



CIVIC UPDATE

SEPTEMBER 2012



A Publication of the Citizen Participation Team

Public Opinion Research

Welcome to this issue of Civic Update!

This issue focuses on the use of public opinion research in citizen participation programs. NDI has grown to view public opinion research as valuable tool for informing program decisions and informing political leaders, civic activists and other actors in a variety of development settings. In situations of political uncertainty, structured research provides practical insight when reliable, relevant information is otherwise unavailable. When political environments are more stable, public opinion research helps NDI and its partners to understand what might be stirring or obstructing the winds of political change. In other instances when elite views are disproportionately loud, public opinion research supplies the views of citizens. The use of focus group research can also help NDI better position itself as a knowledgeable and practical provider of assistance to democratic reformers.

NDI believes that surveys, focus group and interviews can help bring citizens voices into the policy-making process. Although research is not a substitute for constituency outreach by elected leaders or the organized political participation of citizens, NDI can use it to help those in power begin considering citizen input and help demonstrate the value of citizens freely expressing opinions and concerns.

There are two main types of public opinion research—qualitative and quantitative. Surveys and polls are a type of quantitative research that involve asking a large number of people a specific set of close-ended questions. With proper sampling and analysis, quantitative research allows us to generate percentages and make predictions. Qualitative research, unlike quantitative, does not use statistical

methods as the primary means to gather and sort information. Instead, qualitative research is marked by observations and words to describe opinions and attitudes. Focus groups and key-informant interviews are qualitative research methods often used by NDI.

In incorporating research into NDI programs, certain considerations must be made to determine the most appropriate data collection methodology for the desired use of the information to be gathered. Questions of available resources, nuances of the cultural/ethnic/political context of the environment, and target audience all come into play. This update describes these and other considerations that should be taken into account when planning to conduct public opinion research.

As always, comments on this Civic Update are encouraged.

Aaron Azelton, Director

Inside This Issue

Introduction	1
Types of Research and Data Collection Methodologies	2
Focus Group Study Design: Determining the Number of Discussion Groups	5
Using Research to Inform Program Design and Implementation	6
Using Research to Enhance Local Partner Advocacy Initiatives	9
Team Update and Additional Resources	10

Types of Research and Data Collection Methodologies

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research



Quantitative research, such as surveys and polls, gathers information from a large, representative segment of a population, using random sampling and a pre-determined set of close-ended questions. All respondents are given the same battery of questions and the same choice of answers. When administered rigorously, quantitative research tools are statistically reliable and the results will reflect the general population. This type of research can help uncover a population's attitudes and opinions overall and can also be useful for extracting the views of various demographic sub-groups (by gender, age, socioeconomic class, geography, etc).

Qualitative research, such as focus groups and key-informant interviews, does not use statistical methods and the results cannot be generalized to the larger population. Rather, this type of research is generally conducted by asking open-ended questions that allow respondents to provide detailed opinions. The value of qualitative research is in the researcher's ability to draw out patterns and reveal not only *what* participants feel, but *how* they formulate their opinions and *why* they arrive at certain conclusions. Focus groups and interviews can be valuable tools for understanding political and social contexts, since they provide a richer assessment of citizens' thoughts that quantitative research alone cannot reveal. Qualitative research cannot be used in place of quantitative research, however, because they lack random or representative selection of respondents and are not as rigorously conducted to be made statistically precise.

NDI occasionally uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative research in its programs (a "mixed methods" approach). The strengths of each method can complement and enhance the results of the other. For instance, initial focus group research may guide researchers in designing large-scale surveys, by providing the appropriate language or the key issues that concern citizens. Conversely, focus groups and interviews can be used *after* quantitative research, to investigate survey or polling results in depth. An example of this mixed-method approach is the Benchmark Democracy Surveys conducted by NDI in the Latin America region since 2005. In these cases, NDI used the research results to inform program design and assist with evaluating change over time.



Focus group conducted by Lesson Learnt Consultation LLC in Balkh, Afghanistan on opinions on the Afghan elections

Another example of this mixed methods approach is Iraq. Since 2010, NDI has partnered with an international research firm to conduct a series of five nation-wide surveys in Iraq, three of which were paired with focus groups. A large-scale survey was necessary in a complex environment such as Iraq, so that NDI staff could pull apart information about the various demographic categories, including gender, age, geography, education, income, religion, etc. In order to identify citizen priorities, NDI staff first conducted focus groups and used the research to narrow down the various topics that would comprise the surveys. In this case, carrying out the focus groups first helped staff understand how citizens talk about certain topics, so that issues could be framed accordingly in the follow-on surveys. NDI used the research findings to help political parties craft informed messages and develop long-term policy solutions that would speak to citizens' priorities; therefore, preliminary qualitative research was ideal for capturing citizens' sentiments. In the case of Iraq, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods allowed NDI and local partners to gain a more nuanced understanding of citizen opinions.



Iraqi citizens contemplate a political advertisement poster

“Formal” vs “Informal” Research

Formal research incorporates established methodologies and structured tools to collect data in a systematic, objective manner. The research adheres to a set of accepted standards to ensure that the data is reliable. For this type of research, NDI and its partners often engage experienced researchers or research firms to oversee the research design, data collection and analysis. Informal research, on the other hand, involves less rigorous research design, data collection and analysis. This type of process might be used when NDI is helping a local group become more comfortable reaching out to citizens, or when trying to get a general sense of community priorities when setting the agenda for a public forum.



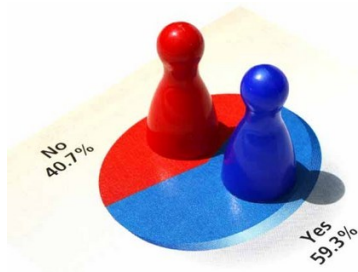
Polling results press conference in Tbilisi, Georgia



Polling results presentation in Salahuddin province, Iraq

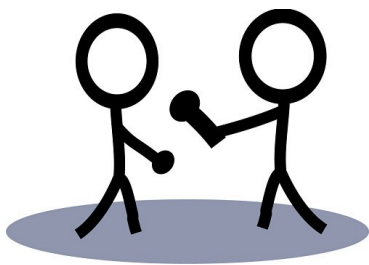
Public Opinion Research Methods

Surveys: A survey is a quantitative method, typically involving a set of close-ended questions that reveal the attitudes and opinions of a specific sample of the population. Survey questions tend to be very specific and are designed to draw out detailed information from participants, so that the results offer an in-depth, nuanced representation of public opinion. The design and implementation of surveys can allow researchers to determine the mood and priorities of the population, reveal attitudes towards public policies, or develop messages.



Polls: Public opinion polls are quantitative, issue-oriented tools which involve short, simplified questionnaires that track the population's views on social and political topics. This is a popular method applied during election periods, because it offers a quick snapshot of current opinions. While the feedback from polls undergoes a process of analysis and presentation similar to surveys, the results are more often used to gauge public opinion in the short run rather than generate overarching predictions for the future.

Focus Groups: Focus group research is a qualitative method that involves a series of carefully designed discussions facilitated by a moderator within small, targeted groups (typically comprised of six to ten people). Groups are homogeneous and are selected based on common demographic features or collective experiences. They are developed to facilitate conversations in comfortable environments that will allow participants to openly express their views through discussion of open-ended questions.



Interviews: An interview is a qualitative research method conducted as a one-on-one interaction through which a set of questions is presented to individual participants. Unlike focus groups, this method creates an environment of trust in which the participants may explore their thoughts on a deeper level, and where the interviewer may pay closer attention to non-verbal cues and facial expressions. Interviews are particularly useful when participants have limited political space, are less likely to respond frankly in a group setting, or require strict confidentiality.

Benchmark Surveys: Benchmark surveys are conducted by NDI during the initial stages of a program to identify democracy deficits, allow for the measurement of progress and success over time, and determine the most appropriate avenues for intervention. These surveys also reveal potential barriers to political participation and areas that can be targeted within programs. Additionally, they provide initial diagnostic evidence about democratic conditions in areas where reliable information is absent or not easily obtained. Often times, the collection of data at regular intervals can be useful for program evaluation. Changes in public attitudes and increased collaboration among key actors can serve as an indication of program impact. Although benchmark surveys are more widely used in other fields to determine baseline information, this tool is gaining increasing attention in the democracy development field for the purpose of evaluating determinants of democratic change. The surveys are usually conducted at intervals, using random sample surveys and face-to-face interviews in collaboration with the local partner.

Focus Group Study Design: Determining the Number of Discussion Groups

By Traci Cook

The beginning point for determining how many discussion groups are needed is to first clearly define the objectives of the study. Is it the purpose of the study to test messages or materials? Is it a study meant to explore opinions about a particular intervention? Or is it a study to better understand the reasons behind current political dynamics and attitudes? If, for example, the objective is to test messages or materials, then only a few discussion groups may be needed (with the demographic composition of those groups reflecting the intended recipients of the messages/materials) if the reactions to those messages and materials are likely to be similar across the intended audience. A study that is looking at general opinion on political topics may require more discussion groups because a diversity of opinion on issues included in the study may exist across the population that is of interest.

In some cases, the universe of potential participants is relatively small as was with case in a 2011 Ugandan focus group study that was designed only to investigate the user experience of an NDI-supported crowdsourcing mechanism. Other examples of studies that would have a limited universe are those focused on a particular demographic, like urban youth. A limited universe of potential participants can reduce the number of needed discussion groups. If, however, the universe of potential participants is a country's general population, more discussion groups may be needed, depending on the study's objective. Some societies are relatively homogenous, but many in which NDI works are extremely heterogeneous with numerous ethnic, geographic, religious, age, income, political party affiliation, or other divisions. At times, it is not culturally or politically possible to mix participants within a group across a divide. Before the independence referendum in Sudan, for example, it would have been unwise, and perhaps insecure, to include Christians and Muslims in the same discussion groups; therefore, it was necessary to organize separate discussion groups with participants from each religion. Another issue that almost always arises when designing a focus group study in NDI operating environments is whether men and women can be included in the same discussion groups. Often the answer is no, because women are less likely in many cultures to share their true opinions in the presence of men. In those cases, separate groups have to be held with men and women, which may increase or even double the number of discussion groups, depending on the objective of the study. In many African and other countries, it would not be appropriate to do a study exploring general political opinion with only urban discussion groups, since the rural population is often greater and can have vastly differing views. Likewise, many countries have significant ethnic and/or geographic divides that require discussion groups be held in the different geographic or ethnic regions, given the likelihood opinion will differ in those regions.

Even if mixing participants among divides such as gender or age is possible, you will need to consider what voices you want to represent in the study's findings. If you want to highlight youth opinion, for example, then you will need to ensure that there are enough discussion groups comprised of only youth participants to justify that. While in theory you could discern youth opinion if older participants are included in the same discussion groups, it is very difficult to accomplish with the limitations we often face in the field, including the lack of sophisticated video facilities and often lower moderator quality. Many other factors may contribute to determining the appropriate number of discussion groups. One is audience. To whom are the results of the study aimed? Considering this question will help you think through the optics of the study. Often the first question asked at a focus group study findings presentation is why a certain

Traci Cook has served for over five years as a Senior Advisor for NDI, designing and conducting numerous research studies and public opinion research polls across Southern and East Africa, including Mozambique, Sudan, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Traci acted as the Country Director for NDI's South Sudan program in 2010 and early 2011, where she led all Institute program activities, including civic education efforts, domestic observation of the elections and South Sudan Referendum and public opinion research.

area or a certain group wasn't included. The optimal number of discussion groups should not be determined by a desire to please, but the perception of the study's fairness is important, especially with political party and other political actor audiences.

Key Questions for Determining the Number of Discussion Groups in a Focus Group Study

- What is/are the objective(s) of the study?
- What is the population universe that is to be included in the study?
- What type of people do we want to participate (give their opinions) in the study?
- What are the key divisions within the country where opinion is likely to differ on the covered subject matter?
- What is the intended geographic reach of the fieldwork for the study?
- What categories of participants, if any, will the study need to report conclusions about – i.e., will findings from participants as a whole be presented or will findings from categories of participants (i.e., youth or women) be presented as well?
- Who is/are the primary audience(s) for the results of the study?

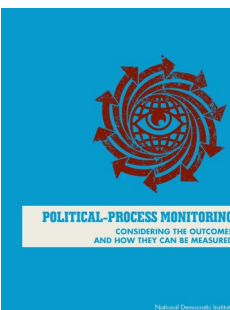
Using Research to Inform Program Design and Implementation

NDI utilizes public opinion research as a tool to inform the development of its programs, including program design, start-up, and implementation. Research can contribute to the initial phase of a program by providing a preliminary assessment of a country's current social and political landscape, and by giving NDI and local partners information on citizen needs and concerns. This information helps NDI teams to identify democratic deficits and tailor technical assistance to political parties, civil society organizations, and government institutions. For example, benchmark surveys have been conducted in Central America since 2005 as a diagnostic tool to assess citizens' understanding of democracy, and to identify democracy deficits and surpluses. In 2007, benchmark democracy surveys in Guatemala revealed information about the marginalization of indigenous groups that challenged conventional wisdom and refocused NDI's efforts to areas that required the most support for democratic change. Prior to the study, the public believed that the 22 indigenous communities in the country had segregated themselves and expressed little interest in formal political participation. The survey results suggested, however, that the relatively low electoral participation rates among these communities resulted from institutional barriers rather than a lack of interest. The find-

ings shaped NDI's programs by leading to the removal of these barriers as a key objective.

Public opinion research can also be used to evaluate and adjust NDI programs. Surveys, focus groups, or interviews can be carried out to ascertain whether programs are achieving the desired outcomes, as well as to uncover areas that should receive more attention.

The Citizen Participation team recently released the guide [“Political Process Monitoring: Considering the Outcomes and How They Can Be Measured”](#), which presents approaches for identifying and measuring political-process monitoring outcomes. The Citizen Participation team designed a research process that involved key-

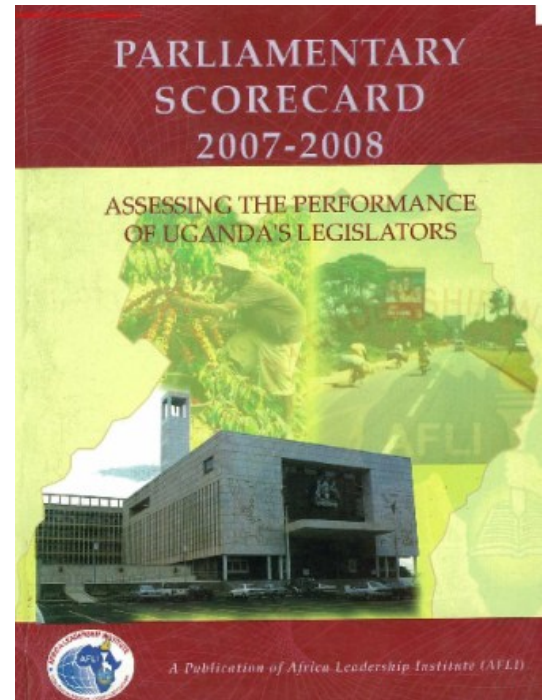


informant interviews and focus-group discussions with NDI staff members, local monitoring groups and other key informants operating in Burkina Faso, Indonesia, Jordan, and Zimbabwe. NDI researchers analyzed the information and drafted a case study for each country. The research helped pinpoint changes in the level of citizen voice, political space and government account-

(Continued on page 7)

ability that resulted from political process monitoring. When trying to determine whether support for political-process monitoring is a possible or practical way to deepen democracy in a given circumstance, the findings will offer NDI staff members and other assistance providers with a useful point of reference when making these decisions. It can also be used to help frame objectives, set realistic expectations and develop participatory methods to measure results.

From 2008-2011, a research team from Columbia and Stanford Universities, in partnership with the Africa Leadership Institute (ALI), used surveys to measure the impact of parliamentary scorecards that were being used by NDI-supported civic groups to monitor the performance of Ugandan members of parliament (MPs). The purpose was to determine whether greater transparency resulting from the monitoring reports actually lead to an increase in government accountability. The research team performed random controlled trials with a selected number of MPs. Random controlled trials are studies that are often used to measure specific interventions by randomly assigning study subjects to either an intervention group or a control group. The most interesting findings were that, while Ugandan voters were strongly receptive to new information about their MPs' performance, there was little evidence that MPs changed their behavior as a consequence of higher transparency, or that information on their performance influenced their re-elections. The information gathered in this study provided the opportunity to analyze various aspects of the program, including the dissemination and publication of scorecards, relevance of the information in the scorecards, and the impact of the expected margin of victory of political parties on the importance they place on the scorecards. This analysis is very useful in determining the considerations that should be taken into account when designing an MP scorecard program in the future, whether in Uganda or in another political context.



More recently, NDI conducted six rounds of focus groups (each including 12) in Tunisia to better understand citizens' attitudes towards the political transition immediately following the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. Since public opinion research on political attitudes was prohibited under Ben Ali's rule, the information gleaned from the first round of focus group was unprecedented.

In addition to helping NDI better design program interventions, the Tunisian research has provided political and civic leaders with objective information about citizens' expectations during critical first steps of the country's political transition. As a result, the research influenced political leaders' thinking and decision making, and encouraged more pluralistic leadership. One tangible result was the current coalition government's definitive steps towards addressing grievances by publicly considering the removal of ministers who citizens perceived to be under-performing.

The research results from NDI's first round of research, conducted in March 2011, provided baseline information that has been used to guide and inform the five subsequent rounds of research. The Institute will continue quarterly rounds of research to provide an assessment of ongoing challenges and barriers to democratic development. As has been the case in other countries, the research series has also helped NDI gain access to political leaders, donors and other opinion leaders in the country.



Focus groups with Tunisian youth

Public opinion research is frequently shared with local partners including government officials, political leadership, civil society and the media to stimulate discussions about development efforts and the country's political future. Often, programs focus on encouraging elected officials and party leaders to pay closer attention to their constituents' needs and incorporate the research findings into their platforms, policies, and messages. Alongside this benefit for political parties, the dissemination of research can provide a foundation for dialogue and action among citizens and encourage CSO partners to collaborate and build coalitions. Following its most recent round of focus group research in Tunisia, NDI partnered with

two CSOs who organized public roundtables throughout the country. The roundtables, which commenced with a presentation by NDI staff on the research findings, were designed to raise awareness about democratic principles and offer citizens at the local level the opportunity to discuss together their priorities. Each organization agreed to plan three round tables with civic activists and political party leaders. As result of their collaboration, local civic activists and political party leaders have become eager for more public opinion information. Discussions about the data enabled them to refer to real-life examples in their messages, rather than reference common issues in vague terms. This increases the credibility of citizens' voices when advocating for specific reforms or attention to a set of issues and sets the stage for a more collaborative relationship with political leaders. Citizens are also better able to convince decisionmakers of the benefits to addressing certain issue areas if public opinion research demonstrates the importance of that issue among the general population.

"The role of public opinion research in informing Tunisian political leadership of citizen aspirations in the first year of the country's transition to a genuine democracy was significant. Through focus groups, NDI was able to present untested politicians with objective information about what motivated potential voters, in their own words, and how these citizens evaluated political options in the run-up to the country's first democratic elections. In this context, public opinion research not only helped inform politicians vying for votes, but also instilled the value of taking citizens' interest into consideration when developing political visions - a critical facet of building a young democracy." —Nicole Rowsell, NDI Tunisia Country Director

Similarly, as part of the Institute's political party development initiative in Libya, NDI conducted focus group research in April 2012 to capture citizens' attitudes and concerns about the political transition during the aftermath of the 2011 overthrow of the Gaddafi regime. The research, which was carried out two months prior to elections for the General National Congress, sought to uncover citizens' expectations about the upcoming elections, their attitudes towards the performance of political parties and the interim government, and their perceptions about how the electoral process is unfolding. Through presentations of the findings, political parties were introduced to the value of qualitative public opinion research, which was prohibited under the former government. NDI briefed parties on the data collection methodology, the significance of the findings, and how each party could make use of the information to strengthen their campaigns. Briefings of the research results were held for members of the election commission and the national transitional council as well, and the findings were sent to all of NDI's CSO partners. NDI received much positive feedback from partners as a result of these initiatives, including requests for similar activities in the future. Some political parties took measurable actions to address the negative feedback that they had received from citizens. For example, when one party learned from the research findings that it was considered to be out-of-touch with the youth population, its members reached out to young Libyans by hosting discussions on Twitter where individuals could directly engage and ask questions. NDI programming can use this type of increased willingness to engage with citizens on the part of decisionmakers following formal research to assist civil society leaders in reaching out and setting new precedents for political party engagement with citizens.



Focus groups with Libyan women

Using Research to Enhance Local Partner Advocacy Initiatives

Often, NDI works with local partners to conduct public opinion research. The research may be used by partners to develop initiatives such as petitions, to test policies, messages, and outreach methods, or to uncover new avenues for partnership or advocacy. In the past, NDI has facilitated discussions with civic leaders, political parties, and CSOs who wished to develop their in-house capacity to conduct research. Through technical trainings and discussions, NDI offers the knowledge necessary for partners to be able to develop and implement their own research. For example, NDI assisted the National Platform for Angolan Civil Society in Elections (National Platform) to build its capacity to develop strategies for domestic nonpartisan observation prior to legislative elections in 2008 with support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. NDI's objective was to enhance the transparency and inclusivity of voter registration by strengthening the National Platform's capacity to monitor and coordinate the observation of the voter registration process. Surveys collected information regarding citizens' perceptions of the voter registration process and whether people felt that they had access. NDI provided training and consultations to four local electoral observation member groups of the National Platform to enable them to conduct surveys independently. With NDI's technical assistance, the National Platform prepared detailed reports on its voter registration observations and disseminated the information to the media, the public, election authorities, and the international community. The surveys serve as an example of informal research. NDI did not employ a major research firm to conduct the surveys, but rather trained the local network to produce their own surveys and reach out to citizens in municipalities throughout the country. They provided sufficient information about citizens' views on the voter registration process to allow the Platform to develop a report that formed the bases for discussion with election officials.

NDI also trains local partners to interpret research and apply it in their activities. Partners should learn the challenges associated with public opinion research, as well as the advantages of having credible data to substantiate their work. From 2011-2012, NDI used public opinion polling in Ukraine to assist a coalition of civic groups to develop targeted messages for a nationwide petition drive and advocacy campaign to protect the right of freedom of assembly. NDI trained the coalition on how to analyze polling results and use the data to test potential campaign messages. In collaboration with the U.S.-based firm Lake Research Partners (LRP) and local partner the Razumkov Center, NDI interviewed citizens about political issues and democracy concerns in Ukraine. When the polling verified that freedom of assembly was viewed as at-risk and important to citizens, NDI and LRP led the coalition to use the data to develop language for their petition, and messages that would attract long-term supporters. For example, the coalition was able to use language about the "right to peaceful protest", which proved to resonate most strongly with citizens. The Institute included coalition members in the planning stages prior to the polling, and during analysis and presentation of the results. NDI noted that the groups increased their understanding of effective polling and how to extract information. Including a civil society partner during the planning and implementation stages of data collection gives them the skills to be able to conduct similar research



Civic groups defending the right to public protest staged a rally at the gates of the Ukrainian parliament calling for improvements to the pending freedom of assembly law.



NATIONAL
DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTE

Civic Update

is a production of
NDI's Citizen Participation
Team.

Please send comments
or suggestions on the
Civic Update to
Kent Fogg at
kfogg@ndi.org

For questions on public
opinion research, contact
Koebel Price at
kprice@ndi.org

Editors

Aaron Azelton
Kent Fogg
Kourtney Pompei

Writers

Aaron Azelton
Kent Fogg
Sarah Amin

The Citizen Participation
Team thanks all
the DC and field
staff members who
provided assistance
in compiling this issue

Additional Resources

- Tracking Democracy: Benchmark surveys for diagnostics, program design and evaluation, NDI
http://www.ndi.org/files/Tracking_Democracy_Benchmark_Survey.pdf
- From Proposal to Presentation: The Quantitative Research Process at NDI
- From Proposal to Presentation: The Focus Group Process at NDI
- Performance Monitoring and Evaluation TIPS, USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation
http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABS541.pdf
- Introduction to Qualitative Research: Focus groups and Interviews, NDI Morocco Focus group Training, February 2003
- Focus Groups: A Tool for Any Season, Civic Update, Citizen Participation Team, May 2003

CP Team Update

Theory of Change Map

The Theory of Change Map is an interactive presentation that reflects NDI's understanding of the relationship between citizen participation and democratization. It highlights the instrumental role that participation plays in transforming political practices and deepening democracy through NDI-supported initiatives that impact citizen voice, political space and government accountability. The Theory of Change Map is available on the Citizen Participation portal site.

New Additions

Josh McCrain is a Project Assistant on the Citizen Participation team. He received his B.A. in Political Science and Contemporary European Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2011. He is currently completing a Master of Arts from UNC Chapel Hill in Contemporary European Politics, and his thesis is an examination of the role of the European Union in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. He has traveled extensively throughout Europe and has lived in Italy and the Czech Republic.

Sarah Amin joined the Citizen Participation team as a Project Assistant in May. She completed her bachelor's degree at Dickinson College in International Studies with a focus on Human Security and Globalization. She recently received her Master's in International Affairs from American University's School of International Service with a focus on Human Rights, Disability, and Gender. She is particularly interested in international disability rights and the acculturation of international human rights norms.