

Thematic workshops in Paraguay

Along 2013 and 2014, the Comptrollers' General of Paraguay embarked on an innovative initiative aimed at advancing SAI openness to citizen engagement in order to increase demand and social ownership of instances of participation by CSOs specializing in sector issues, especially regarding environment. Through joint efforts between the Department of Citizen Control and the General Directorate for Control of Environmental Management, the SAI organized a workshop with civil society organizations working in the sectorial agenda to receive citizen input which could enrich the audit planning, and start drafting a collaborative agenda.

Background

As a member of the Committee on Citizen Participation OLACEFS, the SAI of Paraguay has been active in promoting citizen engagement mechanisms. Policies granting free access to information, channels for filing citizen complaints, "accountability fairs", social audits, and training of citizens for fiscal surveillance are some of the initiatives the CGR has been implementing since 2007.

In 2013, the CGR sought to further citizen engagement through renewed strategies in view of the following goals: raising awareness regarding SAI mission and the work its special units perform; generating institutional commitments and trust within the CGR to enhance instances of interaction with citizens; promoting CSOs' wide access to information produced by the CGR; creating an official channel of communication and liaison between the CGR and CSOs working on specific issues of public interest; and absorbing the demands and needs of CSOs around the issue (exploring their perspectives, areas of advocacy and interests so as to start outlining an agenda for collaborative work).

Based on its experience in management of citizen engagement mechanisms, the Department of Social Control took the lead, and worked together with representatives from the TPA Initiative¹ to design strategies aimed at boosting links with organizations specializing in fields or topics of public interest. The underlying assumption was that these stakeholders could make substantive contributions to strengthen fiscal control in key areas.

Due to the interest displayed by the General Directorate for Control of Environmental Management (DGCGA, for its acronym in Spanish) in furthering engagement with CSOs, environment was the theme chosen to start the pilot.

Implementation

When developing this pilot project, and once decided that the topic would be environment, the following step were taken to set the initiative in motion:

1. **Brainstorming:** SAI representatives of all units involved in the project (DCC and DGCGA) and advisors from the TPA Initiative held meetings in order to assess the objectives of the engagement initiative, and discuss their fears, goals, and expected outcomes, so as to generate a diagnostic report and start drafting a feasible proposal.
2. **Mapping of relevant stakeholders:** The team drew a map of actors who play a relevant role in the environmental field -CSOs, research centers, academics, policy advisor, etc.- and would therefore be invited to a meeting. Based on this mapping, they built a database including contact information of potential participants.
3. **Methodology:** Based on the goals of the initiative, the team decided to organize the event at the SAI, thereby providing an opportunity for CSOs to get a closer look at where and how the institution works. At the same time, they agreed on coordinating a workshop, as this format encourages dialogue and could contribute to discussing and building proposals of articulation between the CGR and civil society.

¹ The TPA Initiative is a Latin American network of CSOs fostering transparency, citizen participation and accountability practices in Supreme Audit Institutions toward strengthening public-control systems in the region). It is coordinated by the Civil Association for Equality and Justice -ACIJ- from Argentina. <http://iniciativatpa.org/>

Similarly, roundtables would allow representatives of CSOs and officials of the DGCGA to interact, and the latter would be capable of responding to the specific concerns of the participants, while getting actively involved in the initiative and absorbing citizen demand. Along this stage, responsibilities were assigned to the whole team so as to ensure effective planning.

4. **Pre-meeting with CSOs:** The SA team organized a pre-meeting with some of the CSOs -which would also be invited to the workshop- in order to forward the initiative, and receive input and suggestions on the dynamics of the event and potential guests unidentified preliminarily.
5. **Preparation of material for the workshop:** The SAI identified the relevant information that would be shared and distributed during the event, which included the results of the latest audits related to environment issues, and a brochure explaining SAI mission and the work the DGCGA performs. Also, the audit team would deliver a presentation on the topic on-site.
6. **Invitation to participate:** The DCC sent along the invitation -by mail and post- to all potential participants identified in the database, and some days prior to the event, made a phone call to confirm attendance.
7. **The workshop:** At the beginning, the SAI representatives introduced themselves. The Head of the Department of Citizen Control stated the purpose of the workshop and invited CSOs to share their expectations. Right afterwards, the DGCGA team briefly explained the unit's scope of work and provided an overview on the most relevant audits it had recently carried out. The space was open for debate, and SAI representatives answered some general questions, while participants commented on their work and general concerns regarding environmental issues.

After a short coffee break, two roundtables were organized so as engage representatives from the DCC, DGCGA and CSOs in groups for further discussion on specific issues. Some questions were asked to participants so as to guide the debate: 1) Do you consider the work of the DGCGA of potential interest to your organizations? 2) What do actors need to benefit from one another? 3) Can you mention 3 topics of interest to your organizations that could be linked to the DGCGA work? 4) What types of joint actions could be proposed for further engagement?

Discussions in each group were moderated by CSOs advisors, while group members shared their views and wrote down the answers on a board. At the end of the meeting, they would communicate the results of this debate to all participants at the plenary.

8. **After-meeting:** A day after the workshop, the team held a meeting to share their impressions on the workshop's development and outcomes, and to evaluate courses of action. A report was submitted in order to keep a record of all proposals.
9. **Follow-up:** the CGR sent all participants the report along with the proposals and communicated on how these could contribute to improve audit exercises, and also to design specific patterns of cooperation between the DGCGA and CSOs.

Critical issues and achievements

Based on the results of this workshop, it is possible to identify the following impacts:

- Most participants were knowledgeable on SAI work, though unaware of tasks performed by the DGCGA. However, they were all interested in developing a close relationship as they acknowledged that audit reports generate an overview of the current national reality in environmental issues.
- CSOs can deploy strategies for monitoring audit recommendations as well as for identifying possible uses of SAI information on environmental issues.
- CSOs can act as facilitators of contact with other social actors working at the local level, non-preliminarily identified by CGR.
- A partnership between CSOs and CGR can enhance improved results in the following areas: 1) impact on reducing corruption; 2) improvement in the design, management and monitoring of public policies toward the development of a comprehensive state environmental policy; and 3)

awareness-raising about environmental issues and what can be done about it, both by CGR and by civil society.

- Among the proposals for engagement, some of the following were discussed: newsletter on environment audits; internships for environmental engineers at the DGCGA; annual meetings to share results of undertaken audit exercises; mutual training and technical assistance through workshops, courses, etc.; joint audits; participatory planning meeting; feedback mechanisms to receive input from CSOs after audit reports have been drafted; sharing of methodological tools and approaches to encourage social control.
- CSOs and the CGR remained in contact after the event and are currently discussing strategies to push forward feasible proposals for further engagement, beyond the on-site workshop.

Several factors play a significant role in the achievements of this experience: strategic planning, SAI commitment, leadership, and creativity to innovate in more focused and ambitious citizen engagement mechanisms. Ensuring effective communication within the SAI has been critical to opening paths for cooperation that go beyond the initiatives triggered by the Department of Citizen Control.

Engaging a technical unit (the DGCGA) has been challenging, but it has proven effective, since both SAI officials and participants have agreed on the benefits and potential of a collaborative agenda. It remains to be known whether the SAI will manage to channel citizen input into the audit process and build a sustainable relationship.

Implementing partners

- Comptrollers' General of Paraguay, through the following units:
 - Comptroller General
 - Directorate of International Relations
 - Department of Citizen Control
 - General Directorate for Control of Environmental Management
- Civil society organizations working on the sector agenda (target groups)
- Academic groups working in environment issues (target groups)
- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ): Regional programme "Supporting the Organisation of Latin American and Caribbean Supreme Audit Institutions"
- TPA Initiative: Center for Judicial Studies (Paraguay) and Civil Association for Equality and Justice (Argentina) as advisors

Website

<http://www.contraloria.gov.py/>

Additional resources

- TPA Initiative (2014): "Citizenship, Rights and Social Control: Towards a thematic approach in implementing strategies to engage civil society in public oversight"
<http://iniciativatpa.org/2012/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Documentaci%C3%B3n-CGR-Paraguay-editado.pdf>
- TPA Initiative (2014): "Environmental Control in Paraguay: Engagement between the CGR and civil society"
<http://iniciativatpa.org/2012/control-ambiental-en-paraguay-vinculacion-cgr-sociedad-civil/>