was still able to collect case files from her constituents. After analyzing the cases submitted to her constituency office, the MP along with her assistant determined that youth unemployment was a top concern and priority in her constituency. To address this, she requested and was successful in getting the government to include Sinjar in its housing plans for construction in the area. However, as the government did not have land to allocate to construction projects, the MP agreed to donate a piece of family land on the condition that, as long as they were appropriately qualified, those hired were from Sinjar. As a result of this effort, she was able to bring jobs to young people in her constituency.

Saleem Shawqi, Hikma, Basra

NDI-supported MP Saleem Shawqi opened a constituency office in a northern sub-district of Basra in 2015. After just a year into the program, recognizing the benefits of the office, the MP independently opened four more offices in different districts across the province in order to be more accessible to his constituents. To ensure these offices were staffed and managed appropriately, the NDI-supported COA on-boarded new assistants utilizing the information and resources from NDI trainings. Similarly, the COA took it upon him-

self to also train other MPs and Provincial Council Members from the same party on constituency relations.

One of the common challenges faced by elected officials in transitioning countries is citizens' lack of understanding of the political process and inability to differentiate between the legislative and executive branch of government. MP Shawqi and his assistant frequently faced this challenge, with citizens approaching the MP with a concern or request and expecting it to be addressed immediately. One aspect of NDI's training program was to coach MPs and COAs on how to educate and inform their constituents about these civic processes while still working with them to address the case. To address this gap in understanding, MP Shawqi and his COA allocated segments of their outreach activities to civic education, explaining the roles and responsibilities of elected officials, and the legislative and decision making processes in the CoR and executive branch. By providing citizens with a foundational understanding of the political process, the MP and COA were able to build a positive working relationship with their constituents as they were able to better meet their needs and expectations. "This [civic education] increased constituents' acceptance of us," the MP said. "We were honest with constituents about what we can do and what we cannot and this is how we gained their trust."

Constituency relations also involves collecting and responding to cases submitted to the office, and across MP Shawqi's five offices, the MP received 1,015 cases

and solved 24 percent of them over the last four years. But beyond just conducting case work, elected officials must work to bring about broader institutional changes to address more systemic problems through public policy. In this regard, NDI also worked with NDI-supported MPs such as MP Shawqi and his assistant to analyze and assess case work to identify common trends and themes that could be more effectively and broadly addressed through policy or legislation. Based on the cases submitted to his office, the MP identified youth unemployment as the top issue of concern in his constituency. Leveraging this data, the MP and his assistant organized a series of policy discussions on youth unemployment with key stakeholders in the province and developed a policy proposing the creation of an academy for youth to be trained in various aspects of the oil production industry. Having garnered significant buy-in and support from constituents and stakeholders as result of this process, the government expressed readiness to establish the training academy.

In addition to building a strong relationship with his constituents, MP Shawqi's outreach work proved to be a major value-add to his political party, which allowed the MP to build his credibility and reputation within his party. Although he originally decided not to run for a second term, party leadership approached him directly and requested that he stand as a candidate in the May 2018 parliamentary elections. While seen as a daunting and often burdensome requirement for an elected official, this demonstrated to the MP and

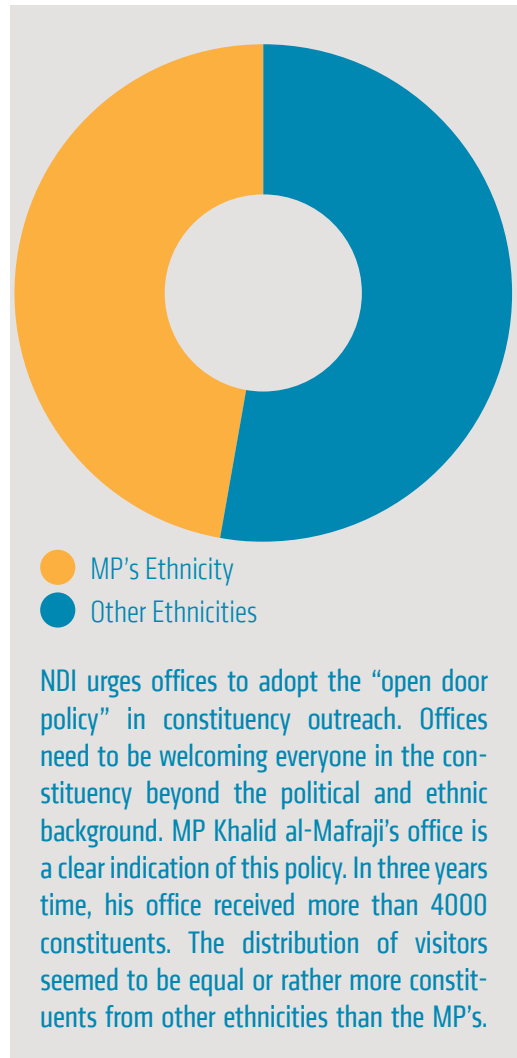
his political party that robust constituent relations initiatives can have a broader positive impact on citizens, election officials, and political parties.

Khalid al-Mafraji, Mutahidoon, Kirkuk

Like many of his counterparts in the parliament during and after ISIS occupation, MP Khalid al-Mafraji was confronted with the challenge of maintaining a connection with displaced constituents from Kirkuk. To overcome some these hurdles, the MP made a concerted effort to build strong working relationships with a wide spectrum of political parties and actors to ensure that he could best meet the needs of his constituents. For example, the MP's frequent engagement across the ethno-sectarian aisle allowed him to address constituents' cases, such as facilitating travel between the Kurdistan Region and Iraq for medical treatment and travel through security checkpoints.

To alleviate the urgency of including Kirkuk in the battle to liberate provinces from ISIS, the MP launched a wide scale media campaign to exert pressure on the government to expedite the liberation process. The media campaign also drew attention to the fact that military personnel were readily available in the area. This media campaign proved to be effective because shortly after it was implemented, plans were put in place to begin the liberation of Hawija.

As the liberation of Hawija was approaching and with the impending humanitarian crisis that would result in an influx of IDPs across the province, the MP's consti-



tuency office established youth volunteer groups to work with the office to ease the flow of returnees into Kirkuk. These youth volunteer groups were tasked with providing food, water, and other necessary provisions to the returnees. The volunteer groups were also responsible for identifying other needs and services that IDPs required, and learned that due to supply shortages while living under ISIS many



were suffering from poor health. With the lack of infrastructure such as health clinics or hospitals to support the influx of IDPs, the MP and his assistant recruited volunteer medics and doctors as well as collected medication and supplies to be distributed to IDP areas across the province.

In preparation for the liberation, the MP and COA anticipated a humanitarian crisis as thousands of people would be displaced with no food, water, or medical support. Therefore, with NDI support, the office organized a policy discussion with 33 young volunteers whom the office managed to recruit to help to provide humanitarian assistance to those fleeing the combat zone.

Sabah al-Tamimi, al-Wataniya, Baghdad

During the 2014-2018 parliamentary mandate, MP Sabah al-Tamimi focused much of her efforts in the CoR on connecting her citizen outreach to her parliamentary

oversight responsibilities. For example, as a member of the Services and Reconstruction Committee, she discovered many cases of corruption that contributed to poor services delivery including water, electricity, and garbage collection. She used her position on the committee and her good reputation in her constituency to draw the government's attention to these cases and most instances successfully arbitrated the case to restore services to her constituents. Similarly, MP al-Tamimi frequently conducted field visits to assess conditions and services in her constituents neighborhoods. During one field visit to two neighborhoods in Baghdad she learned that garbage was not collected properly. In response, she contacted the responsible directors in the Baghdad municipality and the situation was quickly resolved with a clean-up effort and new garbage containers installed in the area.

MP al-Tamimi also became a real conduit between citizens and government as she diligently worked to maintain good cooperative relations with executive officials to support her constituency work. For example, as a sign of legislative-executive cooperation, the MP visited al-Adhamiya market place accompanied by the head of the Baghdad municipality to listen to vendors and customers' concerns. She learned that the vendors occupied a majority of the sidewalk illegally, limiting movement through the streets. She mediated the issue between the vendors and the head of the municipality and the two parties reached an agreement to share the space in accordance with their needs and municipal regulations.

Like many of the NDI-supported constituency offices, MP al-Tamimi and her assis-

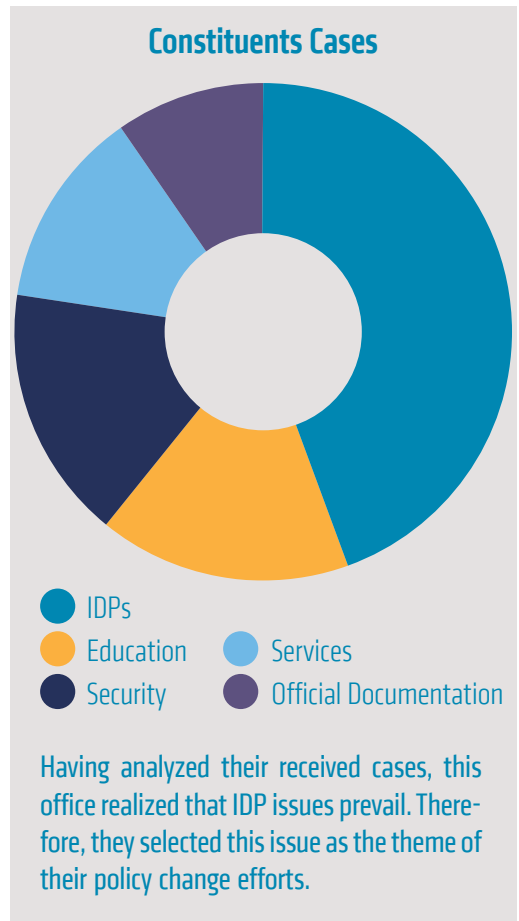
tant raised concerns about the feasibility of hosting policy discussions due to legitimate security challenges. Yet, after facilitating her first discussion and witnessing the benefits of the engagement first hand, the MP added this tool to her constituency outreach toolbox. "Policy discussions broke all the barriers between us and the constituents as it results in serious and open discussions. It gives a clear picture of the issue and how to solve it," said MP al-Tamimi. The MP used policy discussions to further assess the current working conditions for civil aviation staff. Through these discussions, the MP learned that some employees had not received their salaries for several months due to the lack of labor regulations that protect their rights. After meeting over 200 stakeholders impacted by the issue, the MP and her COA developed a policy proposal that sets out de-



tailed recommendations for how to regulate the work conditions at the airport and protect the rights of civil aviation workers.

Najat al-Obeidi, Mutahidoon, Anbar

Hundreds of thousands of people fled Anbar during the ISIS occupation and the ensuing battle against the insurgent group. Citizens scattered across the country, with many fleeing to Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region. As the majority of MP Najat al-Obeidi's constituents were displaced to Erbil, the MP decided to relocate with them to Erbil in order to best serve them. But her constituents were still spread out across the country, which proved to be a major challenge and one that required an extraordinary effort by the MP and COA to be able to engage all of her constituents to listen and try to address their immediate needs and concerns. For almost two years, the MP split her time travelling back and forth to these areas to oversee the distribution of aid to IDPs by the government and humanitarian organizations. Like many during the crisis, the MP realized that the aid was not being delivered properly, especially when she was not there to monitor the distribution process to IDPs living outside camps. She therefore intensified her efforts and was regularly seen at IDP camps and other IDP locations with truck loads of aid, and over the course of two years, the MP and her assistant supported aid distribution to more than 6,500 of her constituents. Moreover, the MP's commitment to being as embedded with and close to her constituents as possible also demonstrates a shift in the MP's thinking toward constituency outreach. A



core principle for effective outreach is to maintain regular and close contact with citizens. At first, the MP was unsure about the required level of effort and potential results, but in time the benefits became apparent: "In the beginning of my involvement in this program, I visited one of the constituents while he was in the hospital to check on him," the MP explained. "After three years and when time came for me to run for another mandate, "I received a phone call from the same man telling me that he did not forget [the visit] and that he will vote for me again," she added.

With her constituency spread across different provinces and what appeared to be insurmountable humanitarian challenges, the MP and her COA found it difficult to hold policy discussions focused on medium-to-long-term systemic issues while their constituents had immediate needs that had to be solved. “We are afraid that participants will ask for food and blankets during these discussions,” the COA said. Recognizing the need to find a balance between the MP’s urgent humanitarian work and her responsibilities as a parliamentarian,

NDI worked with the MP to devise a policy discussion and outreach strategy to help set expectations for citizens prior to their participation. With a strategy in place, the MP’s office successfully facilitated a series of discussion on IDP youth and education. “Advice and methods of holding policy discussions provided by NDI proved to be a success,”the MP said. “After every policy discussion, participant were asking us to hold more as they realized it is the right time and place to give their opinions on certain issues,”she added.

BEST PRACTICES & LESSONS LEARNED

Ensure outreach efforts are inclusive of all voices. An elected official represents all citizens in their constituency regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sect, or socio-economic status. Therefore, MPs and their assistants need to engage all voices in their outreach work, particularly those from marginalized groups, such as women, youth, and minorities, to ensure that they are effectively representing the needs and priorities of everyone in their constituency. This includes making sure that constituency offices are accessible and welcoming to different groups and that elected officials make a concerted effort to reach out to citizens across the ethno-sectarian divide. This would also contribute to building trust among citizens as they would see the MP working to serve the interests of everyone in their

community and not just those from their own ethnic or religious group.

Maintain regular engagement to build trust and open lines of communication between citizens and the government. Through regular outreach and engagement with citizens, elected officials can work to build trust in government. While their first duty is to represent the interests of their constituents in the parliament, they are also the face of government and should use that platform to keep citizens informed on progress and setbacks on government activities and collect data to inform government policies and legislation. This two-way channel of communication allows for higher levels of government transparency and accountability and provides citizens with the opportunity to meaningfully engage in the political process. That is why every form of citizen outreach is a value-add and MPs and their

assistants should engage in direct outreach whenever possible. For example, one MP called ten constituents every Friday afternoon and contributed to the MPs reputation as a trusted official, which also proved valuable during election campaigns as citizens had a positive image of the MP.

Develop responsive and inclusive legislation and policies. Constituent outreach is one of the best ways to identify citizens' needs and priorities in order to inform the development of government policies and legislation that directly responds to citizens. While elected officials do not set government policy, they can inform the development process. Using a tool such as a policy report, elected officials can use the information collected through their constituency outreach to outline recommendations and measures that need to be adopted. Direct engagement with constituents, whether through one-on-one meetings at the constituency office, citizen questionnaires, or targeted policy discussions sheds light on the immediate needs of a community, as well as more long-term systemic changes, such as education reform, improvement in service delivery, and health care benefits. Using this information to develop responsive policies and legislation can demonstrate to citizens that elected officials are listening to them and representing their needs in the legislature and in their political parties. This in turn can also help address the trust deficit between citizens and government.

Provide opportunities for civic education and engagement. In addition to outreach

activities providing elected officials with the opportunity to interact directly with citizens, these efforts allow citizens to interact with the political process beyond voting. Outreach activities like policy discussions, listening tours, and even visiting a constituency office to submit a case can be a positive point of interaction between citizens and government. At a time when trust in government and political institutions is low, these interactions can help rebuild that relationship and trust. Moreover, in an emerging democracy, understanding about the political process and the responsibilities of different institutions is often limited, and a concern often raised by elected officials is that citizens do not understand their role or what is within their power and capacity to address. Citizen outreach can provide elected officials with an informal avenue to help build civic awareness and understanding by explaining, for example, how a particular ministry will address a case or how proposed legislation will work its way through the decision-making process in parliament.

Establish relationships with government agencies at the local and national level. Often times, in order to address cases submitted to the constituency office, an MP needs to coordinate and raise the issue with a particular government agency or department. As such, establishing and nurturing cooperative relations with executive officials to support constituency work is an important resource and tool for an elected official. It can contribute to increasing efficient and responsive to the problem if the MP is able to work directly with the government agen-

cy, and it allows the MP to serve as conduit between citizens and government by drawing attention to specific community needs.

Remain present and engaged during times of conflict and transition. Engaging in constituency outreach during times of violence or in its immediate aftermath may seem meaningless or unproductive as constituents are in need of more immediate humanitarian assistance. While an elected official can provide this much needed aid, remaining engaged and present among constituents demonstrates solidarity and offers opportunities to address needs in the short- and medium-term. Meeting with citizens during listening tours at IDP camps or host communities, opening temporary constituency offices, and facilitating policy discussions can draw attention to the concerns and priorities of constituents beyond their immediate and provide elected officials with valuable information that can support them as they try to create more systemic and institutional changes for long-term support and development. Moreover, as many government processes are rigid and often unable to accommodate emergency situations, elected officials and their assistants can play a vital role in facilitating ad-hoc processes to quickly respond to a situation.

Open a constituency office for direct engagement with citizens. One of the best outreach tools for an MP is a constituency office. It provides MPs with a physical safe spaces in each constituency where the MP and their staff can host citizens to discuss community concerns. It is also a space to

centralize and organize data such as case files and complaints raised by citizens that could later be used to inform policy priorities and legislation, as well statistics on the MPs accomplishments and record of engagement that could be used in campaign messaging and public newsletters. In larger provinces or in situations where an MP's constituency is spread across multiple provinces due to displacement, the MP can consider opening satellite offices in order to maintain a connection to their constituents. Each office should have a dedicated assistant to manage day-to-day operations but all information, especially case work and other statistics, should be relayed back to and centralized in the main office.

Work with a constituency outreach assistant. Constituency outreach assistants oversee the daily operations of each office, including event schedules for MPs, listening sessions with interest groups, and information sessions about government services. These assistants are the daily 'face' of MP relations in their community, and help coordinate communication between citizens, MPs and their parliamentary blocs, as well as relevant ministries or civil society organizations. To be effective however there should be mutual trust and respect between the MP and their assistants in order for the MP to have confidence in their COA's ability to represent them properly to his/her constituents.

Adopt a structured and strategic approach to constituency outreach. At the outset of an MP's term and regularly

thereafter, the MP in coordination with their assistant should map out the internal operations and protocols of the office, such as office hours, publication timelines, and regular MP visits. This process should also include the development of a short- and long-term outreach strategy outlining public activities and setting benchmarks for the constituency office. Outreach should be planned and implemented consistently throughout an MP's mandate and not just in the lead up to an election. Conducting citizen outreach just prior to an election could negatively impact an MP as they would be viewed as only wanting votes and not because they are committed to their constituents. However, an MP with proven outreach skills and a positive public profile would become a big value-add to their political party as they would be a resource for information and a strong candidate during an election.

