"Small Small" -- Challenges and Lessons Learned in Integrating New Communication Strategies and Technology into West African Legislatures

I. Introduction

Around the world, civil society activists are increasingly adopting an ever-widening array of communications and technology tools to push governments to become more transparent, accountable, and responsive to citizen demands. Government institutions such as national legislatures, however, have been far less likely to engage in similar efforts. This is especially true in many developing democracies in West Africa, where limited human and financial resources, weak nationwide technology infrastructure and usage, and limited awareness of the benefits of such tools have historically prevented legislators and staff from utilizing technology to improve the efficiency and transparency of parliamentary operations. Yet in order to meet citizen expectations and respond to quickly-mounting pressure for greater responsiveness, legislatures in the region – and international partners seeking to deliver information and communications technology (ICT) tools and practices in democracy support programming – will need to make concerted efforts to more ably integrate technology into governance processes in the immediate term.

NDI's experience in supporting legislative modernization efforts in West Africa has yielded several important lessons regarding how to successfully -- if incrementally -- roll out communications tools and technology improvements in legislatures in the region. In some ways, these lessons can be encapsulated by the Liberian expression of "small small" – meaning improving slowly, but surely. By working closely over time with legislatures to identify the necessary resources, design "right-sized" tools to fit country circumstances, and raise awareness among legislators and citizens alike, NDI has found that modernization efforts can have dramatic impacts on legislative openness and accountability. At the same time, future programs seeking to improve the use of technology in legislatures in developing countries should bear in mind some of the challenges NDI has encountered thus far in its work in the region thus far and adapt programs accordingly.

II. West African legislatures and the use of technology – the challenge of change

The challenges facing West African legislatures and democracy support programs in the region that include technology components are multifaceted, but not insurmountable. The challenges below, while certainly not an exhaustive list nor applicable to each unique country in the region, represent a broad cross-section of common barriers encountered by NDI in its work in the region in the last decade:

- **Human resources:** Many legislatures in developing West African countries do not have significant resources for permanent staff, much less staff with specialized technology skills. In Mali, for example, with support from NDI and a local consultant, a beta version of the National Assembly's (*Assemblée Nationale* – AN) website was completed fairly quickly. However, the AN struggled to identify a qualified webmaster from within its ranks who would be able to maintain the site and activate it as a tool for receiving and responding to public comments. In other instances, existing communications staff may only have experience working with outdated technology or have limited familiarity with the broad range of communications technology

available today. NDI and its partners within the Liberian legislature found the existing communications team to have a solid command of communication strategies using radio, but to have little familiarity with the next-generation communications tools that the team planned to roll out as part of a planned communications strategy overhaul and technology improvement upgrade.

Legislators are more likely to be older, and not part of the younger generation that better understands technology innovations and recognizes their benefits. Beyond support staff capacity, a primary challenge is often rooted in achieving senior leadership buy-in to the communications and technology components of legislative strengthening programs. Finally, due to a limited understanding of the skills required to manage communications and technology efforts and the importance of doing so, familiarity with ICT is rarely prioritized when making human resource decisions. In the legislative hiring process, which is often very politicized and subject to nepotism and other similar pressures, it becomes even harder to hire qualified individuals with such a specialized and hard-to-find skillset.

- **Financial and administrative resources:** Cash-strapped legislatures in developing countries often don't view communications and technology as a top priority amidst other competing and equally urgent demands. In Liberia, the legislature struggled to find office space for an expanded IT staff, pay its Internet bills, and dedicate resources for installing wireless access hotspots in the legislature itself. In Mali, legislators were reluctant to embrace the development of a legislative website due to expressed concerns about the costs of hosting and maintaining the site.

- **Challenges inherent in working with legislatures:** Certain legislature-specific challenges exist that can inhibit technological and communications enhancements and the long-term success of programs that seek to do so. For example, the stop-and-go nature of legislative schedules, which often have long intersessions in which legislators return to their home districts, can make continuous support difficult and momentum difficult to generate. In countries with high rates of legislative turnover and/or relatively short legislative terms, this challenge is further exacerbated and institutional memory is difficult to maintain. Moreover, legislatures are, at their cores, political entities. Invariably, political disagreement can - and often does - spill over into "neutral" areas such as setting up an email system for the legislature, or in drafting the introductory text for a legislature's website. This is particularly pertinent when thinking about the long-term sustainability of a program that might be identified as a "win" for one side or the other. The democracy support community also needs to anticipate and recognize the unintended consequences and protection of vested interests that may go hand-in-hand with efforts to enhance transparency and accountability using technology. For example, certain legislatures have been markedly slow to embrace tools that publicize voting records and attendance due to the enhanced public scrutiny that would ensue.

III. "Small small" changes, potential for large impact -- success stories and lessons learned

NDI has worked with national and regional legislatures around the world for decades, and in the last fifteen years has been increasingly assisting legislatures to adopt cutting-edge communications and

technology tools. Anticipating that democracy support programs will increasingly include a technology component, the Institute and other likeminded organizations must seek to collect, consolidate, and share lessons learned in order to enhance the chances of success of similar efforts in the coming months and years.

- **Seek to generate political will and identify internal champions:** An effective technology component of a legislative support program requires strong professional relationships with unwavering support and buy-in from senior leadership. NDI has found that identifying a few forward-leaning legislators or staff and then using them to sell the project internally can be instrumental in generating broad and genuine political will for the project's implementation and ensuing organizational changes. To this end, relationships are critical, and the Institute has regularly benefited from its longstanding working relationships with legislators that undoubtedly facilitated the implementation of these programs. In bicameral legislatures, members and staff with connections across the two legislative bodies have also been paramount to successful program implementation.

  At a perceived impasse in identifying office space for new IT staff within the Liberian legislature, an influential committee head was able to solve the problem by suggesting that the new staffers utilize a little-known office space that had previously been used to run the legislature's phone system before that equipment was destroyed during the country's civil war.[1] In Nigeria, legislators opted to form a Joint IT Committee as a signal of their unified support for the technological improvements that were a component of NDI's broader legislative strengthening program. The Nigerian legislators' enthusiasm was partially generated via two study visits to the South African Parliament, in which they witnessed first-hand the benefits of a modern IT system and learned directly from their South African counterparts how such technological upgrades enhanced the parliament's lawmaking capacity.

  In identifying internal champions, it can be helpful to highlight the advantages – electoral and political alike – of being able to more effectively communicate with constituents and draw attention to the important accomplishments of the legislature. In some instances, it has also helped to appeal to legislators by recognizing the prestigious nature of their jobs and institutions, arguing that outward-facing technological applications such as email addresses and websites should reflect this prestige.

- **Design right-sized solutions, appropriate for context:** It's quite often the case that the flashiest, newest solution isn't the right one for legislatures in West Africa. A more moderate change can be more motivating, generate quick interest, and represent a "quick win" upon which momentum can be built for further improvements. For example, when starting from scratch in designing a bill tracking system for the Liberian legislature (the legislature previously had no such system in place), NDI and its partners decided against a more sophisticated system and opted to use Excel, a bulletin board, file folders, and the legislature's few existing computers to

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[1] "Where There's Organizational Will, There's a Way: Liberian Legislative Tech Modernization II." Available: http://www.demworks.org/blog/2012/09/where-theres-organizational-will-theres-way-liberian-legislative-tech-modernization-ii.

monitor the review, editing, and finalization process of draft legislation. This wasn't necessarily the most advanced solution that the team could have designed – but it was the right one for Liberia at that given point in time and, according to NDI program staff, "had a profound impact on (improving) citizen's access to information and on the ability of the staff to do their work."[2] Similarly, communication strategies desired by legislatures, but that may not currently reach the average citizen, such as interactive legislative websites, should be complemented with other outreach efforts. The use of Freedom Fone, a technology that enables automated, interactive, audio information to be accessed and shared via mobile phone networks[3] and the introduction of a "Legislative Spotlight" radio program in Liberia are good examples of type of technology "right-sizing" in legislative strengthening programs.

- **Pursue long term, comprehensive programs for more sustainable results:** As with other types of democracy support programming, NDI has found that its long-term, comprehensive programs that include ICT components far outperform smaller, more piecemeal efforts. This is especially true in the case of technology-enabled programs, which may require longer timeframes in order to address the multifaceted human, financial, and technological resources challenges described above. In Nigeria, NDI has been able to provide nearly continuous support to the National Assembly over the course of a decade, allowing for IT modernization efforts and communication strategies to be institutionalized and endure through several different legislatures. Similarly, in Liberia, NDI had the latitude and flexibility to design, implement, and coach legislators and legislative staff over the course of several years.[4] In Mali, a six-month program that aimed to improve the legislature's ability to communicate with citizens via the reactivation of the AN's website was difficult to implement, not as effective as a broader effort to strengthen citizen-government interaction through a range of different ICT innovations, and led to less sustainable results.

- **Recognize limitations and design support programs accordingly:** It is important to recognize that technology should merely be one part of a broader legislative strengthening program, and that the integration of more sophisticated communications and technology tools into a legislature's operations will never be a cure-all for its challenges. Rather, it is only when appropriately sequenced and incorporated into ongoing legislative proceedings that such changes will be effective and sustainable. In fact, one of the very first steps that legislatures should take – well before beginning technology modernization efforts or rolling out new communication tools – is the drafting of a strategic plan for the short, medium, and long-terms. At that point, legislative leaders and partners can consider how to use appropriate ICTs to facilitate the implementation of this plan.

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[2] "Small Small" Improvements to Liberian Bill Tracking Improve Transparency." Available: http://www.ndi.org/small-small-improvements-Liberia. For more information on NDI's work with the Liberian legislature in creating a bill tracking system, see: http://demworks.org/blog/2011/02/pushing-envelope-envelopes-and-excel.

[3] For more information on Freedom Fone and its application around the world, please see: http://freedomfone.org/. NDI's work with the Liberian Legislature to utilize Freedom Fone technology was covered in the Liberia press at: http://allafrica.com/stories/201212172219.html.

[4] For a full description of the Liberian Legislature's modernization plan, in which NDI provided technical implementation assistance, please see: http://legislature.gov.lr/sites/default/files/Modernization_Plan_2009.pdf.

In Mali, for example, legislators requested that NDI offer skills-building sessions on the Global Legal Information Network (GLIN) and AGORA, two online tools for legislative research. However, legislators and their staff lacked basic skills on traditional legislative research, and the legislature very rarely introduces bills itself. Malian legislators do not have access to the Internet in their offices, and do not have computers provided by the legislature. To effectively use these tools, they would need to be preceded by more basic capacity building efforts on legislative drafting and research strategies and an initiative to properly equip the National Assembly facilities to enable the regular use of Internet-based applications. In Nigeria, where a lack of financial resources does not pose a challenge for the legislature, legislative leadership purchased a large amount of laptops and other high-tech equipment in an effort to improve the efficiency of internal operations. Yet upon arrival, this equipment lay unused in storage for months, untouched by legislators and staff who lacked the skills to use them and an interest in doing so. The purchase of equipment alone was not a fix for modernizing or automating the legislature. Although a necessary first step, it needed to be coupled with awareness-raising and skills-building within the legislature itself in order to be of use.

- **Consider a blend of material and technical support** – Although the provision of materials such as computers, wireless access points, and mobile phones is often frowned upon by the foreign aid community, such material support is often necessary for legislatures to internalize, recognize the benefits of, and sustain communication and technology improvements. Public-private partnerships could be enormously helpful to this end, with the private sector furnishing equipment and democracy support organizations providing capacity building and leveraging political relationships with legislatures in order to ensure that such equipment is effectively taken up and utilized to strengthen institutions and governance processes.

In its first-ever legislative support program with the National Assembly of Nigeria that began in 1998, NDI used program resources to equip the legislature with an 18-station National Assembly Research/Computer Center that still exists today. Once given these computers, the team trained legislators and staff on basic email communication, electronic file management, word processing, and Internet usage. With this combination of an initial material investment and subsequent capacity building efforts, NDI's impact was greatly enhanced and the program was made far more sustainable. Legislators were able to access email and the Internet on a regular basis, use the resource center to conduct legislative research, and eventually used their own resources to upgrade the equipment when it became necessary to do so. After having worked with the National Assembly to develop a legislative website (http://www.nassnig.org/), in 2007 NDI complemented this initial material support with technical support to conduct a survey of website users. At the legislature's request, the Institute then suggested ways in which the National Assembly could modify the website to more effectively facilitate information exchange, promote deliberation on issues of national or regional priority, and encourage the full participation of citizens in legislative debates.

In a departure from NDI's previous modes of engagement with the Liberian legislature, the Institute agreed to pay for 70 percent of the costs associated with installing wireless hotspots in the Liberian legislature, with the Liberians covering the remaining 30 percent. Recognizing the

limited resources at the legislature's disposal, the Institute nonetheless asked that the legislature demonstrate its buy-in to the project by providing a feasible contribution of its own funds to support the project.

- **Understand that information only goes so far:** The greater disclosure of information on parliamentary operations and activity is only as useful as civil society's ability to use this information, analyze it, and push for change as a result. For example, in countries with very limited internet penetration, an equally important effort would need to be made to raise awareness of legislative websites and how to use them as tools for direct interaction with the legislature. This year, NDI plans to launch a program in Liberia to strengthen citizen awareness of legislative modernization efforts and build grassroots demand for continued efforts to enhance legislative transparency and accountability.

- **Beware of a limited capacity to respond:** Last but not least, as the democracy support community increasingly includes ICT components in its legislative strengthening programs in West Africa and beyond, it is important to bear in mind that technological improvements should reinforce institutions -- not undermine them. If citizens receive greater opportunity for dialogue with legislators, they could easily be disappointed and become more skeptical of government if legislators are not feasibly able to respond to feedback and address their concerns. Similarly, the disclosure of information on legislative proceedings that exposes, for example, a high rate of absenteeism for floor votes, could fuel public skepticism and disillusionment regarding democratic processes. Before undertaking initiatives to facilitate citizen-legislative interaction and enhance transparency in legislative operations, legislatures and their partners should carefully consider their ability to meet citizen expectations and sufficiently react to feedback, or to take immediate corrective measures to address weaknesses that may be revealed.

IV. Conclusion

Democracy support programs that aim to utilize innovative ICT tools and strategies to strengthen legislative transparency, accountability, and effectiveness do not fit squarely into the mold of traditional legislative strengthening programs. As such, the democracy support community and its partners need to consider the unique nature of these types of programs to ensure that the benefits of ICT tools are understood, internalized, and appropriately rolled out to strengthen government institutions in sometimes already-fragile country contexts. To address the multifaceted human, financial, and technical challenges involved in modernizing legislatures in developing countries in West Africa and beyond, new modes of partnership and assistance would need to be considered. This would include dual-track material and capacity building support, programs that build legislative capacity and awareness while concurrently building citizen ability to take advantage of enhanced transparency measures, and long-term programs that facilitate the building of institutional practices and transcend political boundaries.