

*República Democrática*  *de Sao Tomé e Príncipe*  
**Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe**

**Executive Secretariat  
National Commission for the National Forum**

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**UNIQUE EXAMPLE OF GRASSROOTS  
DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA  
EXPLAINS OIL TO POPULATION**

The African island-nation of Sao Tome and Principe this week inaugurated a series of public meetings to educate thousands of its citizens on the future of oil exploration in the country's territorial waters. In an **historic experiment in participatory democracy**, Sao Tomeans will also be asked to declare their preferences for how any future oil revenues should be spent.

“The idea is to give the people a set of realistic expectations for the future, and to give the government a better understanding of the popular will. I hope our National Forum can help Sao Tome and Principe avoid the problems that have plagued our oil-rich neighbors,” said Fradique de Menezes, President of Sao Tome & Principe. “We want to keep any oil revenues from creating social divisions or destroying our common resources.”

The National Forum came about as part of the agreement that diffused a coup attempt in 2002. But with help from the international community and local civil society groups, the forum has become a tool for helping citizens decide the country's future. Forum organizers have taken care to pay special attention to some of the smallest, most remote villages in the country.

“What started as a move toward reconciliation between opposing political parties has become something much bigger. This might be the first time that the citizens of an

entire nation have been asked to express their opinions out in public together,” says Pastor Jose Dias Marques, president of the National Forum committee.

In the first phase of 55 public meetings, citizens will learn the details of the country’s new Oil Revenue Management Law, also a first for oil-producing countries in Africa. The law, which puts Sao Tome & Principe in the vanguard of transparency and good governance among oil-producing nations, was designed to manage petroleum revenues via a permanent fund aimed at stabilizing oil income for the future, and helping the country avoid the “paradox of plenty” and “the Dutch disease” that other countries with sudden resource wealth have suffered.

“I think this forum is a good thing. Today I learned what a savings account is for. If you have a lot of money, it’s not safe to just keep it in your house. You have to put it in the bank, where you can make even more money on it,” says Ednilza Santos, a shopkeeper standing outside a National Forum meeting in the fishing village of Santa Catarina.

Representatives chosen from the first phase of National Forum meetings will attend a larger meeting in the capital city of Sao Tome in early July. The National Forum process will culminate in a consensus Plan of Action for sustainable economic development over the next five years in Sao Tome & Principe.

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