

Evidence and lessons from Latin America

Over the past decade Latin American countries have implemented successful governance initiatives that had facilitated the various positive social and economic impacts for which the region is now recognised. These ignited the interest of countries like South Africa, hoping for similar results. *Diana Sanchez Betancourt* relates some of the experiences on strengthening citizen oversight to improve overall governance.



ELLA
Evidence and lessons from Latin America

Since April 2012 the HSRC's Democracy and Governance programme has been coordinating a knowledge exchange platform on citizen oversight, managed together with FUNDAR – a leading Mexican think tank doing research on Latin American policies and public institutions and Practical Action Consulting (PAC) in Peru. The project, called Evidence and Lessons from Latin America (ELLA), is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

Latin American countries are at the forefront of developing innovative citizen oversight mechanisms, which are key for the success and sustainability of publicly funded and managed initiatives. ELLA focuses on the ways in which Latin American governments and civil society have promoted and used the right to information, transparency and participation to improve accountability, reduce corruption and advance social justice.

So, what are some of the key experiences in the region?



Latin American governments and civil society have promoted and used the right to information, transparency and participation to improve accountability, reduce corruption and advance social justice.

Transparency and access to information

Transparency and the right to access information is now a reality in many Latin American countries and a key element of good governance. The first module of the knowledge exchange focused on the legal frameworks and institutional conditions that have enabled the effective realisation and implementation of the right to information in this region. Currently, 65% of Latin American countries have freedom of information acts (FOIAs), some of which incorporate innovative elements that go beyond the minimum standard for transparency and access to information.

Mexico's 2002 Freedom of Information Act was the first in the world to create an autonomous oversight body with the authority to enforce compliance with the law. In 2011, as the culmination of a six-year advocacy process characterised by its extensive citizen and civil society participation, El Salvador passed one of the strongest freedom of information acts in the world. The same year, Brazil also took this first step in guaranteeing citizens' right to information and promoting government accountability, joining the other Latin American countries that have approved these acts.

Citizen participation at the local level plays a role in improving public policies and monitoring service delivery.

Comparative discussions around the implementation of freedom of information acts highlighted that a strong legal framework on access to information is critical for ensuring the right and effective enforcement. Coalitions among multi-stakeholder groups/interest groups that include media, academia, civil society organisations and proactive bureaucrats have been a key enabling factor in the passing of comprehensive laws in Latin America as these coalitions reflect broad interests and expertise. But the real achievements are in the practical application of these mechanisms. Several Latin American civil society organisations have used the right to information to carry out independent assessments of policies and programmes which have directly benefited marginalised communities.

By using access to information laws, organisations in the region have been able to implement oversight actions that included monitoring farm subsidies in Mexico,

tracking oil revenue distribution in Ecuador and the elaboration of state of the nation reports in Costa Rica. Similar experiences included oversight of implementation of food security programmes and the use of community score cards for quality evaluation of services.

Lastly, using transparency as a tool to fight corruption, Latin American countries have launched useful electronic platforms to prevent misconduct in procurements and to monitor public officials' personal assets, with initial results pointing to success.

Budget and public policy issues

From results-based budgets, to transparency portals, to participatory budgeting Latin America has been leading the way in this field. Latin American countries have, for instance, pioneered participatory budgeting, an innovative mechanism enabling citizens to decide how public funds will be spent, while civil society organisations in the region have created the first budget transparency index that measures not only if budget information has been published, but if that information is useful.

In 2009, the Mexico City government implemented an innovative budgeting

approach – the first of its kind – to specifically link the budget with human rights. As a result, 75% of the Mexico City budget is now tied to implementing specific actions to promote human rights.

Another innovative tool in various Latin American countries is the budget transparency portals. These portals contain extensive budget information which is available to citizens and allows them to conduct social audits or monitor how much, and for what purpose, public money is allocated. The Peruvian and Brazilian budget portals are particularly illustrative of the power of well-designed and easy to use portals which become highly interactive tools allowing resources to be tracked in a very detailed way. Similarly, the experiences of Guatemala and Venezuela show that complex budget information can be transformed and presented in an easy-to-understand way through practical citizen budgets.

Citizen participation

The third and last module of the alliance focused on citizen participation, exploring government and civil society's collaborative mechanisms for promoting accountability and social justice. Citizen participation at the local level has long been acknowledged to play a role in improving public policies and monitoring service delivery. Over the last decades, citizen initiatives formed by academia, the private sector and non-governmental organisations in various Latin American countries have pursued greater participation in social oversight of public policies, particularly at the city level.

Since the 1980s, Latin American countries have used local councils formed by citizens and public authorities as an effective mechanism to create citizen participation. Knowledge shared around these mechanisms highlighted a variety of participatory experiences in local governance that have been conducted in the region, such as public management councils in Brazil, regional coordination roundtables (*Mesas de Concertación*) in Peru and self-management councils in Mexico.

Latin American colleagues also presented four different approaches to citizen and community report cards implemented in the region as a tool to benchmark public service delivery. This provided specific and valuable information on the use of these cards to assess quality of and access to health care services.

These and many other good practices and case studies have been shared through innovative 'knowledge products' in the form of videos, podcasts, interactive presentations, briefs and spotlights on publications and organisations.

The project has shown the relevance of Latin America's experience in increasing transparency to fight corruption, foster active citizenship and improve the impact of public spending. A total of 264 participants from civil society organisations, governments, think tanks and activists from South Africa and other countries participated, gaining access to a wealth of knowledge and network interaction with centres of excellence in Latin America.

Author: Diana Sanchez Botman, ILLI, A project leader, Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery programme, HSRC.



More information on the project is available on www.hsrc.ac.za, or e-mail dsanchez@hsrc.ac.za.



HSRC

Human Sciences
Research Council

review

VOLUME 10 NUMBER

FOUR

NOVEMBER 2012

**BRINGING INFORMAL
SETTLEMENTS INTO
THE FOLD**

page 10

**RESTORING THE
HUMANITIES**

page 17

**THE GENETIC HISTORY
OF A WILD COAST CLAN**

page 20

