

Participatory Planning in Argentina

Participatory planning is a mechanism through which the supreme audit institution of Argentina, the General Audit Office (AGN), holds public meetings and informational gatherings with civil society organizations (CSOs) on an annual basis, so that they may make proposals on institutions and programs to be audited for possible inclusion in the Action Plan for the following year.

Experience and knowledge of the topics and issues in each organization's area of expertise prove to be an extremely valuable contribution in helping identify areas for which oversight is critical. In fact, the institutional relevance and overall impact of the AGN's work increase significantly when the preferences and interests of the ultimate beneficiaries of the oversight function are actively considered in the design and execution of its work.

Background

Since 2002, the AGN started to reach out to civil society to consider their input in the oversight process, in tune with the regional trend to adopt mechanisms to increase transparency and to incorporate citizen participation. This happens at a juncture in Argentina of a severe economic and political crisis. Profound crisis in governance and legitimacy made it even more difficult to win the confidence of citizens in the work being done by the oversight entity.

During the initial phase, increasing transparency was a priority; the publication of auditing reports in 2002 was the first step. Public disclosure of this information had a clear impact on the users and direct beneficiaries of the programs and services (or agencies) that were audited. Growing interest in this information was reflected in the media. At the same time, a number of avenues for consultation with users and consumers were introduced, with the views of these groups serving as a supplementary AGN oversight tool. These developments gradually burnished the image of the AGN as a credible actor and a legitimate and skilled interlocutor, the result being the establishment of an inchoate connection with civil society.

The implementation of participatory planning as a distinct procedure started in 2003 with a specific audit. After considering civil society proposals and allegations of violation of Law No. 22,431 regarding comprehensive access to and use of the public transport system by persons with disabilities, the AGN decided to conduct a comprehensive audit of the railway system, as part of their 2004 Action Plan. The experience showed that CSOs had relevant inputs to contribute towards strengthening the oversight process, and increasing its relevance. Hence, the AGN decided to adopt measures aimed at regularizing the participatory planning process. Since then, meetings with civil society organizations have been held in 2004, 2006, 2007, and uninterruptedly since 2010¹. In 2014, the procedure was finally institutionalized and approved by the Board of Auditors, who set up a specific methodology on participatory planning.

Implementation

The Participatory Planning is a procedure that takes several steps along the whole year. It is implemented following the stages described below:

1. **Invitation to submit proposals:** The process is sparked off with the AGN's Area of Citizen Participation e-mailing an invitation to CSOs so that they send proposals on specific audits which can be taken into consideration and analyzed in time to be incorporated into the Annual Plan for the following year. This communication is usually held on March, and CSOs are supposed to e-mail their suggestions to the AGN within that month, since by September the SAI must send the Plan to the Joint Parliamentary Audit Committee (CPMRC), the congressional body to which it provides assistance.

¹ Despite plans to hold participatory planning meetings annually, these meetings have not been held each year. Many times the completion date of the Annual Operational Plan (POA) did not allow sufficient time for citizen input, the result being that it was submitted without contributions from civil society. However, even when participatory planning did not take place, regular contact was maintained between CSOs and the AGN, which made it possible for the AGN to establish a closer relationship with members of civil society organizations. Their concerns have been addressed and collaborative work has been conducted.

Along with the invitation, the AGN also attaches a brochure explaining its mission, the various types of audits it conducts and its scope of work -what can and what cannot be audited-, so that CSOs build solid proposals on audits that fall under SAI's jurisdiction and can be effectively carried out.

2. **Submission of proposals by CSOs:** Civil society organizations complete and e-mail a special form designed by the AGN, which includes their areas of interest, the audit exercises that -in their view- should be undertaken (with as much details as possible, explaining the reasons for such proposals as well), and contact information.
3. **Processing and analysis of the proposals:** The SAI's Area of Citizen Participation submits CSO's proposals to the Planning Department, which is officially in charge of processing the data. The Department, along with the technical teams of the specific areas responsible for each audit suggestion, assess the feasibility and relevance of each proposal -considering the AGN's constraints in terms of competence and implementation capacity- and prepare the Report on the Participatory Planning Program.

* Should there be a need to fine-tune any suggestions, the Area of Citizen Participation will convene a meeting with CSOs.
4. **Discussion of the Audit Plan at the Board of Auditors:** The Report on the Participatory Planning Program goes through various units within the AGN, and is finally delivered to the Board of Auditors for approval, together with the Annual Action Programme and the Annual Operating Plan for the following year. Once these documents are discussed and approved, the Planning Department prepares the reports specifying: 1) the proposals that have been incorporated into the Annual Audit Plan, and 2) the managers and departments who will be in charge. Subsequently, the Annual Audit Plan is delivered to the CPMRC in Parliament for its approval.
5. **Public sharing meeting with CSOs:** In November, the Area of Citizen Participation calls CSOs to an open meeting at the General Audit Office where they will receive feedback on their proposals. At this on-site event, SAI representatives go over the audits that were performed along the previous year - which had been initially proposed by CSOs-, and then inform each organization whether the current proposals have or have not been included in the action plan for following period, and explain the reasons for such decisions.
6. **Post-meeting promotion:** At the end of the year, the AGN publishes a press release on its website, with a brief overview of the participatory planning process, and attaches the presentations delivered by SAI representatives in the meeting.

Resources

In terms of the resources involved, participatory planning is not a costly practice for the AGN. Financial resources are used primarily for the preparation of documents, brochures, and other informational material distributed to the organizations; and to modernize the citizen platform (in order to maintain more regular and ongoing contact with the CSOs), thus making the practice less costly and more functional.

In terms of human resources, the process essentially requires the coordination of efforts among the SAI's departments with specifically assigned responsibilities. In particular, implementation of this mechanism is handled by Area of Citizen Participation together with the Institutional Relations Department -under AGN's Legal and Technical Secretariat-, and one individual serves as the liaison with the organizations, not only with respect to the annual invitation to participate, but also on a regular basis to address concerns submitted to the institution via e-mail, in person, or by telephone.

Critical issues and achievements

Participatory planning in the AGN was built on previous efforts to reach out to civil society and inform organizations of its work, providing material during the briefings and making team presentations, thus bolstering the institution's image.

Over the past years, Participatory Planning has undergone major challenges toward the institutionalization of this procedure. To begin with, timeframes have been restructured so as to ensure that CSOs have enough time to draft and submit their proposals, and also so that the SAI can address these suggestions and actually incorporate them into the Annual Audit Plan, which is sent to Parliament for approval². Similarly, methodology has changed: in the first years of implementation, the AGN organized two public meetings with CSOs (one to invite them to submit proposals, and a second one to provide feedback on their examination), but since 2012, the invitation is sent by e-mail -including a form to be completed-, while audit suggestions are received by the same means. Feedback meetings are called at the end of the year, and since 2010, they have been held uninterruptedly. This has backed the creation of the Area of Citizen Participation in late 2012, together with the design of a website especially aimed at mainstreaming citizen engagement.

Along 2013 and 2014, a series of workshops on participatory planning on different fields (environment, transport, health, among others) have been coordinated by the institution. These activities bring together representatives from CSOs specialized in each field, and officials from all the departments related to the planning and execution of audits on such fields. This kind of participatory practice aims to create a clear and complementary mechanism to develop accurate and timely proposals for the oversight planning process, and to engage CSOs in the planning of specific audit exercises which have been included in the Annual Audit Plan. In addition, through these thematic workshops SAI representatives from technical units highlight audit findings, and expect citizen input on the issues and topic under audit.

Most recently, in April 2014, the Board of Auditors approved the Procedure of Participatory Planning, leading to the institutionalization of this engagement mechanism.

All these features assess the critical elements for success of the Participatory Planning process: preparing the invitation in advance and in an organized fashion; delivering information which tackles the general lack of familiarity with the institution's roles and responsibilities; having an efficient coordination team within the institution and leadership with the conviction to implement the procedure on an ongoing basis; and providing feedback on citizen input.

- Evidence shows providing complete and detailed information allows organizations to develop useful proposals that fall within the scope of audits conducted by the AGN.
- The means and forms for CSOs to submit proposals must be simple and educational. In this sense, including questions pertaining to the organization's area of interest and the reason for which the CSO are submitting the proposals streamlines communication, and provides additional tools for the AGN's expert professionals to accurately translate them into technical terms, and make the process more efficient.
- The possibility of submitting proposals by e-mail provides organizations with another channel for communication with the AGN, and it facilitates the systematic processing of the submitted information.
- The high attendance rate at these meetings is also a good indicator of CSO's interest in receiving this information and understanding SAI work.

Despite the achievements of this engagement policy, there are some critical aspects that should be taken into consideration to elicit broad participation. For instance, developing an intensive publicity campaign (through multiple channels) and issuing the invitations to a public that does not solely include established and recognized CSOs, but also groups based in the country's inland areas and small organizations as well, can contribute to strengthen this mechanism and promote engagement with other key stakeholders. In addition, once the audit reports are issued and are publicly available, the AGN could send copies to CSOs whose proposals cover such topics.

² Until 2010, CSOs were called to an on-site meeting in late August or early September, and asked to forward their proposals within two weeks. This made it practically impossible for the SAI to study them in depth and evaluate their incorporation into the Annual Audit Plan, since by the end of that month this document had to be handed to CPMRC.

Once the participatory planning process is complete, the conditions and mechanisms necessary for maintaining the link between the CSOs and the SAI over time must be created. The importance of maintaining the link is twofold and benefits both parties. On one hand, the SAI must have a network of organizations that review and disseminate reports. The CSOs are actors with an ability to boost the impact of the audit reports, and thus are potential partners in the effort to strengthen the oversight system. On the other hand, it is essential that the SAI understands that CSOs do not view participation in this type of process as an end in itself, but rather as a means to secure audits of projects and/or programs where, based on information provided to them by the beneficiaries of these programs and given the role it performs as an organization, there is suspicion of irregularities.

Implementing partners

- General Audit Office of Argentina, through the following units:
 - Office of the Head of the AGN
 - Office of the Legal Secretary – Office of the Deputy Legal Secretary
 - Area of Citizen Participation
 - Press and Communications Department
 - Institutional Relations Department
 - Planning Department
- Civil society organizations

Website

<http://www.agn.gov.ar/participacionciudadana/>

Additional resources

- TPA Initiative (2014): “What is AGN’s Participatory Planning about?”
<http://iniciativatpa.org/2012/de-que-se-trata-la-planificacion-participativa-que-implementa-la-agn-de-argentina/>
- TPA Initiative – Civil Association for Equality and Justice -ACIJ- (2011): “Participatory planning in the Auditoría General de la Nación”, <http://iniciativatpa.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/participatory-planning-in-the-auditoria-general-de-la-nacion-argentina.pdf> [documentation of the experience prior to the institutionalization of the Participatory Planning procedure in 2014]
- General Audit Office (2014): “Approval of the Participatory Planning Procedure by the Board of Auditors”.
<http://iniciativatpa.org/2012/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Planificaci%C3%B3n-participativa.pdf>