Case Study #3: Zimbabwe: Overcoming Obstacles to Holding Governments Accountable - Kourtney Pompi, Lead Researcher

Adopted from the National Democratic Institute's Political-Process Monitoring: Considering the Outcomes and How They Can Be Measured

Following the controversial 2008 election in Zimbabwe, key political actors negotiated the Global Political Agreement (GPA), which created a Government of National Unity (GNU) comprised of both opposition leaders and the ruling party. In a country where political space is highly restricted, the GPA provided an entry point for civil society to monitor government actions. With the assistance of NDI, the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) brought together 29 CSO groups to form the Civil Society Monitoring Mechanism (CISOMM) to monitor the implementation of the GPA. Many CISOMM partners had significant experience in monitoring both elections and political violence and saw political-process monitoring initiatives as a natural next-step in the progression of their activities. By expanding their existing skill sets and knowledge and leveraging their existing relationships, CISOMM was able to overcome obstacles that organizations new to this type of activity often face. CISOMM members discovered a measure of protection in the strength of their numbers, which allowed their monitoring efforts to be critical of the implementation of the GPA. The use of evidence-based monitoring was useful for CISCOMM and helped build their credibility. While CISOMM members had difficulty identifying the direct impact of their initiatives on government accountability, their ability to occupy the space created by the GPA may be considered an initial achievement. CISOMM's ability to carry out efforts without interference by the government or security forces helps to set an important precedent for future citizen action. The Zimbabwe program illustrates that while monitoring the government may be risky, not monitoring at all may pose an even greater risk - including the closing of political space.

Introduction

For more than 30 years, Robert Mugabe has presided over the people of Zimbabwe. The most recent elections in 2008 gave Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) another six years at the helm of government. The 2008 elections were characterized by both the international community and domestic election observation groups as deeply flawed. With opposition and independent candidates participating in this election, opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai won the first round, Tsvangirai eventually withdrew from round two, however, due to significant election-related violence and election procedures that were viewed as highly corrupt. While this gave Mugabe the electoral win, Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party won the majority of parliamentary seats. This win led opposition parties to push for a power-sharing agreement. Mediated by South African President Thabo Mbeki, the GPA[1] was signed on September 15, 2008, creating the GNU with Mugabe as president, Tsvangirai as prime minister, Arthur Mutambara as deputy prime minister and a politically inclusive cabinet to be determined. The agreement outlined the roles and responsibilities of signatories and their respective parties, political and socio-economic guarantees for citizens, the rule of law and human rights commitments.

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[1] "Agreement between the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations, on resolving the challenges facing Zimbabwe", 16 September, 2008. <www.cisomm.org>.

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The GPA provided opposition leaders a political seat at the table that acknowledged their electoral victories, something that had never before happened, and provided a framework that civil society could use to monitor progress toward agreed upon reforms. Several local CSOs recognized that the GPA opened political space and created both an opportunity and need for civic activism. With the assistance of NDI, a leading local human rights organization, the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), brought together like-minded organizations in late 2008 to find ways to help ensure that the GPA is enacted. The CSOs explored the implications of the GPA and what role civil society could have in relation to the new power sharing arrangement. The groups determined that they should begin by monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the GPA. Seen as a natural progression in their human rights and election monitoring work, ZLHR and 29 other groups formed CISOMM[2] to monitor the implementation of the GPA. Headed by a secretariat made up of representatives from several member organizations, CISOMM discussed which articles of the GPA they could effectively monitor and eventually organized themselves into seven thematic cluster groups to monitor issue areas covered under the GPA: economic recovery, humanitarian and food assistance, constitutional reform, political justice and transition, institutional reform, respect for human rights, and freedom of expression.

NDI supported CISOMM in its early stages by providing technical assistance in the form of comparative experiences from Kenya, including advice on how to organize member organizations around this type of monitoring project. NDI also provided a technical advisor to help CISOMM members develop a set of benchmarks to be monitored and with the CISOMM to establish a reporting schedule and report dissemination strategy, and provided guidance to CISOMM as they held their first report launch event. Following this early assistance, CISOMM operated on its own to monitor the GPA and the broader political environment. CISOMM has written monitoring reports every 3-6 months since the project's inception and continues to monitor the situation to this day.

The following analysis of the CISOMM project is based on findings from in-country research conducted by NDI in April 2011. Using the standardized interview template found in this guide, NDI held four key informant interviews with three lead CISOMM partners. Due to security concerns for CSOs operating in Zimbabwe, NDI did not conduct focus group discussions. Each interview consisted of the interviewer and one to three members from selected partner organizations that worked on the CISOMM monitoring project. Partners that were selected had the highest profile and largest coordinating role within the project. Each organization was interviewed separately due to security concerns. NDI also conducted one group discussion with

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[2] Current list of CISOMM member organizations: Bulawayo Agenda (BA), Centre for Community Development in Zimbabwe (CCDZ), Centre for Research and Development (CRD), Christian Alliance (CA), Civic Education Network Trust (CIVNET), Counselling Services Unit (CSU), Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition (CZC), General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union
(GAPWUZ), Justice for Children Trust (JCT), Legal Resources Foundation (LRF), Food Security Network (FOSENET), Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI) , Media Institute of Southern Africa – Zimbabwe Chapter (MISA-Zimbabwe), Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (MMPZ), National Association
of Non-Governmental Organizations (NANGO), Oxfam International (OI), Platform for Youth Development Trust (PYD), Progressive Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU), Restoration of Human Rights Zimbabwe (ROHR), Save Zimbabwe Campaign (SZC), Students' Christian Movement of Zimbabwe (SCMZ), Students Solidarity Trust
(SST), Transparency International, Veritas, Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ), Women's Coalition (WC), Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), Youth Agenda Trust (YAT), Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights (ZADHR), Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development
(ZIMCODD), Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights), Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (ZHRF), Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR), Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU), Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP), Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA), and Zimbabwe Young Women's Network for Peace Building (ZYWNP).

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NDI staff who worked on the CISOMM program, with supplemental information gathered via email exchange following the research trip.

How CISOMM Operated in a Tough Political Environment

Political-process monitoring initiatives provide citizens with a mechanism to promote accountability and increase transparency of government actions. Ideally, monitoring government action should be a regular part of civil society's role in the political-process. However, in countries like Zimbabwe where political space is limited and often disappears at the whim of the ruling party, civil society oversight activities may appear threatening to those in power. Consequently, access to information is limited and society's ability to monitor government action is hampered and may result in physical threats or detentions. Moreover, CISOMM partners knew that these risks needed to be considered and managed. In the past, CISOMM partners had come under severe scrutiny by Zimbabwe's security forces for their activism and monitoring efforts. During interviews, key CISOMM representatives indicated that joining CISOMM and monitoring the GPA was a logical next step, since most CISOMM members had conducted some type of monitoring activity in the past, including human rights monitoring, violence monitoring, and election monitoring, and had learned how to monitor political-processes in ways that safeguarded their activists. For the groups interviewed, all felt that monitoring the GPA was within the scope of their activities and that they could make use of existing skill sets and networks of volunteers to collect information. One CISOMM partner acknowledged that NDI had helped them develop monitoring skills that could also be used to monitor the GPA, including: creating data collection tools; recruiting, training and managing volunteers; developing methods of collecting data from volunteers; writing reports; and working with the media. One CISOMM partner commented that monitoring the GPA only added a few extra data collection points to their existing efforts, since they already had volunteers in the field collecting information on food distribution and access to health care, and did not necessarily create any additional risk. *CISOMM partners specialized in finding ways to maximize small amounts of political space. Monitoring the GPA proved to be a way to expand political space and raise the voice of civil society in a meaningful and constructive way.*

Working together toward a common goal was beneficial for CISOMM members. Most important, as expressed by all the CISOMM partners that were interviewed, was the members' ability to tap into their existing areas of expertise and interest. By organizing themselves into groups around areas of existing interest, member organizations did not have a steep learning curve in relation to the GPA issue they monitored. Members leveraged their existing knowledge, expertise, and relationships in their cluster area to collect information on the implementation of the GPA. Some CISOMM members have specific technical skill sets that were extremely useful to the project. Legal expertise was particularly helpful in understanding the technical language used in the GPA document, for example; and CISOMM's secretariat had members with strong writing and analytic skills who contributed to efforts at synthesizing cluster group input and writing the monitoring reports. Everyone interviewed also recognized that there was safety in numbers, which would make it harder for the government to crack down on 30 organizations than to crack down on one or two.

Outcomes of CISOMM's Monitoring Efforts

CISOMM members told NDI researchers that the GPA monitoring has begun to alter relationships and government perceptions of civil society by those in government. When

specifically asked if they thought there was a change in relationships between government and CISOMM members as a result of GPA monitoring, all the CISOMM members interviewed said no. Upon having them describe their interactions with government before, during, and after their GPA monitoring activities, however, that response may not be completely accurate. One partner described a situation in which their organization was invited to meet with a specific ministry office, which was perceived by the organization as a positive meeting (i.e., to act as a resource for the ministry). Interviewees acknowledged that generally most of the government invitations come from more progressive politicians, however this invitation was not described as such. The relationship between this ministry and the CISOMM member before the monitoring project was described as antagonistic, as this particular partner had been subjected to extensive scrutiny by security forces in the past. The meeting invitation indicates that evidenced-based monitoring may help to change the perception and nature of how government views and responds to civil society's monitoring efforts - certainly a positive outcome.

A similar result was observed with the media. Interviewees did not describe a particularly strong relationship with the media prior to the CISOMM project. In environments with limited political space, the media is often a wildcard: either politically aligned and favorable to the ruling party or more apt to help provide civil society a platform to voice concerns about government behavior.[3] In Zimbabwe, CISOMM partners were rather neutral on the role of the media in aiding their monitoring efforts. While the media was not proactive in helping to publicize CISOMM's findings, the media did attend press conferences and publish information found in CISOMM's monitoring reports.

Perhaps most significant was CISOMM's ability to leverage existing relationships with some members of parliament, ministry officials and other civil society actors. These relationships helped provide CISOMM members with access to information, which was one of the biggest challenges interviewees identified. The ruling party has always been reluctant to make information about their actions public, so by having a few allies with access to information, CISOMM partners were able to access official documents and people in order to monitor how the commitments outlined in the GPA were being met.

Lessons Learned

Often it is the small victories and the little steps toward larger openings for civil society to participate in the political-process that count the most; such may be the case with the CISOMM project in Zimbabwe. That the CISOMM members were able to collect information, develop regular reports, and disseminate their findings to the media without their efforts being stymied by the ruling party or security forces is significant.

By analyzing each discussion with CISOMM members in its entirety and looking across all the information collected during the in-country research trips, several outcomes can be highlighted:

▪ Political-process monitoring initiatives are often a natural next-step in a civil society organization's progression in activities. This is especially important to consider when political space is limited.

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[3] This has happened on several occasions in Cambodia, where Beehive Radio, an independent media outlet, often aired commentary that was critical of the government.

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- Expanding upon existing skill sets and knowledge may help organizations overcome some of the hurdles that organizations new to monitoring government face.

- Using evidence-based monitoring can build an organizations' credibility.

- When space is limited to monitor and hold government accountable, working in a network or coalition may be beneficial as there is safety in numbers.

- Leveraging existing relationships are key to overcoming challenges of access to information and to disseminating findings.

Finally, one of CISSOM's most significant achievements was their ability to occupy the space that the GPA created. Even more important, several CISSOM member organizations created a new initiative, the Independent Constitution Monitoring Project (ZZZICOMP) to monitor the constitution drafting process called for in the GPA. Not only did these organizations recognize the unique opportunity to monitor the GNU that the GPA provided, but they also created and demanded additional space by expanding their monitoring efforts into new areas. While there may be great risk in monitoring government, for the members of CISOMM, the risks associated with monitoring the GPA were outweighed by the risks of not participating in some way around the GPA's implementation. For CISOMM and ZZZICOMP, to not monitor government and allow existing limited opportunities for government accountability to close was riskier than any crackdown by the government for their efforts. At present, the GNU is under scrutiny to make the GPA work and for all signatories to uphold the commitments they signed on to. If civil society does not continue to monitor government and report their findings, that opportunities for political engagement could disappear. In challenging environments such as Zimbabwe, the challenge is for civil society to look for opportunities to engage in political-process monitoring efforts so that political space does not shrink or disappear.

ZIMBABWE: CISOMM MONITORING PROJECT, MOST SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES AND ACTIVITIES (based on discussion participants' responses)

Engaged by PPM (as perceived by CISOMM member organizations that granted interview)			External to the Program (as perceived by CISOMM member organizations that granted interview)		
Directly Influenced	**Most Significant Outcomes Attributed to PPM Program Engagement**	**PPM activities**	**Group**	**Most Significant Impacts Attributed to PPM Activities**	**PPM most significant activities**
Political Parties/GPA	• There is greater political space for political party actions in accordance with the GPA • Political parties utilize the recommendations in the periodic report by the CISOMM • The MDC increased its efforts to include involvement by civil society in parliamentary work	**Outreach meetings** **Questionnaires** **COPAC committee trainings** **Workshops** **Media trainings** **Reports and newsletters**	**Civil Society as a Whole**	• Community members feel ownership in the constitution writing process • There is greater understanding of the constitution writing process • CSOs enhance the capacity of citizens to monitor government follow through • Public confidence in the parliament is built through the shadow report • Electoral monitors understand constitutional elements	
CSOs	• CSOs are becoming authoritative sources on the GPA • Relationships are strengthened between CSO partners • CSOs increased their skills in event documenting • CSOs acquired new skills in monitoring government follow through • CSOs acquired event documentation skills • CSOs increased their	**Technical assistance**	**Government**	• Government is aware that there are outside monitoring its performance • Ministries invite CISOMM partner organizations to meet and discuss concerns	

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	ability to design their own monitoring instruments • CSOs expanded on existing skill sets in monitoring • Partners feel increased safety to monitor because of the number of groups engaged				
CISOMM	• CISOMM publications are recognized by international conventions • Coalition reports are presented to Geneva Commission • Collective work prevents individual CSOs from unnecessarily duplicating monitoring activities • There is increased communication and report sharing in the Constitution Selection Committee COPAC				
Media	• There is an increased demand for information from CISOMM • Media attends press conferences of CISOMM • Media publishes information found in CISOMM reports				