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**Final Report**  
**HAITI Elections**  
**IFES Subgrant Agreement No 521-0254-A-00-5109-AA**  
**January 1997 to March 1998**

**I. SUMMARY**

During the period leading up to the 1997 legislative elections in Haiti, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) recognized that Haitian citizens lacked the necessary knowledge to participate in the campaign process and polling in an informed manner. To address this fundamental problem, NDI launched a program to facilitate the broad dissemination of electoral information to the public through the reopening of the Electoral Information Center (EIC) in Port-au-Prince. Beginning in January 1997, the Center served as the base of operations for NDI's civic and voter education activities and as a neutral forum for all of Haiti's electoral actors to exchange information and ideas.

NDI conducted numerous seminars, discussions and debates at the EIC on topics such as the electoral process, decentralization, candidate platforms, women's participation in the political process and the role of journalists in a democracy. These events inspired interest in and discussion of the elections and their importance in the broader political context. The women's program brought various civic groups together and led to plans for joint follow-up programs by these organizations. In addition, journalists who participated in the training program at the EIC were able to incorporate the investigation and interview techniques, which they learned at the seminar, in their daily reporting.

Unfortunately, the April 1997 elections were marked by widespread irregularities and a lack of transparency at all levels of the electoral process. The resulting political impasse caused the second round runoff elections to be postponed indefinitely, increasing Haitian cynicism and decreasing confidence in the political system. NDI reacted to this climate of crisis and pessimism by designing a program to teach democratic principles and promote participation in the political process. Beginning in October 1997, NDI's Haiti team initiated a series of Civic Forum discussion groups in the West and Grand'Anse departments. Positive reactions from the participants, high attendance rates and a growing demand for more civic forums suggest the discussion groups are having a significant impact in Haiti. Based on the success of the first six months of the program, NDI sought and received additional funding from USAID to continue and expand the Civic Forum program in Haiti.



## II. BACKGROUND

In the last decade, the Haitian people have taken important steps to overcome a long history of authoritarian rule and embark on a transition toward democracy. Beginning with the overthrow of the Duvalier dynasty in 1986, through the election of President Aristide, the coup regime and the 1995 to 1997 cycle of elections, Haitians have made significant progress toward democratization. However, throughout these struggles, citizens have faced countless setbacks which, combined with pervasive economic hardship, have resulted in a growing sense of disillusionment and alienation from government institutions. This trend is evidenced by the high levels of voter abstention and popular protests stemming from the inability of political institutions to respond to the needs of citizens.

Haiti's April 1997 senatorial and local elections were to have completed the first cycle of democratic elections begun in 1990. Instead, the controversy surrounding the disputed results of the elections contributed to a political crisis that led to the June 9, 1997 resignation of Prime Minister Rosny Smarth and the refusal of the ruling Lavalas Political Organization (OPL) to recognize the election results or participate in subsequent rounds without the designation of a new electoral council. In light of these developments, and after consulting with numerous Haitian civic and political leaders, NDI concluded that the only cure for Haiti's stalled democratic development would be to revive the interest and involvement of Haitian citizens in the political process. To achieve this goal, citizens needed to gain a deeper understanding of the fundamental concepts of democracy and learn the skills needed to participate in the political process. NDI recognized that only armed with these skills could the Haitian public begin to influence government policy and hold their political leaders accountable.

NDI decided to launch a program structured according to the Civic Forum model, which the Institute has successfully implemented in other areas of the world. This model incorporates a series of community discussion groups designed to teach democratic principles and promote participation in the political process. The forums are established through cooperation with local civic organizations and led by local moderators. This ultimately strengthens civil society while transferring skills to local groups, who are then capable of independently conducting similar activities in the future.

The Civic Forum format is particularly well-adapted to a place such as Haiti, where in recent years civil society groups have often filled political voids and met social welfare needs neglected by weak or underfunded government institutions. In many areas, Haitians place more trust in these entities -- which include professional associations and nongovernmental organizations -- than in the government. NDI has focused its efforts on providing assistance in the areas of civic education and strengthening civil society, since political institutions in the country have ceased to exist.

Haitian journalists have also played a positive and pivotal role during the period of democratic transition. Overcoming a history of repression and censorship, the print and electronic media have worked to provide a largely illiterate population with the information they need to make informed choices about elections and public issues and to encourage government accountability. In order to complement these efforts, NDI has encouraged the participation of journalists in the Civic Forum sessions and has maintained consistent contact with the media community in Haiti throughout the program.

### III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

#### Electoral Information Center (EIC)

The EIC was inaugurated on January 21, 1997, with an orientation to the Center for Haitian journalists. Throughout the pre-election period, the Center was connected through telephone lines to 14 radio stations in Port-au-Prince and to 36 stations in the nine provinces. The Center provided facilities for basic media production, press conferences, telephones, photocopying, transmission of meetings and messages to the local media. In addition, NDI sponsored seminars, debates and roundtable discussions at the EIC, as discussed below.

#### *Women's Roundtable*

Traditionally, Haitian women's participation in elections and in the political process has been dramatically lower than that of men. However, women's groups have recently increased their efforts to integrate women into Haitian political and business life. NDI recognized that encouraging and broadening the dialogue on women's participation would promote awareness of the importance of women's role in government, increase voter turnout and ultimately help to increase representation and access of women in government. With these goals in mind, on February 28, 1997, NDI cosponsored a roundtable discussion on women's participation in local and legislative government. NDI worked in collaboration with prominent women's nongovernmental organizations, female political party members and women's rights activists. The program was one of the first of its kind to take place in Haiti and brought together some of the most prominent women's activists and leaders in Haiti. Each participant covered a different aspect of women's participation. The lively discussion was broadcast over Haitian National Television (TNH) and replayed several times.

#### *Journalist Training Seminar*

NDI conducted a journalist training seminar at the EIC on March 13 and 14, 1997. The Institute targeted the Haitian media for civic education activities based on the success of NDI's activities with journalists during the 1995 elections. This experience indicated that civic education directed at journalists provides them with a more comprehensive picture of the electoral situation, resulting in more accurate, balanced electoral reporting. The effect of the training was subsequently multiplied through journalists' reports to the Haitian public. The March 1997 seminar built on the training NDI had provided at the EIC during the 1995 elections. NDI trainer and Argentine journalist Ana Baron, focused on journalists' unique role in a nascent democracy and basic investigative journalism techniques. She implemented an interactive format, using examples from daily life in Port-au-Prince to discuss the basic tenets of investigative journalism and interview techniques. Topics covered included government censorship versus journalists' self-censorship, the rights and obligations of journalists, and basic methodologies of conducting investigations and interviews.

## *Candidate Debates*

After the 1995 debate program sponsored by NDI, the Haitian electorate began to view debates as an integral part of the campaign period. Thus, at the end of March 1997, NDI co-sponsored a series of senatorial candidate debates with local radio stations in Les Cayes, Gonaives and Jacmel. The debates extended the Institute's program from interactive radio contact with the provinces via telephone lines to a more personal exchange. Despite the large number of senatorial candidates in each province, all of the candidates who wished to participate were invited to do so. Attendance at the debates ranged between 60 and 100. The debate format included presentations by the candidates and follow-up questions from the journalists, covering topics such as decentralization, judicial reform, public security, land reform, privatization and economic reform. The debates were also broadcast simultaneously to provincial radio stations and were covered by local television networks.

## **Civic Forum**

In October 1997, NDI began organizing Civic Forums in Haiti to provide citizens with the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to play an active role in democratic society. Managed by Haitian moderators, these two-hour forums have provided citizens with an opportunity to discuss the fundamental concepts of democracy, raise issues of concern and learn skills they can use to take part in the political system. The program seeks to provide citizens with the necessary skills to influence local and national policy and to hold their political leaders accountable. With these skills, Haitian citizens, who have traditionally been marginalized, are able to participate more actively in the political system.

To prepare for this program, NDI staff in Haiti spent several months researching issues of importance to Haitians, identifying potential civic partners, assessing public interest, and recruiting and training qualified moderators. Based on this research, NDI decided to establish forums in the communes of Leogane, Miragoâne, Petit Goâve and Grand Goâve, spanning the Grand'Anse and Western departments outside of Port-au-Prince. These sites were chosen for the program because of the large number and broad spectrum of grassroots organizations working in this politically polarized area. In October 1997, NDI developed a moderator guide as a reference document to be used in conducting the civic forums. It contains a description of the moderators' responsibilities, organizational and facilitation techniques, as well as outlines of the module contents. At the conclusion of the moderator training, NDI formally initiated the Civic Forum program in Haiti.

To reach diverse groups of citizens quickly and effectively, each discussion group was organized in cooperation with an existing community association. The program was carried out by NDI's expatriate field representative, two local program coordinators, and eight Civic Forum discussion moderators. Every five weeks, each moderator completed a circuit of discussion sessions with approximately 25 separate groups that each comprised about 25 participants. After visiting each group during the five-week cycle, the moderators returned to the same groups and introduced new information, skills and values that built on lessons learned in previous discussions.

From October 1997 to March 1998, the Haitian moderators led participants in a series of four Civic Forum cycles designed to provide a comprehensive introduction to the role and structure of a democratic state. The topics of the cycles were as follows: "The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizens in a Democratic Society," "The Executive Branch," "The Legislature," and "The Judiciary."

For the first cycle, NDI's moderators distributed a list of rights and responsibilities in a democracy, copies of the 1987 Haitian Constitution, and descriptions of the Civic Forum program to all program participants. Discussions included a brief definition of the concept of democracy, an introduction to the 1987 Constitution, and an in-depth study of the rights and responsibilities of a citizen as described in the Constitution. The second topic, the "Executive Branch," responded to participants' interest in understanding the ratification process of a prime minister, an issue which was and continues to be quite topical in Haiti. Participants discussed the role of the president and the prime minister and the differences between the two offices. Moderators also engaged participants in an exchange regarding the difference between national and local government officials, direct and indirect democracy, and parliamentary and presidential systems. These debates revealed participants' distrust of their parliamentary representatives, as well as their reservations about the country's need for a prime minister.

In "The Legislature" cycle, participants discussed how this branch of government should work and how it presently functions with no prime minister and a limited number of parliamentarians. Civic Forum participants also addressed the relationship between the legislature and the executive branch, drawing from information learned in the previous Civic Forum cycle. They proposed ways in which citizens can influence the legislature, such as holding meetings with their representatives in parliament. As part of the staff training for this cycle, NDI moderators met with parliamentarians and attended a parliamentary session.

During the first 6 months of the Civic Forum program, NDI held a total of 325 forums in cooperation with 95 Haitian organizations, representing farmers, political parties, youth, labor, women, religious groups and local government officials. Approximately 3,000 participants attended these meetings, with the number of participants averaging 23 per each Civic Forum. The ratio of men to women was about five to one, and the average age range was 25 to 35.

NDI coordinated media training activities with the Civic Forums to allow Haitian journalists to bring issues raised by citizens at Civic Forum events to the local and national audiences. Conversely, media programs have provided issues to be discussed at Civic Forum meetings, drawing citizens more closely into national debates. By coordinating the two activities, NDI helped encourage citizen involvement in national issues and increase the skills of journalists.

Throughout the program, NDI attempted to meet regularly with local community radio journalists in Leogane, Petit Goâve, Miragoâne, and Grand Goâve to inform them of the Civic Forums taking place in their communities. At these meetings, journalists explained their difficulty in accessing information needed for accurate reporting. In the communities where they work, newspapers, libraries, the Internet, and most forms of communication other than the radio, are virtually nonexistent. Radio stations rarely have sufficient funds to send journalists to Port-au-Prince,

where printed materials are more readily available. As a result, NDI staff have received numerous requests for copies of printed materials. NDI has provided journalists with position papers on privatization and the ongoing electoral crisis written by the political groups in Parliament, as well as articles downloaded from the Internet. NDI has also consulted with these journalists on the possibility of broadcasting Civic Forums on the radio so that the program could reach a wider audience.

During meetings with Haitian journalists, NDI has encouraged them to play a greater role in their communities, instigating the formation of journalist associations in Leogane, Petit Goâve, and Miragoâne. On December 13, 1997, NDI assisted the Association of Journalists of Petit-Goâve with the organization of the first in a series of "Citizen Conferences." NDI offered the Association advice in planning its conference, especially with the selection of topics and speakers. The first meeting focused on "The Role of the Press in a Democratic Society" and addressed the nature of the leadership role that Haitian journalists have assumed in mobilizing their communities. The conference brought together more than 250 people, representing political parties, grassroots organizations, teachers and international organizations. Discussions focused on the lack of an independent media and the absence of political and ideological tolerance in Petit-Goâve.

#### **IV. RESULTS/ ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

##### **Electoral Information Center (EIC)**

Attendance at EIC events between January and April of 1997 ranged between 50 and 100 participants and increased with each event. In all, NDI estimates that over 800 Haitians participated in scheduled events at the EIC or used resources provided by the Center. Television and radio coverage of the events significantly broadened the audience. TNH received requests from both the public and regional television stations to rebroadcast some of the events. Attendees expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to discuss these important topics and thanked NDI for providing a forum that fosters this type of dialogue.

Through NDI's practice of working with the local media, the field staff noted a growing understanding and involvement in the debate process by journalists in the provinces. In many cases, local radio stations initiated debates in their cities and contacted NDI for technical assistance. Furthermore, journalists remarked that they felt increasingly comfortable summarizing and commenting on the debates and organizing their own follow-up and support programs afterward.

The women's roundtable sparked interest in the area of women's political participation within Haitian society and was rebroadcast on provincial radio and television stations. Many civic NGOs and other women's organizations requested copies of the debate for use in Port-au-Prince and in the provinces. The women's organizations that participated proposed to work together on the production of a pamphlet covering issues raised in the debate. The seminar also gained considerable attention from the U.S. Embassy, USAID and the State Department. A video of the women's roundtable was shown several times at the U.S. Embassy and the USAID mission and was distributed by the mission to all NGOs working in Haiti. A consultant at USAID told NDI that the women's

debate was “one of the best things [he had] seen in Haiti ”

The participants at the journalist training seminar were highly motivated and engaged throughout the training and began to apply their newly-learned interview techniques during the workshop sessions. Many of the journalists commented that this activity was their favorite program that NDI had conducted in Haiti. The journalists were particularly interested in the discussion of self-censorship and subsequently demonstrated more willingness to talk to their colleagues and NDI staff members about their operational constraints. NDI received numerous requests from journalists to sponsor a longer-term program to provide this type of training and exchange of information.

### **Civic Forum**

The response from the moderators, civic groups and program participants to the civic forums has been overwhelmingly positive. During the six-month period covered by this grant, NDI/Haiti held approximately 70 civic forums per month, reaching more than 3,000 participants. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the program has furthermore influenced hundreds of friends and family members of participants. Participants have expressed their support for the Civic Forum program and their need for skills to increase political participation in Haiti. Because of the great demand and interest in these activities, eight percent of the civic forum groups began conducting similar discussion sessions in their organizations, independently of NDI. Some 80 percent of those who attended cycle one returned for later cycles, and 700 new participants attended cycle three. This demonstrates the significant interest in the civic forums among diverse organizations, including the media, women’s groups and nongovernmental organizations.

Members of the local government representatives to the Administrative Council of the Communal Section (Conseil d’Administration de la Section Communale -- CASEC) and Assembly of the Communal Section (Assemblée de la Section Communale -- ASEC) also began participating regularly in Civic Forum discussions in all four of the communes in which the program is currently being conducted. The participation of these officials increased contact with their constituents and provided a forum for them to articulate their policies and hear citizens’ concerns. This type of exchange has laid the groundwork for candidate forums and election related meetings in the future.

NDI has observed a striking similarity in the reactions of participants in the different Civic Forum sessions. Across the board, participants have expressed general disillusionment with democracy and a feeling that government institutions have abandoned the citizenry. Through the Civic Forum program, Haitian citizens have realized that they must work together to reclaim democracy and demand that the government meet the expectations set forth in the Constitution. NDI has shared this information with political leaders to increase their awareness of the frustrations of the electorate. Civic Forum participants have also expressed the need for civic education to promote greater citizen political participation among youth. In fact, many of them have suggested that the program be expanded to involve the Haitian school system.

In a short period, the Civic Forum program initiated the process of reconnecting citizens with political leaders. In several cases, citizens have taken concrete actions as a direct result of their Civic

Forum experience The following are examples of such actions

- Six Civic Forum groups in Leogâne and Petit Goâve met with their local and national government officials to discuss their problems and opinions about the future of Haiti
- Three NGO's participating in the civic forums in Leogâne met with Deputy Yves Rose Pierre to discuss the possibility of reopening a local sugar refinery factory
- In the Demba section of Leogâne, a local peasant organization participating in the Civic Forum, organized a meeting with local government officials to discuss the role of these officials and the needs of the community, one of the officials then wrote a letter to his supervisors inquiring about funds for his community

These meetings led to an establishment of contact between local government officials and deputies and their communities, where none existed prior to the forums

The journalists and media outlets NDI has worked with closely over the past three years have taken advantage of the Civic Forum program to improve their programming ideas in the area of political participation. This newly sparked interest inspired the jointly-sponsored citizen participation conference that took place in December 1997 and was attended by 250 people. Based on the success of this conference, counterpart associations in Miragoane and Leogane later planned similar activities, and Petit-Goâve organized a second conference focusing on the Haitian constitution. The initiative, taken by the Haitian media in organizing these events, demonstrates their growing interest in political participation and their ability to stimulate public involvement.

## V EVALUATION/CONCLUSIONS

Haiti is a prime example of a lesson that NDI has learned and applied across the globe, namely that it is generally preferable to design flexible programs that are capable of adapting to rapidly changing political environments to respond to fluctuating local needs. The program work conducted by NDI in Haiti during the 15-month period covered by this grant clearly exemplifies this philosophy. NDI's understanding of the political situation in Haiti, based on years of on the ground experience, allowed NDI staff to offer timely and relevant assistance during a period of political crisis and institutional vacuum.

Beginning with pre-election activities and culminating with the initiation of the Civic Forum program, NDI addressed fundamental obstacles to Haiti's democratic transition, focusing on the lack of public awareness and involvement in the political process. High attendance at NDI's Civic Forums and concrete actions taken by citizens as an outgrowth of these discussion sessions, indicate that when given the opportunity, Haitian citizens are anxious to discuss their country's problems and take part in the political process. NDI plans to continue providing a forum to encourage this participation, with the goal of securing the long-term investment of Haitian citizens in their country's democratic development.