

GPSA Brown Bag Lunch Series

Making local government work for the poor in Mexico

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Sponsored by:



Presenters: Almudena Ocejo Rojo, Executive Director CCS-CIESAS (Centro de Contraloría Social)

Discussant: Janmejay Singh, Senior Strategy and Operations Officer, Middle East and North Africa region, World Bank

Chair: Olive Moore, Knowledge & Learning, Global Partnership for Social Accountability, World Bank



TAKE-AWAY MESSAGES

- For social accountability and to mobilize citizens, it is imperative that international organizations work with local organizations who have roots in the community, detailed knowledge of the local conditions and power dynamics. At the same time, we should be cognizant that in order to scale-up these interventions, coalitions that scale across the country need to be built. Intermediate organizations become important at this stage.
- While empowering and organizing citizens to participate in public affairs and demand accountability from the government is essential, so is incentivizing and building capacity of the government officials to manage citizen participation and respond to it.

I. ABSTRACT

Olive Moore opened the discussion by emphasizing the importance of citizen participation in social accountability activities. Almudena Ocejo shared the work undertaken by CCS-CIESAS towards improving citizen participation in not only exacting accountability but also influencing policy making processes in Mexico – what she called ‘citizen control.’ After briefly providing an overview of CCS-CIESAS work, she went on to explain two initiatives supported -- one in the rural southern part of Mexico and the other in the urban northern Mexico. She discussed the impact of these initiatives and lessons learned. Janmejay Singh, Senior Strategy and Operations Officer in Middle East and North Africa region at the World Bank, discussed the similarities of CCS’s work with PECSA project in Cambodia which he had led, and challenges of working in SA projects. A lively discussion followed that identified several challenges of CCS’s work in particular and social accountability work in general.

II. ABOUT CCS-CIESAS – CONTEXT, OBJECTIVE AND STRATEGY

CCS-CIESAS works for strengthening ‘citizen control’ in Mexico CCS provides financial support to initiatives that promote citizen engagement and oversight of public programs and policies in Mexico. In addition, CCS also supports its partners with funding, training and technical assistance. CCS has trained nearly 60 CSOs and more than 300 staff on issues related to public participation, accountability and democratic control.

In Mexico citizens generally do not engage with the government on public affairs. While they mobilize for emergency situations, they do not have incentives to mobilize for collective issues that pertain to their quality of life. Although, citizens are aware of the problems they face, there is a gap on how this information can be translated into action. Sometimes, even when citizens are interested in engaging with the government to improve service delivery, they do not know how to go about it. They sometimes do not even know how the government works. This knowledge is essential not just for monitoring government performance but also to participate in policy-making processes.

Similarly, government is not always interested in creating space for citizen engagement. It also has limited capacity to manage citizen participation. When government does not respond, it creates further disincentives for citizens to engage with the government. In this context, while some projects are advancing well, others have run into challenges. Therefore, CCS has learned a lot on what works and where from these experiences. CCS mobilizes citizens to engage with the government through four pathways. First, through Ramo 33-FISM (Fondo para la Infraestructura Social Municipal). This Program determines how the funds from the federal government are distributed to municipalities that are earmarked for social infrastructure. This process provides an entry point for citizen participation to determine what projects the money is spent on. De jure this process requires citizen participation but de facto participation is minimal. CCS exploits this entry point and mobilizes citizens to engage with the government through this process.

Second, Municipal Development Plan (MDP) provides an entry point for citizen participation in policy making. This document provides important planning information and guidance for development in a municipality. CCS mobilizes citizens to engage with the government through MDP.

Third, citizens can engage with the government through City Council. City council's responsibility is to monitor what the city is doing and follow up on the development plans. However, city council is not accountable to the citizens. CCS mobilizes citizens to monitor the performance of city council members and make them accountable to the citizens.

Fourth, CCS mobilizes citizens to engage with the government through public procurement process by monitoring how the money is being spent, and observe if the regulations are followed.

Choice of a precise strategy in a specific context depends on the problems faced by the community. Once a concrete problem is identified that is affected by the municipality's performance, then the best pathway to solve this problem is decided upon.

Another important feature of CCS works is that it works with local organizations that have roots in the community. This gives them local knowledge of citizens' needs as well as of the power dynamics within the community.

III. THE STORY OF TWO INITIATIVES

The first initiative described by Almudena took place in 3 municipalities and 5 communities in Yucatan. These communities decided to engage with the government through FISM. Communities were unaware of how much their municipalities were getting from the central government for social infrastructure funds. They did not know how the public officials prioritized various social infrastructure projects taking place in their communities. CCS's campaign, also called 'Caravan,' focused on promoting technical capacity and political skills of the citizens, in partnership with grass root organizations. CCS argued that this campaign had a crucial role to play in the following developments. Public works proposed by communities in 4 out of 5 communities were authorized by the city council and 3 municipal commissaries requested intervention to promote participatory process in their communities. CCS argued that the campaign also had spillover effect as it inspired 2 community based groups to work on citizen control.

The second initiative took place in the northern part of Mexico in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua and is called Plan Estrategico de Juarez (PEJ). In this initiative, the community chose to scrutinize the municipal development plan and city council plans. The campaign focused on improving technical capacity of the citizen groups, and mobilization of different urban groups around a common interest. The organization carried out litigation, direct work with municipal officials and outreach including through media, social media and theater. According to CCS, the impacts of these activities have been widespread. It led to increased attendance of city council members. Federal court decided to allow PEJ President to attend city council sessions. In addition, class action suit to open city council sessions to citizens is currently in process. In general, CCS argues, this initiative increased citizens' awareness about the workings of municipal government.

IV. CHALLENGES

“Laws are there for participation and we should use those as entry points and it has helped in some places – as an entry point it has been successful but not really long term success” (Almudena Ocejo Rojo).

During the discussion a number of challenges to CCS’s work were identified. It was suggested that CCS’s approach is difficult to scale up. Working with local organizations could exacerbate the problem of scaling up as their influence spreads across smaller areas. So intermediaries become important as they can help build coalitions for specific issues that span across the country. Without building these coalitions and networks, it becomes difficult for these interventions to be replicated and spread over large areas.

The second challenge that was highlighted during the discussion was of sustaining citizen participation over time. While this is a problem in social accountability interventions generally, it is especially significant in Mexico’s context, where historically citizens have participated in public affairs only in return for a reward. While this behavior was shaped and sustained by incentives provided by patronage politics, it still remains a deterrent to true citizen participation.

Perhaps the most important challenge noted by the participants had to do with responsiveness of the government; community mobilization by itself cannot ensure government responsiveness to citizens’ demand. Government responsiveness is important for sustaining the citizen participation as well. If the governments don’t respond to public pressure and community participation, citizens would have even less incentive to participate in public sphere.

It was suggested that World Bank and other international organizations can help by integrating incentives in municipal structures that promote community participation and responsiveness in their programs. For example, these incentives can be built in programs like P4R that provide financing based on certain indicators. However, the presenter warned that only codifying citizen participation into laws is not enough; government officials learn ways to ‘simulate’ participation when it is built into programs as a necessary condition to get funding.

Moreover, incentivizing government officials to respond to citizens’ participation is only one way of increasing government responsiveness. The second significant aspect is improving officials’ capacity to respond. Officials need to learn how to manage citizen participation. There need to be clear norms, scope, expectations and procedures of citizen participation in public programs. It should be emphasized that officials instead of thinking citizen participation as a threat should perceive citizen participation as an opportunity to make their policies more effective.

It was also mentioned that the knowledge of local power dynamics is necessary but not always sufficient. Organizations and communities that are delving into these initiatives should in addition to understanding power dynamics should also be able to affect them. They also need to build their capacity to influence decision-makers through formal or informal connections.

V. MOVING FORWARD

The discussion suggested that development practitioners, in a way, are generating artificial demand for social accountability tools and practices. Instead of leveraging existing structures and basing social accountability interventions on existing institutions, we tend to create new processes. We need to turn the focus on mobilizing communities to leverage existing accountability structures instead of creating new structures.

Social accountability should be perceived as a process and not a project i.e. it is not a one-off endeavor but a continuous process that is open ended and continuously changing.