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Mobile and Satellite Phones Are Useful Election Monitoring Tools Technology enables organizations to transmit data in real time



A volunteer tracks reports on the Ghanaian election.

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Washington — Millions of people worldwide use mobile phones to communicate with friends, take photos, play music and check e-mail. Democracy advocates are harnessing the power of mobile phones to monitor elections by transmitting critical data in real time.

In many developing nations, information communications technology (ICT), which employs mobile phones (commonly referred to as cell phones in the United States) and computers, is increasingly the main source of communication, says Ian Schuler, ICT manager at the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Washington.

"In important elections like the December 2008 presidential contest and runoff in Ghana, it was only natural that ICT be used as a tool to help ensure a free and fair outcome," Schuler told *America.gov*.

NDI has provided technical support to nonpartisan election monitors in more than 70 countries. Over the past four years, it has used short message system (SMS) technology to report on elections in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Montenegro, Indonesia and the Palestinian Authority.

SMS technology operates using mobile phones and computer software to transmit, collect and interpret timely information from volunteer observers at polling stations, said Schuler, who helped develop the training and ICT strategy for the Ghanaian election.

"Election observers use a series of carefully constructed codes to phone in very short text messages limited to 160 characters that goes straight into a computer," Schuler explained.

In the Ghanaian election, Schuler said, "We had 1,070 people called rapid response observers reporting from 230 different constituencies who sent their text messages into a command center where specialized computer software processed the information."

He said the monitors were required to submit five reports a day and could transmit complex information in very short messages "because they already had a questionnaire indicating what they were looking for and each of the questions and answers had a code. This would then tell the computer what they were observing."

The volunteers, who received a one-day training session on the questionnaires and codes, used their own mobile phones but were provided with prepaid phone cards. "Since the data they sent was in electronic format [rather than by voice], we had that information put together within minutes," Schuler said.

The result, he said, is that "this rapid reporting of election conditions has proven very reliable, cost effective and helped to instill confidence in the democratic process."

In Ghana, NDI worked with a local organization called the

Center for Democratic Development (CDD.) Jared Ford, a senior program officer at NDI, said, "I think Ghana is really going to be the model for how SMS works and how local monitoring groups like the CDD take ownership of the process."

By using SMS, "CDD had its election results hours, days before the [Ghanaian] electoral commission did and that played a key role because the contest was very close with two runoff elections," said Gemima Neves, NDI senior program manager for Central and West Africa.

CDD official Franklin Oduro said the organization was able to help the electoral commission by alerting it to supply shortages at polling sites.

Kojo Asante, who ran the CDD operations center, told *America.gov*, "I have never done anything like this before. In other elections, we used laptops to build a database of information sent in by monitors speaking over mobiles, but it was a pretty slow process."

The speed and accuracy of the SMS process, Asante said, "really affected our media releases, which we were getting out quicker because of the real-time information we received at midday, and allowed us to give a more reliable account of how the election was going."

SATELLITE PHONES HELP ELECTION MONITORS

New information technology makes it easier for outside election observers to do their jobs, Lisa Gates, press secretary for the International Republican Institute (IRI) in Washington, told *America.gov*. IRI has deployed dozens of teams to monitor foreign elections, many of which used satellite phones to gather information about polling station conditions.

Shawn Beighle, IRI's director of ICT, said that in elections in Nigeria, Georgia, Kenya, Ukraine and Bangladesh, "we used satellite phones because in a lot of the countries we can't trust the cellular networks to be functional. Some countries even shut down cell phone networks during elections."

Beighle, who directed the ICT efforts for the IRI team deployed to the 2007 Nigerian presidential contest, said, "In that election we supplied more than 25 sat phones to observer teams. They were given a one-page cheat sheet of monitoring questions to which they would phone in quick answers to an integrated voice response [IVR] system operated by the command center in Abuja."

Because phone time is expensive, Beighle said, the IVR technology, similar to an automated customer-service phone system, allows "teams to voice quick responses, usually yes or no, or choose a multiple-choice answer to the preset list of monitoring questions, without having a long conversation."

Like the SMS process, IVR enables a real-time picture of election conditions to be developed, Gates said. "We're able to have updates every hour on what our teams are seeing throughout the entire country using basic, easy-to-read data."

"Various political and civil society actors involved in the election depend on such quality and reliable information to give them a more holistic picture of what happened during the election," Gates said.

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