



## SUCCESS STORY

### Electors and Elected Forge Partnerships for Better Governance



USAID/Kenya

*A traditional community dialogue takes place under an acacia tree in Kenya's Rift Valley.*

*“USAID has given us a lot of courage and motivation to talk about issues affecting us and identify alternative ways of dealing with them rather than through violence.”*

*—David Birech, Lol Keringet Community Group Secretary*

**November 2009** – Throughout Kenya's universities, bus stations, canteens, rural markets, and family homes, the air is constantly abuzz with political talk. Citizens debate issues that affect their lives and complain that their Members of Parliament (MPs)—who made big electoral promises—have consistently failed to follow through and adequately represent their interests. However, many Kenyans are unsure how to bring their concerns to their legislators.

Since Kenya's independence, the Kiswahili word commonly used to denote an elected official has changed:

from *Mjumbe*, or messenger, to *Mheshimiwa*, the respected one. The change indicates that Kenyans today feel that they should defer to officials rather than engage them about political issues. Consequently, many Kenyans believe it takes special access to approach a representative, as well as exceptional courage to call for accountability.

To help Kenyans to better connect with their legislators, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) supported a Kenyan nongovernmental organization as it hosted eight forums that brought constituents and MPs together and helped both groups arrive at a mutual understanding of the partnership nature of their roles in governance.

The forums focused on demystifying the concept of *Mheshimiwa*, which tends to distance constituents from their legislators. At first, many of the participants had difficulty grasping the idea that their MP was accountable to them. And many had their eyes opened when they recognized that being assertive does not mean being disrespectful; rather, it is the role of an engaged citizen to push a legislator to be more responsive and proactive.

The forums sparked a paradigm shift, as the average participant started to view the MPs as messengers and MPs agreed to consult more frequently with their constituents about the messages they want to send to the legislature. The MPs also agreed to keep constituents informed about the activities and decisions of the Parliament. Moreover, one MP has established a hotline to facilitate communication with constituents.

The eight forums were held in the Rift Valley, a politically charged region that was severely affected by violence following the 2007 elections. In the Rift Valley, efforts to educate citizens and engage them in the political process are vital to prevent violence from arising as an expression of political frustration.