

# NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

## Civic Update

### A New Side of Skills Development

Citizen Participation Team | May 2017

What helps citizens succeed as political leaders and activists? This is a question that many of NDI's citizen participation programs work to address. The transfer of knowledge and technical skills are seen as critical to these efforts. However, there is also a growing understanding of the need to develop certain attitudes and behaviors that help increase and sustain the effectiveness of participation. This process takes time and practice, and is one reason NDI emphasizes learning-by-doing approaches, where citizens also learn "soft skills" related to social interaction, communication, and higher-order thinking necessary for political success. USAID and other donor agencies are also recognizing the need to focus more explicitly on "soft skills" as a critical element of all human development work. This issue of the Civic Update examines how NDI programming can address this new side of skills development.

#### What Are "Soft Skills?"

USAID and other development agencies have grouped a number of related traits under the heading of "soft skills," including positive self-concept, self-control, higher order thinking (problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making), social and interpersonal skills (including conflict resolution and negotiation), empathy, and goal orientation.<sup>1</sup>

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*Challenger participants in Moldova conduct get out the vote efforts*

The Organization for Economic Co-operation Development (OECD) uses the term "social and emotional skills," which it defines as the skills involved in "achieving goals, working with others and managing emotions."<sup>2</sup> Other terms that have been used to describe them include "life" skills and "human and conceptual" skills.

"Soft skills" are typically contrasted with "hard" or technical skills, which are skills related to specific, tangible activities that can be observed and measured, such as baking a cake, driving a car or writing computer code. "Soft skills," on the other hand, are more akin to personal habits and perspectives than discrete technical abilities. However, this distinction can be misleading, since "soft skills" underlie and reinforce "hard skills:" for example, computer programming is a "hard skill," but the higher-order thinking necessary to envision and design a new program is a "soft skill." The intangible nature of "soft skills" means that, unlike some "hard skills," they cannot be readily taught through discrete interventions, like a training. Instead, they are learned over time through repeated practice. The following table links a few "hard skills" with underlying "soft skills" to help illustrate both the connections and distinctions between the two. As the examples indicate, "soft" and "hard" skills go hand in hand. Neither is effective on its own; both are important for effective civic and political activism.

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"Hard Skill"	Underlying "Soft Skill"
Writing a campaign communication plan	Interpersonal skills ( <i>the ability to effectively communicate and engage positively with other people</i> )
Carrying out an advocacy strategy	Goal orientation ( <i>the motivation and ability to make viable plans and take action toward desired goals</i> )
Completing a power analysis toolkit	Higher-order thinking ( <i>the ability to identify an issue and take in information from multiple sources to evaluate options in order to reach a reasonable conclusion. Includes critical thinking, problem solving and decision making</i> )

The "soft" interpersonal skills required to understand how to effectively convey information about your campaign to a particular audience, for example, inform the writing as well as implementation of a campaign communication plan.

## State of the Research

There is a growing conviction among development agencies, educators, and governments that "soft skills" should receive significant focus alongside "hard" and technical skills and that "while these [technical] skills are highly predictive of success in some aspects of life, social and emotional skills show a higher predictive power for a broader range of social outcomes."<sup>3</sup> Employers across the globe often claim that job applicants lack the "soft skills" needed to succeed in the modern workplace, which has led to the incorporation of "soft skills" into many youth employment programs. There has also been substantial research on the impact of "soft skills" programs on outcomes in education, violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health, although questions remain about

program design and utility when developing "soft skills."<sup>4</sup> While there is no direct research into the relationship between "soft skills" and democracy, research has explored violence prevention and peacebuilding interventions which seek to support tolerance of opposing views, resolving difference and conflict through dialogue rather than violence, and intergroup empathy, which are key to strengthening democratic norms and practices.

"Soft skills" are primarily discussed in a youth context, as some evidence shows greater malleability in these skills at younger ages. A growing body of research also shows that "soft skills" contribute to positive youth outcomes across various sectors of development. The problems that "soft skills" approaches seek to ameliorate are not exclusive to young people, but they disproportionately affect youth: unemployment is highest among youth; youth are prone to poorly-informed decisions about sexual and reproductive health; and a large proportion of violence, whether committed individually or in gangs and other armed groups, is perpetrated by youth. Research suggests that earlier "soft skills" interventions are more beneficial, as "skills beget skills" in a compounding manner.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, many post-conflict reconciliation programs that engage a wide age range of participants contain "soft skills" components with a goal of preventing violence, and there is no explicit evidence demonstrating that "soft skills" education becomes ineffective after a certain age. Early-stage research from the Center for Empathy in International Affairs also suggests that neurological systems dealing with distress and compassion are malleable in adults and that empathy can be built through targeted training.<sup>7</sup>

A recent YouthPower Learning draft report outlines guiding principles for building "soft skills" among adolescents and young adults. The report emphasizes the importance of experiential learning - "soft skill" development occurs through new experiences that provide the opportunity to practice, an appropriate level of challenge, and reflection on the experience. Because "soft skills" are interrelated, training should address them in combination. Strong and supportive relationships based on shared power and respect for young women and men's contri-

### Gender and "Soft Skills"

It is important to bear in mind how the distinction between "hard" and "soft" skills can relate to socially constructed gender norms. In many contexts, "soft skills" such as social and emotional skills, are associated with women and are perceived to be feminine traits, whereas "hard" skills such as mathematics and computer skills are associated with men and perceived to be more masculine in nature. As a result, normative perceptions of feminine "soft skills" can be seen as irreconcilable with the masculine "hard skills," leading to a lack of recognition in the ways in which they underpin and reinforce one another.<sup>5</sup> These socially constructed gender norms around skills have also caused many educational programs to undervalue "soft skills" when compared with "hard skills." In addition to calling into question the clean distinction between "soft" and "hard" skills, this could impact the way "soft skills" are developed, perceived and utilized by men and women.

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butions make the experiential learning approach most effective. Because staff attitudes and behavior can impact the outcome, they should exemplify the “soft skills” in question, provide positive reinforcement, adapt skill-building to participants’ skill levels and interests, and facilitate communication and learning between participants. Programs should also ensure that the differential needs, perspectives, and impacts on women and men are taken into consideration throughout program design and implementation due to the gendered nature of the distinction between “hard” and “soft” skills. Finally, effective programs should integrate learning contexts, including the family, local community, schools/universities, and the workplace, because “soft skills” are complementary in nature and their development is enhanced when messaging is consistent across contexts.<sup>8</sup>

Measuring outcomes of “soft skills” development programs is difficult, and many evaluations, including those employed by most NDI programs, rely on self-reported data. However, several tools provide more rigorous and standardized measurement for “soft skills” interventions. USAID has suggested the Chinese Youth Positive Development Scale (CYPDS), while the World Bank’s comprehensive STEP Skills Measurement methodology includes several questions assessing socio-emotional skills derived from the Big Five personality model. A randomized control trial (RCT), in which participants (individuals, villages, schools) are randomly assigned to receive or not receive a particular intervention and differences measured between the participants receiving an intervention and the control group, is another possible evaluation model. However, demonstrating causation between skills and successful outcomes through an RCT is still difficult.<sup>9</sup>

## Why Are “Soft Skills” Important for Democracy & How May NDI Programs Help Build Them?

NDI has noted a widespread recognition among young political activists of the need for improved “soft skills” to succeed as a civic or political leader. Although there is a need for formal study of how democracy assistance programs develop “soft skills,” the connection between soft skills and democratic practice is clear. “Soft skills” underlie most activities that are necessary for leaders, activists, and informed citizens in a democratic context. At the most basic level, citizens with improved higher-order thinking skills are better informed when they participate in politics, consume news media more critically, and can undertake more nuanced discussion of political issues. With stronger higher-order thinking skills, activists and politicians can more effectively conduct power analysis and contribute to developing more informed policies.

Although “soft skills” development is not typically an explicit objective of NDI’s programs, an analysis of many

programs suggests that the practice of political organizing both requires and develops “soft skills.” For example, gaining a better understanding of a country’s political system, learning how to use technical skills and tools to engage the political process, and seeing tangible results from an advocacy effort can foster a sense of **self-efficacy** and power that one can affect change through politics. Through the practice of political analysis, opinion formation, negotiation and debates, people develop **higher-order thinking skills** like critical thinking and problem solving. Through the process of setting a goal, developing a plan to achieve it and following through, people practice and develop a **goal-oriented** mentality. Where NDI brings together different societal groups, such as ethnic and religious communities, sexual and gender minorities, people with disabilities, and diverse political party groups to interact with one another and discuss their experiences, interests and needs, people develop **empathy** by gaining a better understanding of and cognitively processing another’s perspective and state of mind. Contemporary research also indicates that emotions-based trainings can build empathy and apply to conflict resolution and peace-building contexts. Inter-group, person-to-person interactions, such as debates and working in groups to plan and take political action, build **social and interpersonal skills**. It is important to note that, as described above, recent guidance by USAID/YouthPower Learning suggests that “soft skills” are best learned through experience. These skills are not developed through a single discrete activity or training session, but rather are fluid and develop over time through practice. A preliminary review of “soft skills” development within NDI programs has highlighted the skills of **empathy, higher-order thinking and interpersonal skills** as common in programs and particularly relevant to NDI’s mission.



*Ana Usharek participants vote in a debate competition*

The relationship between “soft skills” and political engagement may be different for men and women. For example, NDI discussions with young women activists suggests that building these abilities is particularly important for them, as they may be at more of a deficit in certain areas due to unequal educational and other opportuni-

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ties. For example, young women may need more time to build up the sense of self-efficacy necessary to persevere in the political sphere due to cultural norms that discourage women from participating in public life. Moreover, sociocultural and institutional barriers to women's political participation may prevent them from exercising their "soft skills." Put another way, programming may develop increased "hard" and "soft" skills for women in politics, but if there are no spaces for them to exercise these skills due to discriminatory social norms and institutional barriers, they will not benefit from programs in the same way as men.

How can NDI best incorporate "soft skills" development in its programming? The following examples of NDI programs demonstrate how "soft skills" can contribute to democracy assistance outcomes.

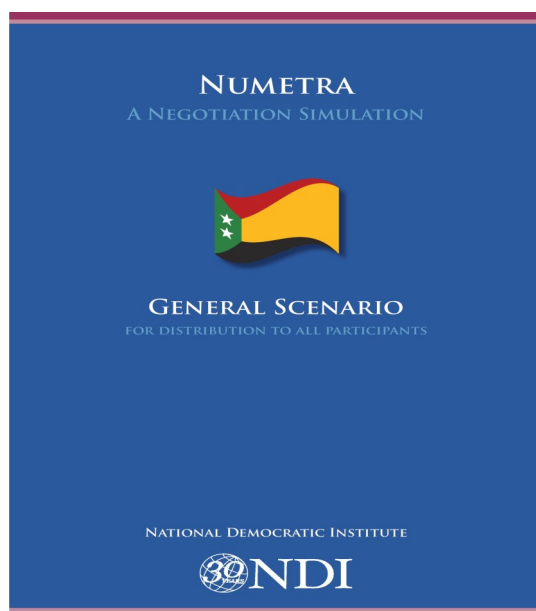
## Conflict Resolution & Empathy in Negotiation: Bahrain

Particularly since the outbreak the 2011 uprising, Bahrain's politics has been characterized by entrenched divisions between the government and opposition. After high-level discussions on reform failed to bring about material changes, moderate Bahraini youth have demonstrated greater openness and willingness to engage across partisan lines and requested assistance to better communicate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts within their own organizations and across the political spectrum. From 2013 to 2015, NDI brought together politically and civically active youth from all sides who were seeking an avenue to engage peacefully in the democratic reform process. The program aimed to help participants develop the skills and

experience to reach across the aisle as they take on more senior roles in government, political parties and civil society. To achieve that goal, NDI sought to build empathy and relationships between youth of different political backgrounds through a program focused on negotiation and conflict resolution. Empathy-building was not an explicit activity; rather, it was threaded throughout the program.

To avoid the challenges of such a politically sensitive environment and encourage participants to step outside of their day-to-day experiences, activities were conducted out of country. The first program iteration engaged youth in loyalist and opposition-aligned groups separately. Both cohorts found the separation unnecessary and expressed a desire to interact with and learn from youth of different backgrounds, so future sessions were merged. In an acknowledgment that skills building requires sustained investment over time, the program consisted of multiple workshops. Participants first attended a messaging and communications training including active listening and feedback exercises. NDI chose to host the following negotiation and conflict transformation workshop in Northern Ireland to enrich participants' experience with the context of the region's recent political strife and reconciliation efforts. From the late 1960s until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Northern Ireland was embroiled in a low-level conflict known as the Troubles, driven by a variety of political, ethnic and religious factors. While Northern Ireland's history varies significantly from that of Bahrain, the similar experience of intra-societal conflict provided an opportunity for reflection and learning. The negotiation skills-building workshop was led by a former deputy Northern Ireland party leader, and participants also had the opportunity to meet current Northern Ireland Assembly members, party leaders involved in the Good Friday Agreement, former political prisoners, and community activists. After completing the trainings, participants carried out a political negotiations simulation.

To approach empathy-building through negotiation and conflict resolution, participants worked through a simulation based on a scenario in a fictional country, "Numetra," which is in the midst of a political crisis involving major street protests and escalating violence. Participants were provided with a general background dossier on the demographics, politics, and conflict context of Numetra, as well as a unique brief explaining their personal role within an internationally-mediated "National Negotiation Initiative," negotiating stance, and desired outcomes. Numetra was designed with a generic demographic, social and political context which made it widely applicable, but participants identified parallels to their own country and situation given common themes across politically charged environments. Participants in the simulation took on reversed roles: loyalist participants role-played as members of the opposition, and opposition participants



*Participant manual for the Numetra simulation*

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were assigned loyalist positions.

NDI's program built empathy among young Bahrainis according to intergroup contact theory, which posits that conditioned interpersonal contact can meaningfully reduce prejudice between groups. According to the theory, for a contact situation to effectively reduce prejudice, groups must be of equal status within the interaction, work to achieve a common goal through cooperation, have the support of an facilitating authority, and involve significant personal interaction.<sup>10</sup> The Numetra simulation also built empathy at the intellectual level by forcing participants to temporarily embrace and think through the mindsets and motivations of their political adversaries through switching roles in a fictional world. NDI programs that build empathy often include role-playing or other activities which require participants to take on and act out the perspectives of others. This experiential learning is key to "soft skill" development and more effective than, for example, a group discussion about why the other side thinks the way they do. As they are required to adopt the thought processes of each other's viewpoints, participants must work through the logical and emotional underpinnings of a formerly unfamiliar and perhaps misunderstood political stance.

The setting of Northern Ireland provided a safe space for participants to reflect on their own understanding of Bahrain's civil unrest as they learned about North Ireland's experience in conflict and reconciliation. By removing participants from the tense environment in Bahrain, the program gave them the opportunity to engage in more open and honest discussions and build constructive relationships with their opponents. An opposition participant said that until the NDI program, he had never pictured himself being in the same room with someone representing a loyalist group but found the experience important because it allowed him to form relationships with youth across the political spectrum. Empathy paves the way for a politics that transcends conflict over religious or ethnic identity and allows for negotiation and coalition-building, whether in the political system or at the community level. Participants also learned the importance of phrasing in connecting with "opponents" to enable constructive communication and not appear overly aggressive. The combination of role-swapping in simulations, interacting with participants across the political divide, and the historical context of Northern Ireland was very cathartic for participants and helped lay the foundation for future joint engagement.

## Interpersonal & Social Skills: Jordan

Similar to many countries across the globe, most youth in Jordan are excluded from and inactive in politics. Youth see parliament as ineffective and rarely identify with a political party. Parties in Jordan based on ideological plat-

forms are rare and receive only a minority of votes. Instead, most candidates run (and most citizens vote) on the basis of tribal ties. Further, dominant practices in the education system do not encourage participatory learning, critical thinking, or open discussion and debate based on personal opinion or analysis. These factors contribute to a political culture rarely characterized by nuanced debates or consistent policy positions. NDI's Ana Usharek (I Participate) and Usharek+ programs address this challenge by activating young Jordanian men and women in politics and public life through providing a space for interactive civic education and support in taking political action to address issues in their communities.



*Ana Usharek participant analyzes youth community priorities*

Through Ana Usharek, which has operated since 2012, university students learn about democratic values and political systems, human rights, non-violent dispute resolution, and civic responsibility. Through a semester-long curriculum, participants engage in weekly sessions at their university where they are introduced to the above topics, learn how they are applied in other countries, and discuss how they relate to their own lives and the Jordanian context. During Ana Usharek discussion sessions, youth are required to analyze concepts introduced, an exercise that builds critical thinking. By interacting with others and discussing opposing views with others in a respectful way, youth build interpersonal skills that improve their ability to interact productively in social contexts and effectively express and understand knowledge and ideas. These experiences open avenues for citizens from diverse backgrounds to take collective political action around common priorities, breaking down barriers and building relationships. External research has also shown that interpersonal skills contribute to violence prevention, particularly among youth.<sup>11</sup> When people feel confi-

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dent in the possibility of expressing themselves socially and discussing issues in their communities, violence becomes a less attractive option.

Each year, graduates of the Ana Usharek program can apply to participate in the Usharek+ program, where selected youth receive NDI technical support and mentorship in carrying out advocacy campaigns to address local and national level issues. Through this year-long program, youth combine training in “soft skills” with technical political skills for policy advocacy. Participants learn how to conduct advocacy campaigns through a combination of interactive learning workshops facilitated by NDI and applying new skills to carry out advocacy to address self-selected issues. They also learn how to participate in policy debates, and practice these abilities through regional and national debate competitions with other universities. Participants learn the “hard skills” of debating, including debate formats and how to structure an argument. But participants and staff report that the debates provide an opportunity to practice critical thinking through policy analysis, as well as social skills for constructive interaction and exchange of ideas among youth holding different viewpoints. The practice of analyzing a public problem, developing and implementing a campaign strategy and plan to address it, participants also practice the higher order thinking skills of problem solving and goal orientation.

During interviews with NDI as part of a recent study of Ana Usharek and Usharek+, participants and staff consistently identified the above-described “soft skills” as some of the most valuable outcomes for young people’s continued participation in politics and public life. NDI’s Jordan staff report a transformation in these abilities among young women and men as they progress through the two programs. When students first begin Ana Usharek, many are hesitant to speak out about their own political positions or challenge others’, and there are more instances of students miscommunicating opinions. As the program progresses and participants practice interpersonal and higher order thinking skills, discussions become more lively, efficient and effective. For example, NDI facilitators report many cases where some of the Ana Usharek participants who were the initially the most reserved becoming some of the most vocal and participatory by the end of the program.

Participants also report these “soft skills” translating to other areas of their lives - for instance, they become more confident in analyzing and discussing public issues in a formal and constructive manner with their peers, friends and family. Speaking of how Ana Usharek affects youth, a Dean of Student Affairs at a university where the program operates said, “Students who complete the program demonstrate a completely different way of thinking about society, with a more disciplined desire to play a publicly active role. They also demonstrate improved abilities to engage constructively with others.”

## Critical Thinking for Policy Development: Moldova

Despite successive pro-European governments making progress toward Moldova’s European future with the signing of an Association Agreement, Moldova’s democratic transition has stalled, while Moldovan government agencies and political parties often lack the policy capacity to develop appropriate solutions to the country’s pressing issues. This deficiency is rooted in the education system’s decades-long emphasis on rote learning and memorization to the detriment of critical thinking, discussion, and research skills. Therefore, much of the current and next generation of politicians and civil servants are not well-equipped to develop policy. In addition to limiting effective policy development, the dearth of adequately qualified applicants opens the door for nepotism and corruption in the government hiring process.



*Challenger participants canvass and get out the vote for parliamentary elections*

NDI’s Challenger program arose out of the recognized critical need to develop higher order thinking skills for policy development, analysis and implementation, particularly for young people who may lack prior experience in the policy sphere. Addressing the skills deficit among youth, which is perpetuated by the education system, will improve capacity for policy development within parties and state institutions. The program also addresses a major issue affecting Moldova - the adverse effect of the emigration of well-educated Moldovans to western countries with more promising opportunities. The Challenger program offers ambitious and idealistic young people the opportunity to improve their skills and contribute to meaningful work in improving governance in Moldova.

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NDI conducted a multi-phase program for university students and young professionals to develop skills in grassroots political organizing, citizen outreach, policy analysis and research. However, Challenger is not simply a series of technical trainings providing a checklist guide to policy analysis but aims intentionally to develop participants' higher-order thinking skills to prepare them for challenging and stimulating work in a variety of contexts. Particularly in contexts where educational systems do not encourage these skills, NDI programs promote these abilities through experiential learning, such as conducting policy research and political analysis or evaluating case studies.

The course consists of three components: a field canvassing exercise, a policy debate school and a school of critical thinking. Participants begin by canvassing members of their community to identify an important local issue. After taking the "Political Compass" test to determine their own ideological leanings, they are divided into two groups aligning with either the ruling Democratic Party or their opposition, which is an important step for the remainder of the program. The policy debate school, consists of a series of trainings that improve participants' research, communication and presentation skills. Challengers learn how to structure arguments and develop strategies on particular topics, all while working in teams. In the "School of Critical Thinking," Challengers are guided through the process of developing a policy to address the issue identified in the first step from their respective ideological perspectives. In this final step, the skills that were acquired throughout the program, such as debate and higher-order thinking skills are put to the test in the form of a final debate. During this final debate, which is attended by members of parliament, government officials responsible for the identified issue and members of the press, Challengers debate their policy recommendations to address a local issue.

In only three years, Challenger has developed a stellar reputation and is recognized as a valuable credential for public service-minded youth. More than 80 percent of graduates are employed in government ministries or parties. Following one of the final debates, a parliamentarian commented that the presentations she heard from Challenger participants were of higher quality than what is often presented in parliament and that she would take Challenger's recommendations back to her parliamentary committee. This is an indication of the program's effectiveness in building higher-order thinking skills in youth policy leaders as well as the add-on effect of raising expectations of the level of critical thinking in policy analysis within parliament and political parties.

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