

SYSTEMATIC METHODS FOR ADVANCING ELECTION OBSERVATION

A Field Guide for the West Africa Election Observers Network



INTRODUCTION TO WAEON FIELD GUIDE SERIES



Nonpartisan citizen observers play an important role during elections by raising public confidence in the election process, deterring electoral malfeasance, exposing irregularities, and providing citizens with important information concerning the integrity of elections. In 2011, with support from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) through a grant from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), citizen observer groups from 11 West African countries formed the West Africa Election Observers Network (WAEON) to support nonpartisan election observation in the subregion and increase dialogue and cross-fertilization among observation organizations from different countries. As of March 2013, the following organizations are members of WAEON: Burkina Faso's Mouvement Burkinabé des Droits de l'Homme et des Peuples (MBDHP), Ghana's Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO), Guinea's Consortium pour l'Observation Domestique des Elections en Guinée (CODE), the Ivorian Convention de la Société Civile Ivoirienne (CSCI), Liberia's Institute for Research and Democratic Development (IREDD), Mali's Appui au Processus Electoral au Mali (APEM), Nigeria's Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), Niger's Association Nigérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme (ANDDH), Senegal's Rencontre Africaine pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme (RADDHO), Sierra Leone's National Election Watch (NEW), and Togo's Concertation Nationale de la Société Civile (CNSC). WAEON aims to strengthen electoral processes and encourage citizen participation in democratic governance. The network is part of the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (www.gndem.org). Since its inception, WAEON has organized a series of training academies for its members on topics such as systematic election observation, communication techniques and strategies to prevent election-related violence, and sustaining electoral and political reforms in the post-election period.

The training academies inspired the network to develop a series of practical field guides as easy-to-use reference tools for citizen election observation groups. To date, three field guides have been published in English and French:

- Systematic Methods for Advancing Election Observation
- Outreach and External Communication
- Materials for Professional Observers: Designing Forms, Manuals and Training Sessions

The field guides complement other reference tools available on domestic election observation, such as NDI's handbooks, *How Domestic Organizations Monitor Elections* and *The Quick Count and Election Observation*. These and other resources are available on NDI's website www.ndi.org.

For future inquiries on WAEON, please contact the WAEON Secretariat located at the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana):

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1

What is Systematic Election Observation?

All forms of citizen observation help mobilize citizens, increase public confidence and deter fraud at the polling station level. In many countries, citizen election observation begins as an activity of mass mobilization, where the simple presence of an observer contributes to public faith in the process. For these mass observation efforts, much of the organizational effort surrounds volunteer recruitment, training, and distribution of observer materials, with little focus on the transmission or analysis of observer reports. Although such efforts can increase overall transparency and identify specific instances of election fraud, observer groups' statements in these cases are based only on the leadership's own analysis and anecdotes from regional coordinators, and so cannot reliably address whether the announced results are accurate. For nonpartisan observers to provide fuller, timelier and more informative statements about the election process to the public, candidates and election authorities, they need to adopt an observation methodology that includes streamlined communications with volunteer observers deployed strategically and in a statistically sound manner.

As citizen observation has advanced, organizations have realized the benefits of using observers to collect reliable information that can be communicated to organization leadership for analysis of nationwide trends. Direct reports from reliable, nonpartisan observers allow citizen monitoring organizations to draw evidence-based conclusions about the electoral process across the country, instead of relying on partial,

anecdotal or skewed information. This approach, known as **systematic observation**, uses advanced monitoring techniques to prioritize and strengthen **the collection, analysis and dissemination of observer data**. By using more strategic observation methodologies, systematic observation can help citizen monitoring groups provide **more representative reports**, reflecting nationwide trends including all regions and demographic groups. The focus on observer data ensures observation groups share **accurate, evidence-based information** with the public, not skewed by anecdotes or political bias.

Prerequisites for Systematic Observation

In order to effectively employ a systematic observation effort, monitoring groups need to meet certain basic requirements. These include:

- A reputation of professionalism and nonpartisanship
- Geographic nationwide coverage
- A strong centralized observation project
- Sufficient financial and human resources, available in a timely manner
- Management mechanisms for financial and human resources
- Well-trained, reliable observers
- Ability to implement rapid reporting and processing
- Political will to consider new methods

Organizational and Management Structure

2

The organizational and management structure of a monitoring effort serve as the foundation for the entire observation. More basic observation methods that prioritize observer visibility over observation data have often used decentralized, regional models that place field organizers largely in charge of deployment and data collection strategies. When the focus is on mass mobilization, regional coordinators are best suited to recruit and manage volunteers. By contrast, systematic observation relies on standardized and streamlined organization from a nationwide effort. Regional coordinators remain key actors in systematic observation, but their recruitment efforts and communication plans must follow the strategy adopted for the entire country. Therefore citizen monitoring groups may need to adjust their operating models in order to employ systematic techniques and ensure their uniform implementation nationwide.

Centralized Observation Operations

While some groups and coalitions take on many activities during elections, such as voter education, media monitoring or trainings for electoral authorities, a project team should be assigned to work solely on election observation to avoid being preoccupied with other affairs. All supervisors, coordinators and leadership must operate under the same recruitment, deployment, training, data reporting, information analysis and media strategies. Groups therefore will need to centralize their monitoring effort to ensure that everyone is operating with the same timelines, strategies and materials. A Steering Committee or core team should be comprised of individuals within your organization vested with decision-making authority. This team should also be designated to effectively disseminate observation plans, coordinate the field and identify and clarify the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the observation effort. In particular, groups should develop:

- An organizational chart demonstrating the levels of observation management
- Job descriptions for all personnel, including those in the field
- Written policies and protocols regarding human and financial resources
- Strong top-down and bottom-up internal communication systems

Field offices still play a crucial role in managing the observation effort and providing local-level expertise, and should have mechanisms for providing feedback to headquarters.

Coalitions and Networks: Options for Centralization

Many groups may work in coalitions or networks in order to achieve national coverage and encourage diversity. However coalitions can present challenges to establishing a strong, single leadership structure.

Coalitions may consider assigning various election responsibilities among their member groups, with each group responsible for one or a few activities. One group may work exclusively on voter education or violence monitoring, while another group, usually the largest, would lead election day observation. Other members may provide observers for the effort but would not be in decision-making or leadership positions.

More commonly, however, coalitions create an independent structure from the broad umbrella to plan and implement election day observation. In this case, member organizations assign personnel to the leadership and management of the effort. In this way, the observation effort can have a clear and centralized structure while the member organizations can otherwise maintain a looser configuration outside of observation. While the central management structure may or may not need to register as a legal entity, it is in the



TIP

Construct a Board of Diverse, Prominent Leaders

Above program staff, a high level board of directors acts as the public face of an observation group or coalition. Board members should be well-respected, prominent leaders in the public arena, such as university professors, former election commissioners, former elected officials and human rights activists; the board should include both men and women who represent all key political and demographic groups. The program leadership reports observation findings and data analysis to the board, who drafts the reports and presents findings to the public.

best interest of all coalitions to establish a clear memorandum of understanding (MOU) that outlines the basic parameters of the partnership.

Observer Management Structure

Project leadership will need to determine exactly how election day observers will be managed from the top down. Supervisors in the field are often the management link between observers and headquarters. However, depending on the amount of observers being deployed, groups may require several layers of management (for instance, state or regional coordinators to manage supervisors).

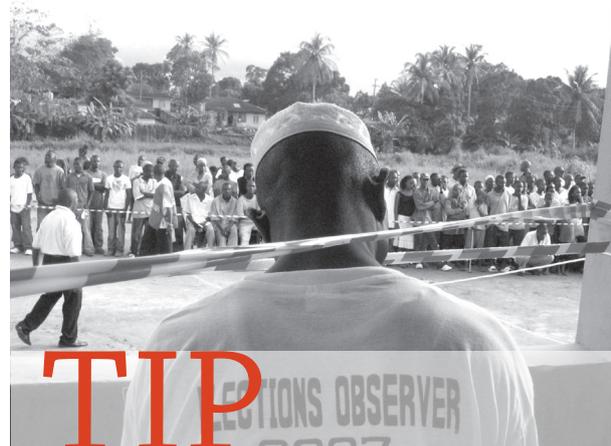
Because systematic observation focuses on collecting better information on the election across the entire country, observers must deploy to all regions of the country. This deployment should generally follow the distribution of polling stations; if 70% of polling stations in a certain district are in rural areas, 70% of observers in that district should observe rural polling stations, even if the regional capital is more convenient. If 20% of polling stations are in Region A and 3% of polling stations are in Region B, the same number of observers should not be assigned to Region A and Region B. Rather, observers should be deployed across regions according to the distribution of

polling stations, with 20% in Region A and 3% in Region B.

Systematic observation will therefore utilize deployment techniques that may spread observers out to less populated or more difficult-to-reach areas. Based on this approach you should avoid assigning the same number of observers to all supervisors. The amount of observers assigned to each supervisor should reflect the degree to which that supervisor can reasonably manage and communicate with the observers in his area. For instance, a supervisor in the capital city may be able to easily manage 20 observers, while a supervisor in a remote region, where observers are more dispersed, may only be able to reasonably manage 5 observers. The management structure should therefore be flexible to the local context.

Technical Management

Systematic observation requires long term planning, the ability to deploy across the country, and the use of advanced communications technologies. Given these financial, technical and logistical demands, other actors play a large role in the observation effort besides supervisors, coordinators and project leaders. Some of the critical technical personnel include:



TIP

Make Your Deployment Plan Early

Your deployment plan will serve as the crux of all of the other strategies developed for observation. This includes the management structure and information like the amount of supervisors you will need and where they should be from. It's critical that groups decide well in advance the kind of deployment in which they are interested and develop at least a draft strategy in order to begin planning the rest of the observation effort.

- Statistician/Data Analyst
- Data Center Coordinator/Data Clerk Manager
- Database Manager and IT support
- Logistics Coordinator
- Accounting and Grants Management staff
- External Communications/Media staff

Some of these roles may be filled by members of the project leadership. While these are relatively small in number, their division of labor and responsibilities should be well-defined. In addition, organizations should include realistic staffing needs in their program budgets.

Internal Communications

All project participants must have timely access to the information they need to carry out their duties. Internal communication plans should be developed to widely and quickly disseminate protocols, policies and observation plans. You should have complete contact information for everyone participating in the observation effort, including steering committee members,

central and field level staff and observers. With a centralized organizational structure, the headquarters needs a uniform contact list for all observers. Even if regional coordinators continue to play a central role in contacting and recruiting observers, they must collect contact information according to a common template and regularly communicate updates to the central office.

It is important to determine the fastest and easiest way to get in touch with a large staff. This will likely include phone calls, SMS and email listservs. You should also consider developing a phone tree and back-up methods. These plans should take into consideration the communications challenges that exist in your country; while email is likely accessible to most program staff in the capital, other approaches are more appropriate for coordinators and observers in regions with limited internet access. Regular meetings should be established among the project leadership and/or steering committee, as well as periodic meetings with field coordinators.



Case Study: Togo

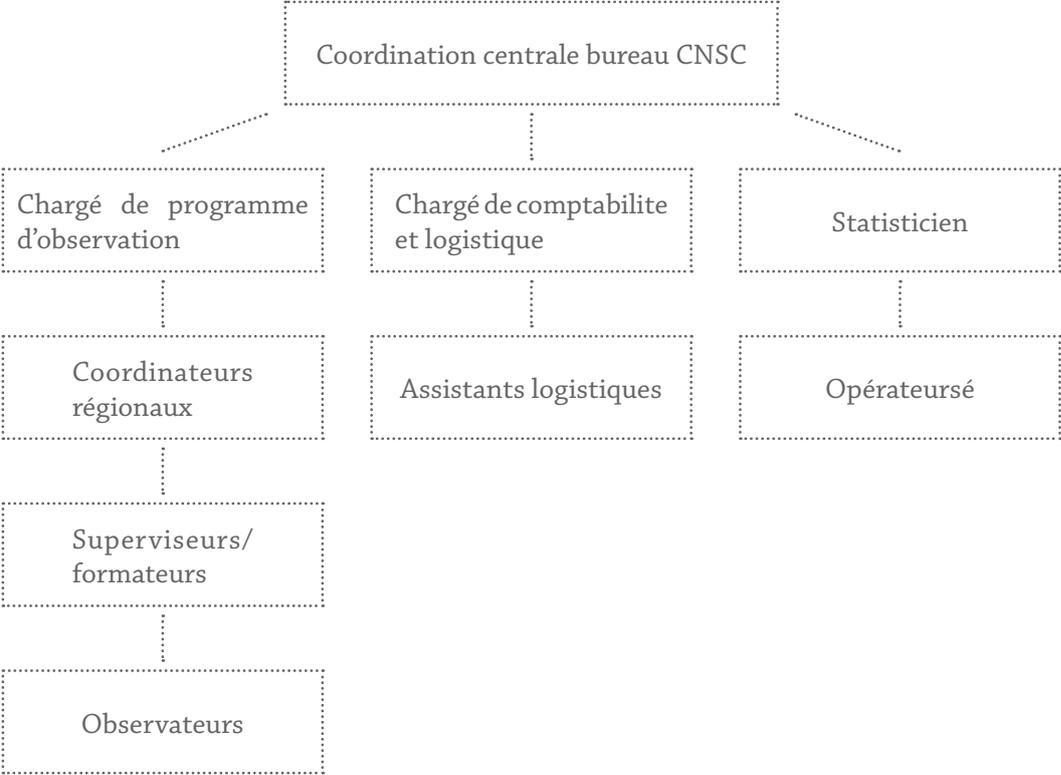
Centralizing A Coalition Observation Effort

The 2010 presidential elections in Togo allowed, for the first time in the country's history, independent and widespread citizen observation. Organizations within the coalition the Convention Nationale de la Société Civile (CNSC) seized the opportunity to participate but were faced with the challenge of organizing a nationwide observation effort for the first time just weeks before the election. While the member organizations continued their voter education campaign, nonviolence campaign and other ongoing activities, the CNSC leadership assigned a core election observation coordination team. This core team, led by one of the board members of the CNSC, included political leadership, program support staff, a database specialist and

accounting and administrative staff, all based in Lomé and charged with making the strategic decisions and logistical preparations necessary for a successful observation effort. The team selected regional coordinators for the five major regions of Togo who arranged regional trainings, assisted with trainer and observer recruitment and facilitated communication and reporting between the regions and the capital. With their assistance, the coordinating team was able to guide the recruitment strategy and maintain a centralized contact database of all CNSC observers and trainers. This organization allowed for a seamless transition to centralized data collection through a Lomé call center on election day.

EXAMPLE

Organizational Chart, CNSC Togo (2010)



Encouraging Diversity and Including Marginalized Populations

3

As safeguards of the electoral process, observation groups should reflect the society they represent. Being inclusive not only helps build the public's confidence in your organization but helps bring a variety of perspectives to your monitoring effort, reducing the bias of a strong, majority voice. Diversity in your organization's composition, including by gender, race, religion, language, class or physical challenges, can help maximize your coverage and allow you to reach communities or information to which you may otherwise not have access. Information cannot be fully representative if it only includes a segment of the population; at its essence, systematic observation must also be inclusive observation.

Observer Requirements and Recruitment

You should always strive to recruit the most competent and reliable observers, but you do not want observer requirements to be overly-burdensome. Having exclusionary standards for observers, such as educational, language or health prerequisites, can reinforce marginalizing structures. Try to avoid requirements that might bar otherwise perfectly qualified observers. For example, a woman who volunteers with your organization and has demonstrated competence should not be disqualified for lacking a diploma.

Observation groups should prioritize recruiting women and minorities. Groups may even consider requiring supervisors to recruit at least a certain set number of women and have strategies to recruit observers from underrepresented regions.



Case Study: **Mali**

Encouraging Women's Participation In Observation

The Association d'Appui au Processus Electoral au Mali (APEM) has established itself as the leading election observation network in Mali, but it recognized that despite its wide reach and reputation, the network continued to lack substantial women's participation. While preparing for the planned 2012 elections – which were ultimately derailed by a coup d'état – APEM developed a multi-faceted strategy to make the network more inclusive. The network established a goal of recruiting at least 30% women as observers and supervisors. While recruitment was never finalized, by early 2012, APEM had

made substantial progress in involving women in all levels of the organization. APEM also adapted its observation materials to include a gender perspective. Observation checklists included questions to measure women's participation as both voters and pollworkers, and checklists sought to identify any barriers to women's participation. The incident forms also addressed barriers to participation, including guidelines for observers to comment on how incidents targeted or disproportionately affected certain groups or demographics.

Marginalized groups generally experience more electoral discrimination than other populations; having links to those communities can create helpful avenues for information gathering.

Consider Your Coalition

If you are operating in a coalition, consider bringing in women's organizations and organizations representing minorities. This not only adds important perspectives to your overall organization and analysis, but also makes recruiting women and persons from diverse backgrounds easier. Involving disability rights groups can help build greater awareness of polling station accessibility issues and engage an active and politically neutral segment of civil society in your coalition.

Be Strategic in Deployment

If, for some reason, you feel as though a group of people may not be deployable as observers on their own, consider whether deploying them in

pairs would be helpful. For instance, there may be some places where a woman would not be allowed to go alone, but if deployed with a male partner or family member, she would have access. Observers with disabilities may be limited to urban areas or benefit from a partner to provide assistance. This way, everyone can still participate effectively. However always keep safety in mind – if sending an observer into an area where his/her background may be received with hostility, consider deploying this observer elsewhere.

Be Creative with Volunteers

Some volunteers, like the blind or those with severe disabilities, may be unable to actively participate as full election observers. However, this does not prevent them from participating in your observation effort. There are plenty of critical roles for staff and volunteers in your monitoring mission, including phone clerks, data clerks, data managers, organizers, logistics coordinators, fundraisers, etc.

Recruiting and Deploying Observers

4

Systematic observation can only occur with systematic deployment. How observers are deployed will not only influence who and how you recruit, but will determine where you get information from and how representative or complete that information is. The quality of that information guides the analyses and conclusions you can draw on the electoral process and share with the public. The following are critical components to systematic observer deployment.

Consider Quality Over Quantity

All election observation efforts are constrained by resources. Groups must decide what is the best use of their observers. Simply maximizing the amount of observers deployed is not always better – the management needs of a large-scale deployment can compromise quality control for observers, including the ability to recruit strong candidates and provide them sufficient training. More importantly, deployment of several thousand observers decreases the chances of receiving all observer information back in a short period of time. Often, this results in data only coming in from urban clusters prior to your press statement, skewing the information you report. Systematic deployment relies on high-quality observers and the ability to reasonably manage the rapid reporting and processing of all observer information.

Use Stationary Observers

Systematic observation requires accurate, reliable information on the entire voting process at individual polling stations. Since an observer can only attest to the quality of the process in a polling station while he/she is present in the polling station, **systematic observation requires each observer to deploy to a single polling station and to observe the opening, voting, closing and counting process at that one station without leaving.** Systematic observers are then able to assess the integrity of that particular

station and the subsequent ballot box in the station. In addition, observation from opening to closing allows the observers to better understand the demanding work of polling officials and distinguish between minor irregularities and misconduct that could impact the outcome of the process.

Many organizations use roving observers to extend the reach of their monitoring effort. While roving observers may increase the amount of polling stations covered, this is at the expense of observation credibility at those polling stations (see Quality Over Quantity). Without an observer present all day, there is less deterrence against fraud and fewer witnesses to identify irregularities. Observation of a polling station for



TIP

Focus on the Fewest Possible Observers to Establish a Visible Nationwide Presence

Observer groups should strive to find a balance between a number of observers that is large enough to be credible and visible nationwide but is small enough that you can reasonably collect and process information from all observers in the short window between observation and your press release.

only a short period of time produces very limited information on the quality of the voting process there and cannot verify whether the vote count at any of the polling stations visited (including where the count is attended) is accurate. Without an observer present all day, there is less deterrence against fraud and fewer witnesses to identify irregularities. Some organizations may, if their budget allows, use roving observers to visit polling stations unexpectedly and provide some deterrence of election fraud and irregularities over a broad geographic area or to verify critical incidents. However, this should take place in addition to systematic observation, and information collected by roving observers must be kept separate and not used in any analysis of election results.

Establish More Representative Deployment

In order to gather systematic information, observers must be deployed to a proportional and nationwide sample of polling stations. This helps alleviate the over-representation of certain areas (and the underrepresentation of others) that can skew data. Traditional, non-systematic observation has often relied on two techniques:

- **Convenient Deployment** – Observers are deployed to polling stations that, while geographically diverse, are convenient for them to reach and up to their discretion to choose. This method often results in observer clustering around easily accessible areas like urban centers. Remote or conflict-prone areas, where the process is likely to be the most problematic, see very few observers, if any. Information collected using this deployment method is therefore anecdotal and not nationally representative.
- **Targeted Deployment** – This method is often used by groups with limited coverage to prioritize at-risk areas for observation. Often this includes conflict-prone regions, areas that are politically contentious or other “hot spots.” While this type of deployment is more strategic than convenient deployment, it still cannot provide an overall assessment of the quality of the process since observers are limited to certain areas. It is, however, an effective component of monitoring programs focused on election-related violence.

Both of these methods produce regional and urban biases and do not reflect the nationwide character of the electoral process. For systematic

observation, groups need to assign observers to specific polling stations instead of allowing them to choose wherever they want to go. These observers should be deployed using one of the following:

- **Proportional Deployment** – This method supports observer deployment that reflects the distribution of polling stations. Groups should examine small geographic administrative units (for instance, prefecture, county or district) to determine the percentage of total polling stations in a particular unit. Your observers should then be deployed in that area at the same percentage of the total. For instance, if 3% of your country’s polling stations are located in District X, then you should deploy 3% of your total observers to District X. Applied to each unit nationwide, this helps prevent observer clustering and forces a deployment plan that is more representative of the population. Within



TIP

Use Available Information to Develop Deployment Plans

Systematic deployment requires you to know, at least generally, where polling stations are located. However, sometimes it is difficult to obtain a finalized polling station list well in advance of election day, and changes to the list may occur at the last minute. Groups should not, however, wait to develop their deployment plan until the final list is available. While you may not be able to assign specific stations to observers or may have to make last minute adjustments, you can use old polling station lists from the previous election or current population data to develop a proportional plan. This will at least serve as a basis for supervisors to know how many people to recruit and from where, with the understanding that the final assignments may be subject to changes.

those geographic units, observers should also be deployed according to the proportional distribution of polling stations in urban and rural zones.

- **Sample-Based Deployment** – This method deploys observers to a random, statistically-sound sample of polling stations. Each observer in the sample must report to the exact polling station assigned, even if it is far from the observer’s home or paved roads. In order for sample-based deployment to work, you must receive data from each observer at designated times throughout election day. Therefore, this method can be logistically demanding and requires significant advance planning and statistical knowledge for analysis. However, if done correctly, sample-based deployment can provide an accurate, nationwide evaluation of the electoral process and verify electoral outcomes. Sample-based deployment is a central component of a parallel vote tabulation (PVT), an advanced monitoring methodology that involves rapidly collecting process and vote count data from observers deployed to a random, representative sample of polling stations to provide timely analysis on the conduct and outcome of an election.

Proportional Deployment is the first step to Sample-Based Deployment. Citizen observer groups must be able to successfully conduct a proportional deployment plan before considering the use of sample-based observation or PVT.

Target Skilled and Reliable Volunteers

Systematic observation’s emphasis on data means that observers must go to the correct polling station assigned to them, stay at their polling stations all day, fill out their forms completely and accurately and transmit their findings quickly. While all observation should seek to use trustworthy and nonpartisan volunteers, observers with analytical skills, a strong sense of dedication and clear impartiality are crucial for systematic observation.

Recruit Observers Locally

Recruiting observers locally is one of the best ways to minimize deployment costs and ensure observers will go to the correct station assigned to them. Using the deployment plan, you should identify the exact areas where observers are

needed and focus recruitment efforts there. This may mean that additional resources and attention will be diverted to areas with low organizational presence or volunteer gaps, to ensure local observers are recruited instead of having to send observers from another area. Monitoring groups should always plan on recruiting and training more observers than necessary in case of changes and drop-offs.

Training Observers

To ensure the best possible election day information, systematic observers must thoroughly understand their role, their responsibilities and how to record and report observation findings. Well-organized and detailed trainings will provide the foundation for observer knowledge. The following should be considered for strong systematic observation trainings:

- **Keep training sizes small** – Trainings lose effectiveness once they get too big. Try to keep your trainings below 25-30 people each.
- **Minimize the levels of step-down trainings** – As much as possible, all observers should be trained by master trainers. The more “cascades” in a Training of Trainers (ToT) or Cascade Training, the more likely information will be lost or distorted among levels, and the quality of training will decrease.
- **Train observers close to election day** – Observer trainings should occur as close to election day as possible. Volunteers are more likely to retain critical observation information the closer they are to the actual deployment day.
- **Centralize and standardize trainings** – All trainings should use the same agenda and training materials throughout the country.
- **Train observers on the observation form(s) and data reporting plan** – All trainings should include a section that focuses on how observers should understand and fill out their observation form(s). They should also be well-trained on when and how to report both critical incidents and election day findings.
- **Conduct a simulation** – Observers should participate in an election day simulation during their training in which they go through the voting process and fill out their observation forms.

5

Data Collection

There is only a brief window following election day when information provided by citizen observers can help shape how the public and stakeholders view an election. Citizen observer groups often issue statements just hours or days after an election. Sometimes, however, these statements are drafted with only partial information from observers (often information received quickly from urban clusters), making the statement regionally biased and anecdotal.

Systematic observation relies on information from all observers nationwide to serve as the basis of election evaluation. Centralized and well-organized rapid reporting of observer information is needed to ensure that the group receives information from all areas of deployment and that this information is consolidated in one place. This method requires a centralized data center to collect and process the information pouring in from observers. Some key questions should be considered when developing a data collection plan:

- What are the kinds of information that need to be reported to headquarters on election day (results, qualitative indicators, critical incidents, observer deployment confirmations)?
- What is the strongest nationwide mode of communication given the size and infrastructure of your country?
- What challenges could occur on election day that could disrupt the data collection structure?
- Will observers be able to realistically understand and use the method of data collection?

All observers should collect information on paper forms during their observation. However, the following tactics should be considered for rapidly collecting that information from your nationwide deployment.

Use Short Forms With Limited Questions

The more concise your paper observation form, the faster it can be reported and processed. Long forms with too many questions will hinder both how quickly observer data can be collected as well as how fast that data can be entered and analyzed.

Identify the Most Appropriate Method of Transmission

Systematic observation requires more rapid, efficient and accurate reporting. Depending on the infrastructure, size of your country and capacity of your data center, a variety of techniques can be used to transmit information from observer paper forms:

- SMS
- Phone call (mobile, landline or satellite)
- Fax
- Scan/Email
- Hand delivery

While it is important to have one standardized reporting method, groups may need to be flexible for observers in particularly inaccessible areas. Those observers may have to report their findings in a different way than everyone else in order to ensure their data is received on time.

Determine a Reasonable Timeline for Data Collection

Groups should develop a timeline for when they can be expected to have sufficient data to release a statement evaluating the electoral process. This should be calculated based on the method of transmission, how many observers they have, how many operators they have in the central data center, and approximately how long it will take to receive and enter a single observation form. This timeline will enable groups to give the media an

idea of when it can expect to hear from them, as well as to manage expectations internally about exactly how fast the data collection and analysis process will run. This timeline should also include a reporting schedule for when observers should report their findings. Sometimes groups will collect observer information at key intervals throughout the day, and not just at the end of the polling and counting.

Streamline and Simplify Bottom-to-Top Reporting

While there may be several layers of management between observers and the central headquarters (supervisors, regional coordinators, etc.), your data collection system should be designed so that observers report as directly to the center as possible. This cuts out levels that could stall transmission or potentially lose or confuse information.

Transmitting Election Day Checklists vs. Critical Incidents

Critical incidents can have a severe impact on the process and often require follow-up to gather

additional information. Therefore critical incidents are often reported immediately as they happen, not at pre-assigned times. To avoid disrupting your election day checklist data collection process, it is useful to have a distinct mechanism to report critical violations, whether through a dedicated phone line, special SMS code or via field coordinators.

Back-Ups and Contingency Plans

No matter what mode of communication you are using for your data collection plan, you should always have secondary (and tertiary) methods in place in case of a communication breakdown. Your back-up plans should utilize modes of transmission that are least likely to be disrupted. Mechanisms may include landline or satellite phones, regional collection points, mobile teams, etc. Field coordinators and observers should be trained accordingly on all contingency-reporting plans.

Conduct a Simulation

In order to ensure your data collection plan works, you should always conduct a simulation, or test-



Case Study: Guinea

Building A Centralized Data Collection Structure

Although a small country, Guinea faces significant infrastructural challenges; limited access to paved roads, electricity and reliable cellular networks pose communications problems between the rural interior and Conakry. In 2010, the Consortium pour l'Observation Domestique des Elections en Guinée (CODE) understood these challenges but sought to organize a robust citizen monitoring effort, providing nationwide coverage and systematic analysis of observer data for the first time in the country's history.

CODE members with technical knowledge of data analysis, database software and statistics worked with the program staff to design a data collection system that would allow the secretariat to process reports transmitted by their 2000 observers deployed across the country. The first and most challenging step was developing a centralized

contact list of observers, which allowed CODE to prepare deployment packets complete with forms, a training manual and mobile phone credit for each observer. This was particularly important for the new deployment strategy, where observers were not only deployed in regional centers but across all sous-préfectures, in proportion to the overall distribution of polling stations. Unlike in past elections, observers did not simply return paper forms to their regional supervisors. Instead, observers used prepaid mobile phones provided by CODE to call in reports to assigned national hotlines. In areas with limited network coverage, the observers were instructed to complete their observation and then travel to an area with coverage to report their findings at the end of the day. All reports were entered and analyzed in Conakry in a centralized Microsoft Access database built by the CODE webmaster.

run, with all observers, supervisors, coordinators, data clerks, etc. before election day. In a simulation, observers report fictitious data to the central data center. At the data center, operators and data clerks gain first-hand experience that helps them prepare for election day. This will not only address any weaknesses in the plan before it is too late; it can also confirm your ability to reach all of your observers, re-commit observers, and provides a final practice for all participants.

Use Observer Stipends Strategically to Encourage Response Rates

Many monitoring groups withhold a portion of observers' stipends until after observers report their findings. This increases observers' understanding of the importance of their observation data and motivates them to report completely and on time. Using mobile money applications is one way of delivering leftover stipends once observers have reported.



TIP

Assess Communication Limitations Early

In order to establish an effective data collection plan, it is important that project leadership has a clear idea of what communication limitations exist and where. Field supervisors and coordinators should be encouraged to do communication assessments in deployment areas, where communication options may be unstable. It is helpful to know in advance where these weaknesses exist so that exceptions to the data collection plan for certain polling stations or larger areas can be made in advance.

Data Management and Analysis

6

The success and efficacy of any systematic election monitoring operation depends on the ability to collect and process accurately, and in a timely manner, a volume of information and findings from field observers. There are four different activities that must occur in regards to data management:

- **Developing an observer database** – compiling all information about field supervisors and observers
- **Creating an election day protocol** – developing a document that outlines what you will do with your data
- **Entering the data** – process of entering data from your observation forms into electronic files
- **Analyzing the data** – process of inspecting, cleaning, detecting patterns and developing explanations to your data

Developing an Observer Database

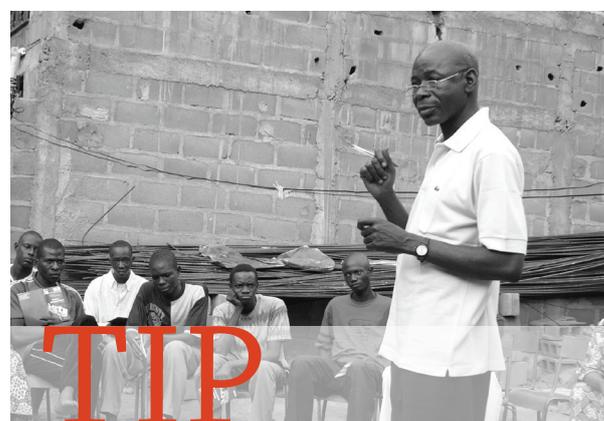
The observer database should be developed from the moment observers are first recruited. It is crucial to compile all related information regarding field supervisors and observers, including: their full name, gender, mobile phone numbers, home numbers, ID numbers, date of birth, education background, assigned polling station locations, immediate family contact information for emergencies (if possible), and, if needed, photograph. You can use a simple computer database like Microsoft Excel or Access. If you have technology skills, it is advisable to use an intranet system where data clerks can simultaneously enter data from different computers.

Make sure that this information is updated in a timely manner. This information can help to verify observers against the system, identify who is sending in data, and track where data is coming from.

If a complete list of observers cannot be obtained before election day, create a protocol that allows new observers to report their location and automatically be added into the database (possibly through their supervisors). In addition, consider creating a protocol that allows observers to report their new location information if they need to change their assigned location to avoid reporting a wrong location.

Creating an Election Day Protocol

In advance of election day, you will need to organize a meeting with your group leaders, key staff, and advisors to develop a protocol for analyzing and releasing your observation findings. The agenda for this meeting may include: reviewing the electoral context, revisiting your observation objectives,



TIP

Use Protocol to Protect Incoming Data

On election day, many people will be seeking access to your observer findings, particularly information related to the vote counts. However, a clear protocol protects you, ensuring that data clerks don't have access to compiled results and outlining in advance when the board will share findings with the public. Only very few people on the data analysis team should have access to the raw data, and they are responsible for sharing and explaining that data to the board.

and creating a draft election day schedule. The schedule should highlight important external and internal milestones or activities throughout the day(s).

The protocol should answer at least the following questions:

- How is the data flow at the data center? What are the roles of different staff? Who reports to the board? What is the most efficient paper handling process at the data center?
- How will staff process incoming observer data on election day?
- How will you analyze the data? Which part of the dataset will be examined first? In what order will the data be analyzed?
- What is the protocol if findings indicate some problems? What problems seem most likely to arise on Election Day?
- Who will have access to your observation findings internally, and when?
- What information will be provided to outsiders?
- To whom will the data be released?
- What is the estimated time for the information to be shared?
- How will you share your findings?

Data security

It is important that you implement and enforce data security and usage policies in your data center. As part of your planning process, you need to make a security assessment to anticipate and take any necessary measures to prevent any security threats. In some countries, data security is a minor concern; in other contexts, you may be aware of efforts by political actors to undermine your observation or gain access to your data. In either case, protecting your data is essential to your overall effort.

- Install basic protections. Your network should be secure from all predictable forms of malicious attacks.
- Create a network log-in protocol. You need to provide different security levels for each person based on their defined roles, an efficient method of managing users.
- Establish a storage & back-up protocol. In the event of server/ computer crash, data back-up will allow you to recover your data and continue your election day operation.

Entering the Data

To be useful, the tremendous amount of information collected by your observers in the paper forms must be processed quickly and accurately. Converting this information to a single database is an effective way to analyze



Case Study: Ghana

Analyzing And Managing Observer Data With Databases

During Ghana's Presidential Election in December 2008, the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) conducted a parallel vote tabulation (PVT) for the first time. Pairs of rapid response observers were deployed to a nationally representative random sample of 1,070 polling stations out of 21,008 polling stations across the country. The central team established a data center with an advanced platform to rapidly collect, manage, and analyze the data from their rapid response observers.

The observers sent specially formatted text

messages, which were received directly on a computer database at the center. Upon receipt of a text message, one of the 40 data operators called the observers to confirm their information. The database allowed CODEO to track any missing data, assess the data quality and analyze simultaneously as the data came in. With this advanced system and high level of faith in the quality of their observer data, CODEO was able to publicly comment on the elections process and affirm the credibility of the election results within hours of the polls closing.

SAMPLE

Observer Database, CODEO Ghana (2008)

Code: PS ID: Region: RC: Constituency: Group: Observer: Status:

★ Polling Station List Polling Stations Found: 1070

Code	PS ID	RC	Constituency	Group	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	IN	Observer	Mobile	CS	Mobile
F271302	1024	AS1	AFIGYA-SEKYERE EAST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F272104	1023	AS1	AFIGYA-SEKYERE EAST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F273003	1022	AS1	AFIGYA-SEKYERE EAST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F273601	1021	AS1	AFIGYA-SEKYERE EAST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F270401	1025	AS1	AFIGYA-SEKYERE EAST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F273901	1031	AS1	AFIGYA-SEKYERE WEST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F270502	1033	AS1	AFIGYA-SEKYERE WEST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F273803	1032	AS1	AFIGYA-SEKYERE WEST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F261604	1221	AS1	EJURA-SEKYEDUMASE 'A'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F262001	1232	AS1	EJURA-SEKYEDUMASE 'B'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F262701	1234	AS1	EJURA-SEKYEDUMASE 'B'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F262902	1233	AS1	EJURA-SEKYEDUMASE 'B'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F261901	1231	AS1	EJURA-SEKYEDUMASE 'B'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F240603	1253	AS1	KUMAWU 'A'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F241002	1252	AS1	KUMAWU 'A'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F242501	1251	AS1	KUMAWU 'A'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F243502	1261	AS1	KUMAWU 'B'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F244403	1262	AS1	KUMAWU 'B'	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F200202	1273	AS1	KWABRE EAST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F200301	1272	AS1	KWABRE EAST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...
F200403	1271	AS1	KWABRE EAST	RRO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		...	...	...	...

and manipulate the information. In practice, this process is heavily dependent on the reporting system used by the organization.

Using computer/ phone operators in a data center

Groups must establish one single center for observers to transmit their information. The information can be transmitted over the phone to all operators who will transcribe the data to a paper form or directly enter the information to a database. This approach will allow direct verbal communication with their observers to improve data quality. Paper forms can be physically transferred to a central location for manual data entry by computer operators or scanning. This approach is most appropriate in situations where the telecommunications infrastructure is unreliable or non-existent. However, both approaches are time consuming, as well as labor and resource intensive.

$$\text{Number of Computer Operators Needed} = \frac{\text{Number of observers} \times \text{Minutes per call}}{\text{Target number of minutes for processing all calls}}$$

At the data center, computerized data entry forms should be developed to provide an interface for the operators to enter in information from the paper forms. Involving an experienced database programmer will help you design an interface that is simple for data clerks to use. In general, these computer data entry forms should mimic the design of the paper forms to allow the computer operators to intuitively transfer data from one to the other. But it may deviate from the paper form, including removing extraneous text or formatting the data entry form to fit on the screen without scrolling. The simple way to consolidate information after data entry is by manually copying the database on each computer. However, combining this information can be disruptive, prone to mistakes, and it is not possible to analyze the information as it comes in. It is advisable to develop either a client server database or a web-enabled database. This setup will allow multiple computer operators to input the data simultaneously on each computer.

You need to conduct a speed test to calculate the time required to enter in each form and the number of data entry operators that need to be recruited and trained to meet your reporting goals.

Using Mobile Technology/ SMS

Some citizen election monitoring organizations already extensively use mobile phone technology

to increase speed and improve accuracy of the data entry process. One of the great advantages of using a mobile phone is that the data can be simultaneously and automatically input into a database or a spreadsheet, saving additional hours of data entry. But it requires more advanced computer skills such as the ability to write database queries or complex SMS processing rules. Observers also will need to have basic knowledge of how to use mobile phones and training on how to transcribe their paper forms into a single, coded text message.

Data Analysis

Preparation before election day

Analyzing data within a very short time is not an easy task, and is compounded by the extraordinary pressures surrounding election day. You have to prepare the majority of the job in advance of election day.

- **Gather contextual information which will help you to interpret your data.** Typical contextual data are: electoral context (administrative preparation, political environment, polling data, and other observers), documentation from previous elections, comparison from other countries with a similar electoral system, etc.
- **Develop a clear election day protocol, as discussed above.**
- **Create software to visualize the findings.** Graphic presentation will make observation

findings more accessible and attractive to media and the general public. Decide how you will use the graphic presentation: will the data be illustrated with bar charts or pie-charts? Will it be presented in numeric tables?

Analyzing the Data on Election Day

- **Analyzing initial data** – Do not wait until all the data has been received to begin analyzing the election day results. Once you have received around 20% of observer reports, check for any software/ hardware errors in the database and scan for early signs of substantive election problems.
- **Scanning the data** – Analyze the distribution of responses to each question on the observation forms; identify any “outliers” that do not conform to proper election procedure.
- **Searching for systematic patterns** – Determine whether problems or irregularities are randomly distributed or clustered in any region of the country (by cross tabulating all of the problem cases). Investigate the reasons behind it, using your regional supervisor. If the problem cases are distributed randomly and the scale is not large, then it is possible the cause of the problem is simply human error.
- **Determining the impact of the problems** – Determine whether the scale and scope of problems identified has a material impact on any particular party or candidate.



Case Study: Liberia

Basic Data Entry For Observer Reports

The Election Coordinating Committee (ECC) sought a simple and effective way to collect and analyze observer reports during the 2011 elections in Liberia. They had a limited budget, timeline and technical skills to build a complicated data management platform. In light of these limitations, they used a free and existing option available with a Google account: Google forms.

The ECC built custom Google forms that reflected

the format of the checklists observers would be using in their polling stations. After election day, observers submitted their completed paper forms for collation and analysis at the data center in Monrovia. ECC operators in the data center used the Google forms interface to enter observer data from each individual form. The resulting spreadsheets allowed the ECC to conduct basic calculations and generate simple graphs and charts to better present observer findings to the public.

Quality Control

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Quality control is an ongoing process throughout the observation effort – from preparation to report writing – which helps to ensure that your systematic election observation is conducted in a professional manner. Any possible errors may have a negative impact on the quality of data. Therefore, error detection is the first step in a quality control process. The next steps are the actions to be taken when a certain error occurs.

Observer Forms and Manual

- **Translation of materials** – The original questions should be translated with the best possible equivalent term or phrase in the local language. Idioms or elements that may introduce problems in translation need to be avoided. The form should be translated by election experts who have a basic understanding of key election terminologies.
- **Number of questions** – Fewer questions on the forms provide fewer opportunities for errors.
- **Form design** – Design the observation form with clear structure, layout and explanations, and include concise instructions.
- **Testing** – The form(s) needs to be pre-tested. Thoroughly revise the form before it is finalized.

Observer Management

- **Reputation** – It is important to establish a system to check the impartiality of your observers.
- **Trainings** – Trainings should be adequate for the observers to make themselves familiar with the election procedures, understand the observation forms and know how to report their findings.

- **Evaluations and feedback** – Evaluation of training should occur at a number of levels. The observers can be given a preliminary assessment at the beginning of the training and must be evaluated at the end of the training in order to determine whether they are ready to be deployed. The observers should in turn evaluate the training provided, as well as the trainers. Ideally, trainers should be evaluated by the headquarters as well.
- **Ongoing support** – Remember that training is a continuous process. Observation and supervision throughout the operation are part of the training. Observer supervisors play very important roles in ensuring the quality of the data sent by observers.

Observer Deployment

- **Deployment plan** – A detailed deployment plan should be developed. The observer or supervisor should survey the polling station site if necessary before the election day.
- **Onsite supervision** – Each observer should have a supervisor that oversees, coordinates, and provides onsite support. The ideal supervisor-observer ratio varies between 1:5 and 1:20, depending on the location.
- **Observer communication** – Establish a system to allow regular communication with observers at all times.

Data Management

- **Built-in verification** – Develop databases that have an integrated data verification mechanism to indicate any data omissions, errors, and inconsistencies.

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Presenting Observation Results

Visualize Your Data

Systematic observation generates reliable and important information on an election, but it is meaningless without a way to organize and present important findings. Data visualization is a way to present and explore your data through charts, graphs and maps that make the data more accessible and easier to understand. People comprehend data better through pictures than by reading numbers in rows and columns. By visualizing data, you are able to more effectively ask and answer important questions about the quality of election day processes. Think of visualization as if you were telling a story; take time to learn about the information at the base of your graphic. What kind of election day story are you trying to tell? To convey a message to your readers effectively, sometimes you will need more than just a simple pie chart of your results.

Here are some best practices in data visualization:

- Summarize your chart/graphic in plain language. What do these circles, bars, and colors represent?
- Create a color legend or directly label shapes and objects in your graphic. You should include the unit of representation of data.
- Color is critical. Use it appropriately and minimally to maximize its impact. Choose from an option of color palettes, as in www.colorbrewer2.org.
- Arrange data in order. If the data is name or category based and not time-based, it is a good idea to arrange the data in descending/ascending order.
- Include your sources. Where did the data come from?

There are various software platforms you can use to visualize your data fairly easily and quickly:

- **Microsoft Excel** – Bar charts, line graphs, pie charts, and scatterplots are all simple to

generate with Microsoft Excel. Excel provides an easy solution if you don't need higher quality data graphics.

- **Google spreadsheets** – Google spreadsheets are essentially the cloud version of Microsoft Excel. Google provides some advantages over Excel; you can access your data anywhere as long as you have an internet connection and web browser. You can easily share your spreadsheet with others and collaborate in real time. Google also has some additional charting options via the gadget options.
- **Many Eyes** – Many Eyes is an ongoing research project by IBM Visual Communication Line. It's an online application that enables you to upload your data as a text-delimited file, a format that makes your data accessible across a variety of software platforms. Many Eyes allows you to explore your data through a set of interactive visualization tools and a number of customization options. They also provide a variety of more advanced and experimental visualization, along with some basic mapping tools. A wordle , or world cloud, can analyze word use; words used more often are sized larger. One caveat in Many Eyes is that all the data you upload to the site is in the public domain, which could pose problems in more sensitive political environments.

Mapping

Maps are an incredibly intuitive way to visualize data. The easiest online solution, although it does require a little bit of programming, is Google. ArcGIS is a more complex program that enables you to map large amounts of data and manipulate it in a number of ways, such as smoothing and processing. There is no code required, but it does require you to upload the base geographical information.

Reporting your findings

Your statements and reports are the vehicle



Case Study: Senegal

Mapping Observer Reports in Real Time

The fraught political climate surrounding the 2012 presidential elections in Senegal made it more important than ever for Senegalese citizens and the international community to have reliable information on the credibility of the process. The Collectif des organisations de société civile pour des élections (COSCE) led this effort, among a broader coalition of Senegalese civil society groups. Their “M Observers” used mobile phones to report observations through SMS messages to an online mapping platform – www.senevote2012.com – that updated for the public in real time.

This system was unique not only for mapping observer reports and incidents, but for providing context on the quality of the overall process across the country. Throughout the day, the map would

update with observer reports, tracking positive developments in green and irregularities in red. The system would track the cumulative reports for each department in Senegal, shading each department accordingly. When visitors looked at the map, the deep green color reflected the overwhelmingly positive reports transmitted by observers throughout the country. This level of context helped convey the true story of the elections and not distract the public – or the observers themselves – with the few irregularities that were reported. Such shading in maps is more appropriate for election observation than pinpoint or incident reporting maps, whose focus generally skews too negative and is unable to provide perspective on how the number of reports relates to the credibility and transparency of the process.

SAMPLE

Senevote2012 Map, COSCE Senegal (2012)

SÉNÉGAL-SCRUTIN 2012
DONNÉES DES BUREAUX DE VOTE EN TEMPS RÉEL

Legislatives | Legislatives 1ST ROUND | 1È TOUR ABOUT | A PROPOS

CHOISIR UN BUREAU DE VOTE OU RECHERCHER SUR LA CARTE CI-DESSOUS

1 Région

2 Département

3 Bureau de vote

MISES À JOUR: 08:24 GMT, 27 Mars 2012
LES DONNÉES DE: 1097 (de 11904) bureaux de vote

Map data ©2012 Google - Terms of Use

FILTRE DE CATEGORIE

Heure d'ouverture

- L'ouverture du bureau de vote
- Operations de vote
- Taux de participation à midi
- Heure de clôture du bureau
- Taux de participation
- Le dépouillement
- Rapports d'incidents graves
- Violence
- Achat de conscience
- Arrête de vote
- Intimidation
- Autres incidents importants
- Opinion globale sur la consultation

INDICATEUR (COMMENT ÇA MARCHE?)

Les points rouge indiquent que les observateurs ont envoyé au moins un rapport défavorable de ce bureau de vote pour cette catégorie.

Les points verts indiquent que, jusqu'au présent, les observateurs n'ont envoyé que des rapports favorables de ce bureau de vote pour cette catégorie.

Ce service web est encore en version BETA. Envoyer votre feedback ou questions à jeffrey.allen@oneworld.net.

for communicating your findings from your systematic election observation. Most observer groups release their election day observation in three phases.

- **Midday press conference** – provides results from the opening and morning process, including hard data, violence, or critical incidents that have occurred and percentages to some opening and morning processes. It is important to stress that the findings are preliminary in nature and that you continue to monitor the process.
- **Preliminary statement** – provides initial findings and overview of the quality of the election day process, with an emphasis on larger trends. They should be informative, evidence-based, and succinct. There is some sensitivity over the timing of the release of preliminary statement. Some groups make this statement as soon as the reliability of the data is determined, others only after the results have been shared with the election commission. Typically, it will be released in the afternoon on the day after election day.
- **Final report** – provides your comprehensive findings and detailed analysis of all aspects of

the electoral processes observed, and is usually released weeks or months after the election. It should provide your final conclusions and recommendations.

You need to remember that:

- The findings should be accurate, objective and verifiable. Avoid statements that are based on speculation rather than concrete evidence. Provide analysis of findings and facts to support your analysis.
- If you do not use statistically based methods in your observation, your statement should NOT say that you are deploying your observers based on a statistically representative sample, and you CANNOT say that the findings are representative of the country or any region. You should mention that your observers are deployed in a geographically proportionate way, if that is the case, and you can give your findings as a percentage of “polling stations observed.” Any observation that is not using a statistically representative sample CANNOT project election results.
- Your statement should NOT solely focus on election day events.

NOTES

NOTES



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This guide was written for the West Africa Election Observers Network (WAEON) by Julia Brothers, Anastasia Soeryadinata Wibawa and Meghan Fenzel, with support from Ulrike Rodgers.

