

Thematic workshops in Argentina

Along 2013 and 2014, a series of workshops on participatory planning on different fields (environment, transport, health, among others) have been coordinated by Argentina's General Audit Office (AGN). 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.

Background

Since 2003, the General Audit Office (AGN) has been setting in practice the Participatory Planning, a mechanism through which the SAI 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. Meetings with civil society organizations have been held in 2004, 2006, 2007, and uninterruptedly since 2010.

Acknowledging that CSOs specialized in particular topics (like health, education, public transport, environment, etc) can make a more focused contribution to nurture the audit process, the AGN decided to create a mechanism -complimentary to the Participatory Planning- so as to incorporate citizen input at the planning stage of specific audits related to their field of expertise.

Building up on the Participatory Planning's achievements, in May 2013, the AGN organized a workshop on environment auditing. The initiative was promoted by the Area of Citizen Participation and was strongly backed by the President of the Collegiate Board, together with cooperation from the Department in charge of environment audits.

Implementation

Organizing thematic workshops entails a process that follows the steps described below:

1. **AGN identifies relevant thematic area/sector:** The SAI decides on the approach and considers on which sectors then need collaboration from CSOs. Criteria may include sectors of high budget allocation or public investment, issues that are on the public opinion and are of interest citizens, among others.
2. **AGN builds up a database:** The SAI identifies which CSOs are involved in the sector agenda (think tanks, policy research organizations or CSOs that are working on the specific topic). Since the AGN keeps contact with organizations who take part in the Participatory Planning and they are already included in the SAI database, they can assist the SAI in targeting others which may be interested in participating.
3. **AGN prepares material for the workshop:** The SAI identifies what information should be produced and distributed along the event, considering the type of documents that will raise CSOs' interest (audit reports that have been issued in the previous years on the correspondent sector, audits facts and figures explaining the results of such audit exercises, information about follow-up, etc.). Since the AGN aims to engage with organizations who may have never taken part in the Participatory Planning, it may need to consider delivering some material that draws into the mandate and functions of the SAI.
4. **AGN defines the purpose of the workshop:** SAI units involved in this engagement practice decide on the objective and expected outcomes of the event, as well as the scope of participation. They consider whether the auditors' team working on the sector wants to consult a CSO working on the same issue to gather audit evidence, to provide documents or reports that the organization has developed, or discuss data collection techniques.
5. **Invitation to participate:** The process is sparked off with the AGN's Area of Citizen Participation e-mailing an invitation to CSOs to take part in the workshop, and explaining its purpose. Along with the

invitation, the AGN also attaches a schedule of the meeting, which usually lasts a whole day (from 10am to 16:00). Some days before the event, the SAI contacts the organizations to confirm their attendance.

6. **The workshop:** At the beginning, the SAI representatives introduce themselves, they state the purpose of the workshop, and briefly explain SAI mandate and scope of work. The audit team or head of the department draws into the findings from previous years' audit reports regarding the specific topic. Then, they invite CSOs to provide insights based on their work on the sector. Along the event, stakeholders debate on the main issues, problems of the sector, critical programs and entities that should be audited, etc. The AGN takes note of these inputs, and decide on the next steps to keep in touch with participants (whether they will contact them to provide information or reports during fieldwork, whether they will be sending along audit reports or will request cooperation in the follow-up).
7. **Analysis of Proposals:** the AGN analyzes citizen suggestions and evaluates how these proposals will be channeled, that is, if they will be considered by the audit team in charge of the specific exercise, or if they can be of value to the forthcoming Annual Audit Plan. Similarly, the SAI discusses internally if they can benefit from collaboration with any of these CSOs during the fieldwork.
8. **Follow-up:** the AGN publishes a press release on its website, with a brief overview of the workshop. It may also attach the presentations delivered by SAI representatives in the meeting, or e-mail them to the participants, informing on how their contributions had any impact within the SAI and audit planning.

Critical issues and achievements

It is important to note that the ten-year experience of Participatory Planning has been critical to the implementation of these thematic workshops. On one side, it has contributed to establishing a sustainable bond between the SAI and CSOs, as the latter keep taking part in the annual meeting and submitting proposals for future audit exercises. On the other side, this practice has achieved consensus within the SAI regarding the importance of citizen engagement, which has paved the way for deeper patterns of interaction with CSOs, especially with those working on a sectoral agenda.

Among other critical factors in this experience, it is important to note the commitment on the part of the AGN's top authorities in order to set the project in motion, but also from audit teams, who had never been engaged in participatory mechanisms and displayed willingness to interact with CSOs. In the end, most of them stated that citizen input could enrich their daily duties, and acknowledged that they had come to see the value and potential impact of their work.

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that in April 2014, the Board of Auditors approved the Procedure of Participatory Planning, leading to the institutionalization of this engagement mechanism. This has strongly backed the development of regular thematic workshops. While in 2013, two events were coordinated, along 2014 there have been at least three workshops with CSOs on specific topics of public interest which have been better targeted and organized by the SAI.

In order to ensure success of this policy, it is important to consider other factors which can contribute to elicit broader participation. This entails developing an intensive publicity campaign (through multiple channels) and issuing the invitations to a public that does not solely include CSOs working in the city. Workshops could be shared online to enable participation of organizations from other provinces working on the specific agenda. Similarly, other key stakeholders could be invited, like journalists, researchers, and legislative advisors so as to enhance further engagement and coordination within the accountability system. Finally, sustainable cooperation is still a challenge. Although thematic workshops are effective mechanisms of consultation, there is no established procedure to ensure that CSOs can indeed engage along the fieldwork and follow-up of audits.

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
 - Department in charge of audits on the specific sector
- Civil society organizations working on the sector agenda (target groups)

Website

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

Additional resources

- TPA Initiative (2014): “Citizen Participation: Thematic Workshops when planning audit in Argentina”.
<http://iniciativatpa.org/2012/participacion-ciudadana-talleres-tematicos-al-planificar-auditorias-en-argentina/>
- 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/>