

**MASTERING INFORMATION:
THE BIRTH OF CITIZEN-INITIATED
VOTER EDUCATION IN MONGOLIA**

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ABSTRACT

In the 18 months preceding the parliamentary elections of June 1996 in Mongolia, a variety of nascent nongovernmental organizations began efforts to educate voters. These organizations, nearly all of them run for and by women, sought to inform the voting public about their rights and responsibilities as citizens in this new democracy. The methods and goals of these NGOs varied, as did their ultimate impact. This paper reviews the experience of two of these innovative organizations, demonstrates the potential contributions of NGOs to political transition, and identifies lessons learned regarding NGO efficacy and the challenges of neutrality and credibility. The cases illustrate the variety of means by which NGOs seek to balance and contextualize outside expertise and urban-centered information, reach broad and diversified constituencies, and maintain nonpartisanship in the process. While attribution is difficult, the cases

provide promising evidence attesting to NGOs' potential contribution and efficacy in civic education and democratization, even in contexts lacking historical and sometimes cultural democratic traditions.

INTRODUCTION

On June 30, 1996, more than 90% of Mongolia's electorate turned out to vote. At the end of the day, Mongolia's democratic opposition party had swept 50 of 76 parliamentary seats. The actions of local NGOs, candidates, and the state had tested and proved the country's transition to democracy. During the 18 months preceding the elections, a variety of nascent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) began nonpartisan efforts to educate voters. These organizations, nearly all of them run for and by women, sought to inform the voting public about their rights and responsibilities as citizens in this new democracy. Their methods and goals varied. The success of these efforts points to a salient opportunity to 1) learn more about the potential contributions of NGOs to political transition, particularly within the realm of civic education, and 2) identify more specific lessons regarding both the efficacy of NGOs in making such contributions and the methods for maintaining neutrality and credibility in the process.

The paper traces the evolution and approaches of two organizations as they struggled to carve out a role for themselves in a previously non-existent territory, facing historical, cultural, and economic challenges during Mongolia's transition. While the Mongolian context is unique, it embodies many of the formidable and common challenges to pursuing political liberalization in a context lacking historical and sometimes cultural democratic traditions. The paper offers lessons for how NGOs might justify their activities in an emergent democracy, establish credibility through demonstrated usefulness, and maintain the neutrality essential to many NGOs aiming to promote democratization, especially those focusing on civic education.

NGOS AND DEMOCRATIZATION: PROMISES AND CHALLENGES

Theory and practice on NGOs reveals the tremendous promise of their potential contribution to democratization, as well as the most common challenges. NGOs have a particular and essential role to play, especially with respect to the provision of information. The degree to which NGOs can be effective in that role depends on their ability to be relevant, maintain neutrality, and establish credibility.

The Role of NGOs in Democratization

By definition, democracy is rooted in accountability, political competition, and responsiveness. The role of citizens in this process is central and must be unencumbered. More specifically, Dahl posits that citizens "must have unimpaired opportunities to a) formulate their preferences, b) signify their preferences to their fellow citizens and the government by individual and collective action, and c) have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of the government."¹⁰ NGOs play a key role in actualizing these opportunities as representatives collective action and voice in their own right and in their potential role to enhance the voice and participation of individual citizens.

NGOs can contribute to this latter role through subtle socialization and through more proactive information dissemination, training, and advocacy. Particularly in transitioning or emergent democracies, this socialization function is key to fostering democratic norms both experientially and pedagogically, as well as creating expectations of accountability and responsiveness.² The crucial outcome of such socialization is a practical and psychological empowerment - enhanced confidence in the collective process³ and self-worth and ability.⁴ This psychological empowerment is the basis for a successful democracy/ ' It represents the foundation on which people can make their own choices - a prerequisite to democratic processes.

Key to exercising this empowerment is the ability to access relevant information by which to hold the state accountable and upon which citizens can make informed choices. Indeed, access to information, particularly for women, is frequently identified as one of the most important constraints to political participation/⁶ Information enables people-to gain the understanding and context they need to effectively participate. If people are to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens, they must have both the information that allows them to do so and enough training and knowledge to interpret that information/⁷

Broad dissemination of information also levels the playing field and enhances the diversity of participants. Democracy is predicated on inclusiveness which cannot exist without the widespread sharing of relevant information/⁸ By disseminating information on policy dialogue and political agendas, civil society organizations (including NGOs) facilitate the participation of other civil society actors in engaging on particular policy positions and platforms. Civil society has a key role not only in disseminating self-interested information, but also in developing and disseminating more general, objective information to the broadest possible audience. Organizations that choose to focus on the latter are most often embracing the more general civic education functions essential to democratization and quality electoral processes.

The Efficacy of NGO Efforts

But what determines the efficacy of such efforts? Aside from more general institutional capacity - a persistent thorn in the sides of many NGOs - the efficacy of civic education efforts specifically is rooted in NGOs' political capacity, their skills with respect to managing information, and their effective pursuit of relevance.

Because this kind of political effort is historically and culturally new in many transition economies, the greatest challenge with respect to political

capacity is maintaining the proper balance of what Senghor called "entrainment et overture." To perform effectively, institutions have to be both rooted (entrained) in the local context and culture, and open (obverts) to outside challenges and influence.(9) More specifically, to effectively promote democratization and engage in civic education, NGOs must use this overture to gain new and specific skills'10) and imbue the application of those skills with local concerns and information.

The selection of information management techniques can address this issue of entrainment, both from a cultural and relevance perspective. In other, more dramatic circumstances, Diaz notes the crucial role of traditional media resources in disseminating information during the Eritrean War and in the development efforts that followed liberation, as these are "culturally congruent and highly legitimate."11) In addition, these mechanisms proved important -in bridging the gap between the rural population and the national, urban-based leadership by enabling the rural population to access information available in urban areas though delivered by different, more locally relevant means.

Indeed, since democracy seeks to maximize participation, and because most democratic action of a macro-scale occurs in urban policy centers, some scholars assert that federated membership organizations may be most effective in maximizing participation and voice.12) By extending its reach and utilizing a full range of dissemination options, an NGO can assure a broader impact on democratization efforts by facilitating citizens' influence over issues that most affect them - a cornerstone of democracy/13' Similarly, flexibility in applied methodologies can address informal constraints to participation, such as economic hardship and overwork, lack of time, illiteracy, and other cultural and traditional factors,14) which are often most salient in rural or outlying areas.

Neutrality and Credibility

Final but essential components of NGO effectiveness, particularly in the

domain of civic education, are neutrality and credibility. Neutrality is particularly problematic for many of the most active NGOs as these tend to be based in urban centers and thus fall suspect to elite dominance15) and/or undue influence of the current regime. Any ties with official state agencies can result in benefits that make NGO leaders less dependent on their members and named constituencies/16' The greatest concern for democratization efforts is, however, the perception of partisanship. In an Asia-wide study, for example, NGO sector representatives expressed concern that while training in human, constitutional, and legal rights is very important for strengthening democracy, it is very difficult to provide training for political activism that is perceived as nonpartisan.17) Citizens must fully appreciate that it is in their interest to participate politically, not primarily in the interest of trainers who might have their own political agenda.

One method for addressing this issue and developing perceived neutrality and credibility is the application of embedded ness, which can be seen as another perspective of entrainment. NGOs must be rooted in defined constituencies: "The clearer the civic grouping that can hold an NGO accountable for what it does, the more firmly it will be located within the civic realm and legitimized as a civic actor."19) NGOs must demonstrate responsiveness and relevance. The ultimate perception of neutrality and credibility can only be measured by the degree and diversity of voluntary participation emerging from the effort.

THE CASE OF MONGOLIA

The case of Mongolia's 1996 parliamentary elections vividly illustrates these challenges. More specifically, the particular evolution and activities of the Women for Social Progress (WSP) and the Liberal Women's Brain pool (LEGS) demonstrate how NGO civic education activities can be justified in an emergent democracy, how credibility can be established, the extent to which perceived lack of neutrality can inhibit these efforts, and how neutrality can be maintained. Information on the cases is drawn from

the first-hand experience and observations of Asia Foundation staff*20' responsible for monitoring a range of civic education programs in Mongolia and consulted throughout the iterative design and implementation process; interviews; and other secondary data sources, including project reports, civic education materials, and newspaper accounts. First it is important to understand the formidable context of these efforts.

The Context

The context for democratization in Mongolia is particularly challenging, owing to its history, its cultural mindsets (as reflected in the language), economy, and demographics. These more general challenges, combined with the specific evolution and structure of each of the organizations, posed particularly daunting obstacles to successful voter education in support of the 1996 elections.

Even though Mongolia was never formally a part of the USSR, it was inextricably linked to the Soviets throughout its 70-year history. When the Iron Curtain fell, Mongolia's politburo disbanded and a more representative transition government, the Baga Hural, was created. This transition government was the first in Mongolia's long history in which the government was ruled by an elected, representative body. It was in the following three years (1990-1993) that opposition parties became better defined, and it was from these opposition parties that both WSP and LEOS trace their roots - WSP from the Social Democrats, and LEOS from the National Democrats. In Western countries, these new organizations would not have been considered NGOs at their outset, but each pursued organizational development well beyond the context of their respective parties.

In addition to these partisan origins, both organizations confronted particular challenges due to the mindset of many Mongolians regarding NGOs and their activities. This mindset is revealed in a brief review of

how key words - such as NGO and nonpartisan - translate into Mongolian. Today, "nongovernmental organization" is translated into Mongolian in roughly three ways: "volunteer," "not of the government," and "mass public organization." The third type of organization, common to socialist countries, involuntarily assigned membership to categories of people, e.g., the Youth Federation, the Women's Federation, and the Workers' Federation. These organizations survived the democratic change, often with their physical plant and capital intact, but did not carry as much legitimacy as actors who came onto the scene after democratic changes began in 1990.

The other two translations for NGO provide indications of public perceptions regarding this new crop of organization that entered Mongolia's political, social, and civic scene in the mid-1990s. "Volunteer" is a concept that is often met with skepticism from Mongolians, after seven decades of forced "volunteer" labor and contributions to the Soviet Union and their own authoritarian leaders. "Not of the government" brings alarming overtones of anti-State activities - alarming because anything that lay outside the government's purview for all of Mongolia's history was punished quickly and severely. In short, for most Mongolians any translation would sow suspicion and doubt about such an organization, particularly regarding the NGO's true objectives.

The term "nonpartisan" has only recently entered the Mongolian vocabulary, appearing only after the democratic revolution of 1989/1990. The concept would have previously been translated as "not of the Party," and any activity that was political and not of the Party was suspect, possibly even seditious. In addition, there was no room for the concept of "loyal opposition" prior to the change. Publicizing competing platforms was unheard of, as there was only the singular thinking of the State and Party. Again, alternative policy options were limited to infra-Party dialogue and not open to public scrutiny and discussion.

Mongolia's economy and demographics present additional challenges to

democratization and voter education. Most importantly, in this transition society where the economic challenges of daily life are overwhelming for many families, attention to political change is considered a luxury that is largely irrelevant to the average Mongolian. The value of democracy is not readily obvious in a day-to-day sense, though many Mongolians might agree with -democratic values in principle. In addition, Mongolia's demographics are unique and challenging not only to democratization in general, but to voter education specifically. Though Mongolia covers a substantial territory, slightly larger than Alaska, its population is only 2.4 million, creating one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world. In fact, over half of the population is based in the three largest cities, and most of the economic and political leadership is in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar. Outside of the capital city, the population is primarily nomadic or semi-nomadic. Moreover, rugged terrain and a fragile communications infrastructure compound the difficulties of nationwide information sharing.

Given these many challenges, the successful elections of 1996 are particularly impressive. It might be expected that in this context democratization would be a slow, evolving process, entailing the cultivation of a democratic culture (i.e., a meaningful and proactive demand, and the development of expectations, processes, and institutions). All of these elements require much time and effort, trial and error, and demonstrated experience. Nevertheless, the election results of 1996 imply a swift movement at least with respect to electoral processes, due in part to the civic education efforts of particular NGOs. The ways in which the organizations studied addressed the challenges noted above and contributed to these efforts reflect each organization's individual evolution and objectives.

WSP Activities/Evolution

Although WSP has its roots in the democratic changes of the early 1990s, it spun-off the original women's group of the Social Democrats several

years prior to the voter education project. In that time and under the strong leadership of its executive director, WSP had developed its own goals and programming that were wholly independent of the Social Democrats.

WSP secured a funding base from a wide set of multilateral and bilateral sources to support a range of programs and partnerships. These programs included vegetable plots for income generation, women's shelter, and awareness raising projects to inform women of their rights and responsibilities in Mongolia's new democracy. Funding sources ranged from Australian bi-lateral assistance to support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The Women for Social Progress Voter Education project began as an initiative to educate women about their rights and responsibilities as voters in preparation for the June 1996 parliamentary elections. Throughout the struggle to win access to parliamentary transcripts for relevant information, the executive director of WSP came to appreciate the fact that the gap between voters and the resources that would help them make informed choices was not limited to a specific gender. Indeed, all voters required equal access to information if the purposes of Mongolia's emerging democracy were to be realized.

WSP's activities included the distribution of flyers, radio programs, and a voter education hotline that provided biographical and platform information on all candidates from a computerized database. WSP worked in partnership with other groups to conduct parallel training, such as media training to guide journalists to ask questions to which the people needed answers. In the later stages of the pre-election period, WSP delivered voter education seminars in selected regions. These seminars addressed issues ranging from the general meaning of democracy, the Mongolian Constitution, legal issues, and citizen action to maintain post-election accountability; to issues of specific concern to that region and voting records and information specific to incumbents. In some instances, these seminars were credited with changing some of the outcomes of particular

aces. For example, in a tight race, the "Father of the Constitution" lost to a member of the Democratic Union; he cited the WSP seminars in his district as a contributing factor to his loss in a conversation with one author the day after the election.⁽²¹⁾

Throughout these efforts, WSP faced constant challenges from those in official circles as well as from others involved in the various campaigns. These challenges were rooted in the issues of utility and neutrality. Specifically, they were based on two questions:

1. What was the right and utility of a nongovernmental organization carrying out voter education programming, when an official election commission already existed?
2. How could an NGO born of one of the most invested parties of the democratic revolution claim to be neutral and nonpartisan during what is inherently a highly charged partisan environment?

These two questions shaped the entire WSP voter education effort. They impacted the information collected, the methods of collection, the approaches to dissemination, and the identification of target audiences. And they forced the staff and volunteers of WSP to clearly articulate the methods and objectives to the public it sought to inform and to all other stakeholders in the process.

The Challenge of Utility

Once the shift had been made to address the needs of all voters, regardless of gender, WSP needed to carry out its voter education project in a way that demonstrated utility in terms of the type of information voters would need to "be informed," the means by which the information would be disseminated, and the value WSP added to the official election commission's efforts.

A key criterion of utility is relevance and this proved an important challenge to WSP as its work emanated exclusively from the capital city, Ulaanbaatar. WSP did not have an extensive network of regional chapters,

nor did it draw substantive guidance from international linkages. Its Ulaanbaatar-based efforts held throughout much of the pre-election period, although WSP did conduct voter education training seminars in five provinces in the later stages of the campaigning period. Because WSP was so strongly identified as a phenomenon of the capital city - and therefore potentially elitist - it was sometimes difficult for staff and volunteers to make the information content relevant to the large majority of workers and nomads that make up Mongolia's citizenry.

Recognizing these challenges and WSP's inherent limitations, the organization focused much of its initial efforts on determining what was appropriate information. Indeed, the content of the voter education materials was critical to WSP's eventual success. Seven months prior to the election, WSP spent one week with a foreign consultant who was a specialist of nonpartisan voter education techniques. This short but intensive contact provided WSP with many of its techniques for publicizing the research it had already conducted, as well as popularizing the importance of the voter in Mongolia's new democratic system. WSP learned to juxtapose international examples of good governance with the patterns occurring in Mongolia in a way that challenged, rather than chastised, Mongolia's citizens and leaders. For example, WSP introduced the concept of the citizens as owners of the government by citing examples of this perspective in other nations, such as the United States. These international examples were positioned side-by-side with corresponding passages from the 1992 Mongolia Constitution.

Equally important as the utility of information content is the appropriateness of delivery mechanisms. WSP varied its delivery mechanisms, alternating among brief radio programs, one-page flyers, seminars, and other mechanisms. Thus it was able to reach a wider audience than its Ulaanbaatar base would have foretold. Each of these mechanisms was used to deliver brief and studiously nonpartisan messages. For example, the one-page flyers contained comparative party platforms on a specific issue so that voters could see it in a discrete, i.e.,

separated, context. The typical flyer introduced WSP and its objectives and informed voters about other WSP initiatives.

None of the delivery mechanisms required the voter to go out of her or his way in committing time or even much energy to gaining access to WSP's voter education materials. Given the stresses, particularly economic, faced by the average citizen, if WSP delivered its voter education message in such a way that required citizens to come to the information, it is doubtful that the volume of information transferred would have ever taken place. Instead, WSP relied on bringing its nonpartisan message directly to the public through mechanisms that were already consistent with the ways Mongolians learn about current events (i.e., radio and newspapers). One of the most illustrative examples of this effort entailed one young woman who convinced a bus driver to allow her to ride in the bus for an entire day. Here, she distributed voter education materials and engaged the passengers in discussions about the upcoming elections and other issues that would be relevant and/or of interest to the passenger voters.

Finally, adding value to the work of the election commission was not difficult in the early stages of the pre-election period because there was complete inactivity from the official body. The passivity on the part of the election commission provided WSP time to define and establish its own role, including carefully researching its material and developing vehicles for conveying the information. Occasionally, WSP would draw rebuke from the election commission, warning WSP to stay off official turf, but no formal actions were taken and WSP staff and volunteers continued undeterred. Once elections were officially called on April 15, 1996, 75 days prior to the actual election date, this challenge became more acute. Nevertheless, by this time WSP had already built a repertoire of activities that were gaining widespread recognition and popular legitimacy.

The Challenge of Neutrality

WSP's challenge in maintaining its neutrality and nonpartisanship was

more directly related to the information collection and distribution aspects of its voter education project, rather than to any lingering or perceived ties to the Social Democrats. This is primarily because under the strong leadership of its executive director, WSP had developed its own goals and programming that were wholly independent of the Social Democrats. Nevertheless, critics of the nonpartisan voter education project could and did use the origins of WSP to assert that the project's true goals were to undermine the ruling Communist Party.

WSP sought to achieve neutrality and balance of information by using original sources of documentation and keeping analysis to a minimum. By doing this, WSP avoided opportunities that could have led to imbuing the information with a particular slant or spin. This is not to say that WSP avoided controversy in the way in which information was presented, only that to the fullest extent possible, WSP staff and volunteers were careful to let the data collected speak for themselves. Primary sources of information included the Mongolian Constitution of 1992, hard-won transcript copies from the State Great Hural (Mongolia's parliament), party platforms, candidate statements, and responses from a direct WSP-created survey of all 358 parliamentary candidates (of which, only a very small fraction were completed and returned).

WSP's neutrality was tested in the earliest stages of its effort to collect voting records of sitting members of parliament. The then stored General of the State Great Hural (now the democratically elected president of Mongolia) forbade access to all parliamentary voting records and transcripts on the basis that they were "State secrets." Arguing that it was every Mongolians constitutional right to know, WSP volunteer researchers gamed highly-restricted access to these records, essentially creating a tag-team to hand-copy records at 15 minute intervals. It was from this modest pool of information that subsequent voter education materials were developed.

LEGS Activities/Evolution

LEOS was also originally affiliated to one of the opposition democratic parties, the Mongolian National Democratic Party. However, early in its development, LEOS defined an agenda and leadership that was distinct from any party ties. One of the early growth objectives was to create a LEOS chapter in each of Mongolia's 21 provinces. As a result, LEGS' voter education project benefited from that federation structure.

The LEOS Women In Politics program was born out of a nascent Asia-wide initiative, the Asia-Pacific Women In Politics Network (APWIP), of which the Chairwoman of LEOS was a founding member. LEOS developed the key goals and objectives of its women voter education at a September 1995 meeting of leading women activists around Mongolia and three other APWIP founders. LEOS supported its voter education program through a combination of funders, including the German Conrad Adenauer Foundation and the San Francisco-based Asia Foundation. During the September meeting, participants agreed to the formation of a nonpartisan Women's Coalition that embraced the full range of women's organizations from the once-monolithic Women's Federation to individual activists. LEOS volunteered to play the role of secretariat to the short-lived Women's Coalition. The women agreed to set target numbers for women candidates, and ultimately for representation.

The audience of the nationwide voter education project of the Liberal Women's Brain pool remained constant throughout the pre-election period. The goal was to educate women about general concepts of politics in a democracy and to point out the benefits to society when greater numbers of women participate in the political process. Aside from being gender-specific ⁽²²⁾, participation was defined broadly; that is, it was nonpartisan. Throughout its voter education efforts, LEOS relied heavily on its existing federation structure. The foundations of the training materials were generated by the APWIP Network. LEGS' relative success, particularly with respect to women in politics, can be measured by the actual election ballots and results. While the Women's Coalition's original target was for

women to represent 15% of the 358 candidates, it reached 9%. Women's participation in parliament increased from 2 on election day to 7 (out of 76).

The key challenges that LEOS faced differed from those confronting WSP, although they were equally formidable. Its chief hurdles in defining and maintaining utility and neutrality came largely from within the organization itself:

1. How could the training materials be made relevant to the Mongolian context, particularly in balancing the learning needs of urban vs. rural women?
2. How could neutrality be maintained throughout the voter education project when, in addition to its own partisan roots, the Chairwoman, a Deputy Chairwoman, and a ranking Board Member were contemplating their own candidacies for the parliamentary elections?

Just as the challenges that confronted WSP during its voter education project defined its actions, so too did those facing LEGS during its women in politics initiative.

The Challenge of Utility

The goal of the LEOS/WEP project was to increase the level of participation of Mongolian women in politics and champion the work of its regional chapters across the country. To heighten the relevance of its message, LEGS' definition of "participation" was very broad. In order of incremental commitment, these included: keeping oneself informed through attending political functions or reading newspapers, pamphlets and leaflets; supporting a candidate through volunteer efforts; joining a group or organization that fostered women's participation; becoming a part of the logistical administration of the election such as voter registration or party election observer; or even becoming a candidate for elected office. These benchmarks were identified in the original APWIP materials.

By providing this menu of options for participation, LEGS was able to tailor its message to its various audiences, encouraging groups to take the next step up the participation ladder to maximize the impact of mobilizing each group. If a particular chapter or group of women was already active in learning about women and political participation, then LEGS trainers would encourage the women to get involved in the political process. If women were not yet engaged in politics or political awareness at all, as was often the situation in the countryside where economic hardship is endemic, women were encouraged to consider political activism as a way of building a foundation for a future seat at the table when economic policy decisions would be made.

The materials for this training were derived largely from APWIP. APWIP's mission is to build networks of knowledgeable and active women leaders throughout the Asia-Pacific region and to share the wealth of lessons learned. Members describe a simultaneous sense of relief and empowerment when they exchange information and learn from their Asian-Pacific sisters. Mongolia was used as a test site for materials that APWIP leaders and activists had compiled as a result of their extensive experience throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The selection of Mongolia as a test site was based in part on the coincidence of the preparation of the materials with the pre-election environment. The APWIP materials were subjected to refinement and adaptation by LEGS during the pre-election period so that its trainers could optimize the relevance of those materials. For example, as the trainers came to appreciate the realities of economic hardship that many rural women were facing, they incorporated more linkages between the benefits of political participation and economic well-being. LEGS' role in providing relevant information was essential, as LEGS used its regional chapters to move into more remote parts of the country than other organizations such as WSP could reach.

The Challenge of Neutrality

As noted earlier, most of the challenges that LEGS faced regarding

neutrality stemmed from the partisan activities of three of the NGO's top leadership, namely the candidacies of the Chairwoman, a Deputy Chairwoman, and a leading member of the Board of Directors. These women did not officially declare their candidacies until two and a half months prior to the election date (and the voter education efforts were already four months underway). However, the time period during which they weighed their options for running - while their most important rural outreach was in full swing - created the greatest threat to organizational and programmatic neutrality. These women and their future campaign staffers used this time and opportunity to mentally test the waters about the prospect of waging a campaign, therefore creating sufficient ambiguity as to their status that neutrality was the most tenuous during this period.

Great care was taken by the organization to separate the activities of those women who were considering campaigns with those who were facilitating the WIP training activities. In accordance with its finders' requirements, when necessity required both sets of LEGS activists to be simultaneously present in the same city or region, the women traveled to those places in separate vehicles, assuring that even the budgets of each undertaking would be distinct. Similarly, women who participated in candidate-cultivation activities were barred from the premises in which WIP activities' were taking place, to avoid perceptions of anyone "wearing two hats" - one partisan, the other nonpartisan.

Given Mongolia's demographics, these efforts sorely tested the personnel and financial resources of LEOS. The number of women who were engaged in the WIP training, either as participants, trainers, or coordinators was limited. It was often difficult to find sufficient numbers of women who were knowledgeable and able to travel to satisfy the demands of the campaign and pre-campaign period, as well as the longer training period. In addition, given the economic hardships of transition, sending double sets of volunteer teams into the provinces was an additional financial burden for this struggling NGO.

DISCUSSION

Success

In the 1992 elections there was a 98% voter turnout; in 1996 this dropped to 92%. However, the 1996 elections were the first time ever that no threats of punitive action against non-voting were issued. In short, 92% chose to go the polls (some of which were 60 kms from voters' residences). Women candidates either emerged from regions where LEOS was promoting its WPP initiative and/or were affiliated with other existing NGO efforts.

LEOS was successful in carrying out training projects in all the provinces. By the time of the elections, LEOS made conservative estimates to have reached more than 3000 women voters throughout the country, although most of these were in the five provinces closest to Ulaanbaatar.

While the voter turnout and party reversals in the legislative body imply successful voter education efforts, these impressive developments cannot be solely attributed to the specific efforts of WSP and LEOS. Nevertheless, each organization addressed key issues of success in democracy promotion, as well as demonstrating success in their more specific goals. Both organizations addressed issues of empowerment, informed choice, and proactive participation. Both organizations sought to level the playing field and diversify participation by reaching previously under-represented populations, including rural areas and women, through a variety of mechanisms. LEOS sought to maximize its reach throughout Mongolia's 21 provinces, while WSP broadened the audience for its voter education initiative to include both men and women.

More specifically, seeking to maximize its contribution, WSP recognized its program limitations and sought to overcome them proactively and quickly. Since WSP recognized its urban bias and, therefore, its limited relevance for the diverse populations it sought to reach, its first priority was to develop the most appropriate materials and information. Starting

with the most general objective sources, it later investigated candidates for representation of a number of regions and sought to question them with respect to key issues of greatest relevance to those constituencies. In the absence of any physical presence in distant provinces, WSP initially sought to reach various regions through more general dissemination - techniques such as radio and newspaper. Only in the latter stages of the pre-election period did it deliver seminars in outlying locations.

LEOS' more specific goals of women in politics are more easily measured. While they fell short of their 15% women representation target, the 9% that was achieved was substantial given the context and culture. While attribution is difficult, it is still likely that LEGS played a role in tipping the scales for women who were already considering running for office. This is particularly true of its own leaders who used the opportunity to their advantage to weigh their options. Indeed, of the seven current women Members of Parliament, three of them are former LEGS leaders.

Perceived Utility

One of the first challenges for these NGOs was establishing utility and credibility in a more general sense. Since citizen-initiated NGOs were a new phenomenon in Mongolia, particularly in the politically charged arena of voter education, these organizations needed to act swiftly to demonstrate their utility and particularly their added value to official electoral commission efforts. Not only did WSP move quickly to establish its niche and credibility, it can be argued that it set standards for voter education in terms of processes and objectivity that the official electoral commission had to contend with. In effect, WSP put the officials on the defensive to carve out their specific role. It is no wonder, then, that the electoral commission fell back on the chimera of WSP partisanship, especially given their effectiveness in providing widely disseminated information. LEOS, on the other hand, was less inhibited by the need to establish utility vis-à-vis an official commission since women in politics was a new idea that wouldn't likely be embraced by any official' agency.

LEOS demonstrated comparative advantage vis-à-vis the official commission in its ability to quickly reach out nationwide through its existing structure and surpass other women's organizations through mobilization of its provincial chapters. In this way, LEOS had its own niche too.

Both organizations demonstrated utility in their provision of training and knowledge. While WSP relied mostly on objective, raw (i.e., unanalyzed) information, LEOS provided training in assessing the implications of the information for women and was thus more analytical in its focus. On the other hand, WSP encouraged average voters toward more subtle analysis and a somewhat more independent empowerment when, for example, it juxtaposed voting records, platforms, and biographical information with large portrait pictures of the specific candidate.

While both organizations suffered from an urban bias, LEOS had the advantage of its existing regional chapters. This federation structure assisted LEOS in making its materials most relevant with the incorporation of local information and data. These chapters allowed for more on-site training and thus enabled a more personal approach with spontaneous responsiveness and interaction that WSP could not attain. Only in the latter stages of the pre-election period did WSP deliver on-site seminars outside of Ulaanbaatar and then only to a limited number of selected regions.

The most impressive demonstrations of the utility of both organizations is found in their balance of entrainment and overture, and in their employment of multiple approaches to attain targeted responsiveness. Both organizations were open to the skills and training provided by international sources: WSP received skills training and templates from a voter education specialist from the United States; LEOS capitalized on its APWIP connection and corresponding materials. These influences were appropriately balanced with strong linkages to the local context.

WSP demonstrated its entrainment through the content of its information: it used specific, contextual information that was all Mongolia-based, while still benefiting from international information where appropriate. For example, WSP juxtaposed international examples of good governance with patterns occurring in Mongolia to both explain the phenomenon and empower the citizenry regarding the gaps in practice. LEGS' approach to entrainment was again based in its federation structure. Its voter education and women in politics materials were of a more general nature owing to their collaborative development with other members of APWIP. While efforts were made to contextualize this information, it remained for the most part more abstract than the concrete examples and candidate-specific information provided by WSP. Still, LEGS was more potentially embedded with specific constituencies in a variety of regions, including some of the most remote.

Through different approaches, both organizations demonstrated targeted responsiveness, essentially meeting the voter rather than requiring the voter to seek out the organization. Both organizations aimed to bridge the urban-rural gap and addressed informal constraints to participation by providing a variety of means by which to receive and act upon the organization's specific message. WSP used a wide range of information dissemination mechanisms, none of which required the voter to go out of her or his way in committing time or even much energy, while LEGS addressed diversity in approach by recognizing that there was a broad range of participation options for women in politics.

Perceived Neutrality

The temporary nature of voter education associated with particular elections inhibits the development of accountability to and even identification of a well-defined constituency. Despite these organizations' pre-election existence, they were both engaging in activities in a new and poorly understood arena with which they had not been previously associated. This meant that both organizations had very little time to

develop trust and credibility and needed to do so while the process was in full gear. While perceptions of partisanship remained important for both organizations, the NGOs were able to address this issue of neutrality and credibility in other ways. This was done, in part, through their efforts to demonstrate responsiveness and relevance as noted above.

However, the particular neutrality challenges facing each organization necessitated additional tactics. WSP, again, addressed this concern through the content of its information. To minimize opportunities to question or any possible appearances of partisanship, WSP's guiding principle was to let the information speak for itself. Thus it relied on original sources with as little modification as possible. Where new information was required, WSP made every effort to let the candidate speak directly for her/himself, in her/his own language.

LEOS' more serious challenge had to be addressed through process constraints. Its particular challenge was obviously its mix of personalities and objectives - the fact that its leaders were striving to promote women's voter participation while at the same time contemplating a run for office. Candidates and trainers/facilitators of women in politics training were thus strictly separated, and even candidate promoters were removed from the nonpartisan training vicinity. The possibility remains that LEGS' leadership/candidates used the NGO as a vehicle for their own informal polling and information gathering. All three candidates waited until the final days of declaration to submit their names for candidacy. On the other hand, the vying political coalitions specifically strategize to delay declarations so as not to provide additional time advantages for their opponents to form their campaign offense. The only true assurance of safeguarded neutrality and associated perceptions will be the organizations' ability to continue to be effective in arenas that require such neutrality. This, of course, remains to be seen.

IMPLICATIONS

While the Mongolian context is unique, it does present the many formidable challenges to pursuing political liberalization common in a context lacking historical and cultural democratic traditions, and the experiences of WSP and LEGS offer more general lessons regarding the role and effectiveness of NGOs in voter education and democracy promotion.

First and foremost, success will always be a relative term. Not only does success depend fundamentally on the more precise NGO's objectives (i.e., voter participation vs. women in politics), attribution is near impossible. Election preparation doesn't take place in a vacuum - there are sure to be many other actors, including official ones, and many extenuating circumstances. For example, voter turnout is inextricably linked to the logistics and administration of ballot boxes and ease of access, not to mention potential negative ramifications of participating (or not), and myriad factors influencing voter expectations and credibility of the process. Nevertheless, the literature supports the potential role of NGOs in enhancing the diversity of participants, particularly in bridging the gap between the rural and urban centers. Short of surveying the voters, success can be measured in part by assessing the mere existence of voter education outreach efforts to various constituencies. The quality of that outreach is, again, another matter. It is clear that, particularly in the Mongolia case, NGOs provided a greater volume of information than would otherwise be made available, and delivered that information on a timelier basis through greater and more diverse mechanisms, and to a broader array of locations than the official electoral commission would be capable of or even motivated to do.

That said, NGOs must still reckon with official agencies and other actors who would question the legitimacy and utility of their entry into this arena. The cases above indicate that:

1. Where an NGO has a more specific niche, i.e., women in politics, it may be less challenged on the grounds of redundancy or direct

competition;

2. Where an NGO has a particular comparative advantage, i.e., existing outreach infrastructure, it may be similarly difficult for critics to prevent or discourage their use of it; and
3. With or without these advantages, an NGO is likely to gain its credibility, establish its niche, and even set standards, where it moves swiftly and decisively, staying ahead of the official commission's own project implementation.

The two organizations clearly demonstrate that there are a variety of approaches to providing training and knowledge in voter education. While one approach may stress the analysis of information and events with respect to their implications for a particular constituency (i.e., women), other approaches can be equally empowering by emphasizing the citizens' own interpretation given complete information but compellingly presented (i.e., the juxtaposition of contrasts such as international examples of good governance and domestic patterns of lack of transparency and accountability, or the immediate association of voting patterns and platforms with the biographical information and picture of a candidate). Both approaches can be said to be better or worse and both hold great potential for practical and psychological empowerment.

With respect to rural outreach, the cases demonstrate that a federation structure is not essential. While its chapters did provide LEGS important opportunities to disseminate information and training, it is possible that LEGS relied so heavily on this structure as the basis for its embeddedness that it may have failed to maximize this opportunity to inform its approach and materials with local information and concerns. On the other hand, WSP's efforts demonstrate that such outreach is possible through less formal and structural means by relying on a variety of dissemination mechanisms and by focusing on the equally important communication direction of the center to the periphery. That is, WSP was able to provide previously unavailable information, based in the capital, regarding voting records and political priorities of incumbents to their rural constituencies.

Both organizations provide interesting models for the balance between entrainment and overtone. WSP borrowed approaches and templates from abroad and contextualized them with local information, while LEGS took more information from abroad and focused more on contextualizing it in the context of delivery. It would seem that both approaches have their own merit and would have to be more carefully evaluated with respect to the different objectives being pursued (i.e., voter participation vs. women in politics).

Especially where NGOs are engaged in voter education for the first time, given the enormous obstacles to developing accountability in this new context in this short duration, NGOs must immediately demonstrate relevance and responsiveness in good faith to particular constituencies. This also means avoiding any appearance of partisanship. The organizations studied, once again, took different approaches: one from the content perspective, letting the information and candidates speak for themselves; the other from the process perspective, physically separating the actors and arenas of the different activities. Just as attribution of overall success is problematic, so too is any definitive statement regarding perceived neutrality. One indication will be the ability of each organization to build upon this experience and continue to be effective in realms that require nonpartisanship. Even this will be difficult to gauge since, on its part, LEGS has now divided its mission to include both women in politics and women in development, thus its relations with the political realm will change dramatically anyway. WSP, on the other hand, is well-positioned to engage in future voter education activities as its nonpartisanship was never compromised through the election of its leaders, and is, in fact, continuing to do so.

CONCLUSION

While the challenges to NGO engagement in promoting democracy in newly transitioning countries are impressively daunting, the Mongolia

case demonstrates that their effective contribution is quite possible; there are a variety of approaches to delivering it. The experience of WSP and LEGS in preparing for the June 1996 parliamentary elections provides useful examples of both successful information content and delivery processes, gained through an appropriate balance between entrainment and overture, with attention to early and decisive establishment of credibility and continuous attention to issues of neutrality and nonpartisanship. The more specific lessons learned with respect to effectiveness, utility, and neutrality are broadly applicable in a global environment that promotes political liberalization and an enhanced role of NGOs. Nevertheless, determination of the precise efficacy of such efforts requires additional theoretical work and comparative application, particularly with respect to measurement, attribution, and weighing the impact of external factors.

By highlighting the issues, challenges, and different approaches, these cases provide valuable input for donors designing and supporting civic education efforts in similar environments. Chief among the more specific lessons related to donor support is the potential need for the donor to assist the organization to maintain its perceived and literal neutrality and nonpartisanship. This was clearly needed in the case of LEGS who, owing to financial constraints, would likely not have otherwise taken pains to distinguish between its civic education efforts and the candidacy of its leadership. This also points to the dilemma donors may face in choosing to support organizations whose leadership may have conflicts of interest but that nevertheless hold the possibility of significantly contributing to program objectives.

As experience in civic education and its support accumulates in the growing realm of political liberalization promotion, many of these lessons can be tried, augmented, and revised. In the meantime, it is already a great tribute to the NGO forerunners that the precedent for their participation in this realm is well-established and with what would seem to be great success.

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