Evaluating and Improving Community Engagement for Electoral Reform in the Cooperative Republic of Guyana

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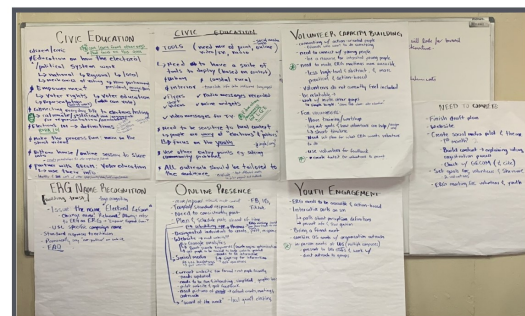
1. Introduction

· Guyana has a complex political history that has sowed deep partisan and ethnic divisions and distrust.
· In 2020, an elections crisis occurred when one party nearly did not give up power. After the election, it was decided that electoral reform was needed.
· Electoral Reform Group (ERG) was formed to ensure citizens are included in the electoral reform process.
· ERG intends to engage communities from the grassroots level to make sure the public has a say in the electoral reform process.
· This practicum involved working with ERG to use a participatory approach to evaluate their methods of communications and community engagement and, based on my experience in campaigns and community organizing, build an actionable plan for moving forward.
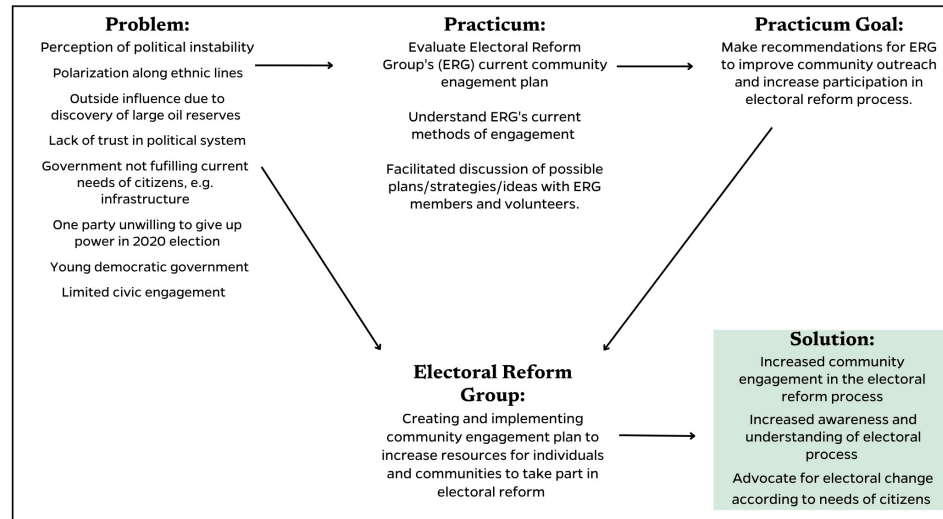
2. Objectives

· Main Objective: Evaluate ERG's community engagement methods and make recommendations and assist forming the basis of an engagement plan moving forward
· Specific Objective: Analysis of the ability of ERG's current engagement strategies in promoting political understanding and engagement.
· Specific Objective: Understand the goals of ERG and its members and assessing the needs of the organization to complete these goals.
· Specific Objective: Understand what strategies need to be taken in the short and medium term to achieve short and long-term goals of ERG, from a communications and engagement perspective.
· Specific Objective: Understand the sociopolitical context of Guyana and how it affects the goals and strategies of ERG.
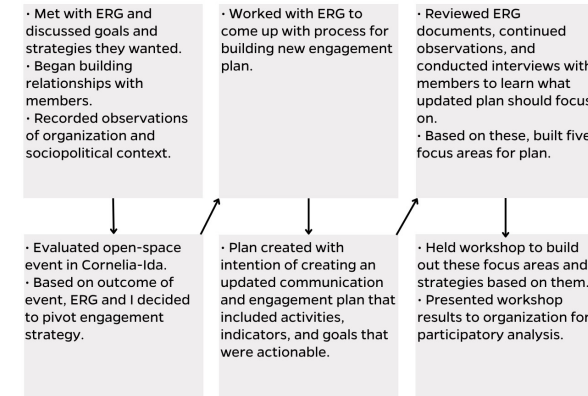
3. Methods

· Methodology: Participatory approach to monitoring and evaluation based on participatory action research (PAR).
· Methods:
· Ethnographic Observation   · Document Review
· Interviews   · Participatory Workshop

4. Contextual-conceptual Framework

Problem:
Perception of political instability

Polarization along ethnic lines

Outside influence due to discovery of large oil reserves

Lack of trust in political system

Government not fulfilling current needs of citizens, e.g. infrastructure

One party unwilling to give up power in 2020 election

Young democratic government

Limited civic engagement

Practicum:
Evaluate Electoral Reform Group's (ERG) current community enagement plan

Understand ERG's current methods of engagement

Facilitated discussion of possible plans/strategies/ideas with ERG members and volunteers.

Practicum Goal:
Make recommendations for ERG to improve community outreach and increase participation in electoral reform process.

Electoral Reform Group:
Creating and implementing community engagement plan to increase resources for individuals and communities to take part in electoral reform

Solution:
Increased community engagement in the electoral reform process

Increased awareness and understanding of electoral process

Advocate for electoral change according to needs of citizens

ERG Strategic Plan

The Problem
- Dysfunctional Political Polarisation
- Social tensions
- Need for jobs/work, livelihoods
- Don't see government responding to needs
- Lack of accountability and representation
- Negotiation and compromise not part of political culture
- Intact natural environment threatened

The Context
- Not long since Guyanese independence (controlling our own destiny)
- Oil revenues complicating the political system
- Elections crisis
- COVID-19

How to Change Things
- Need political elite buy-in and popular support
- Civil Society commitment to change – unity & solidarity

○ Convene civil society leaders
- See if there is interest
- Set up organisation: name it etc.
- Figure out how it makes decisions (including how to raise $ and spend $) (1-2 months)

○ Identify options to address challenges (3 months)
○ Initiate country-wide discussion on challenges related to elections / choosing government

○ Return to country-wide discussion on which option(s) most able to address
- Refine options based on discussions

- Finalise options based on common ground (3 months)
○ Return to country-wide discussion to find country-wide discussion to find common ground on best path forward

○ Advocate for legislative change to the electoral system
○ Operationalisation of changes made to the legislative system
- Develop and implement strategy for consensus for change (towards a culture of negotiation and collaboration for national development

Practicum

5. Process

· Met with ERG and discussed goals and strategies they wanted.
· Began building relationships with members.
· Recorded observations of organization and sociopolitical context.

· Evaluated open-space event in Cornelia-Ida.
· Based on outcome of event, ERG and I decided to pivot engagement strategy.

· Worked with ERG to come up with process for building new engagement plan.

· Plan created with intention of creating an updated communication and engagement plan that included activities, indicators, and goals that were actionable.

· Reviewed ERG documents, continued observations, and conducted interviews with members to learn what updated plan should focus on.
· Based on these, built five focus areas for plan.

· Held workshop to build out these focus areas and strategies based on them.
· Presented workshop results to organization for participatory analysis.

6. Results

Name Recognition
· Building trust
· Concise in messaging
· Name may cause distrust
· Able to respond to criticism/questions

Civic Education
· Include public in reform
· Bottom-up approach to reform
· Empower voters
· Connect everyday life to elections

Volunteer Capacity Building
· Need to build volunteer base
· Connect with young people, make volunteers feel included
· Make meetings accessible
·Create plan for volunteers to participate, be part of conversation

Online Presence
· Social media and website
· Be present and consistent
· Update website, people-friendly
· Build capacity to keep social media and website updated

Youth Engagement
· Be accessible and action-based
· Youth need to feel included
· Work with other organizations such as student groups
· Combine events similar to open-space with outreach

7. Conclusions

· Taking sociopolitical context into account is imperative to success of civil society organization. This is particularly important in a situation as complex as Guyana's current one.
· Successful engagement strategy for ERG needs to include a focus on capacity building and youth involvement. This can be achieved through more interactions with other organizations and an online strategy based on education and calls to action.
· A lack of trust in institutions stemming from decades of tension and corruption means that ERG will need to focus its efforts on building relationships with communities and showing how it can empower the public. Once trust is built, this can lead to the conversations the organization has planned as part of its strategy.

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