



# Best Practices in Democratic Governance: A Guide for Local Governments



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# FOREWORD

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The International Republican Institute (IRI) has compiled a selection of simple but effective democratic governance initiatives that municipal governments can adopt to improve transparency and accountability, citizen participation and inclusion, internal efficiency and effectiveness. The initiatives illustrated are not costly or complex, and IRI's experience in implementing these initiatives has shown them to be not only effective but also adaptable to local context. This manual is designed to showcase best practices and provide ideas for mayors, municipal officials and governance practitioners. While the case studies in this manual are from IRI programs in Latin America, these initiatives can be implemented worldwide.

Since 1994, IRI has conducted democratic governance programs as an integral part of its mission to strengthen democratic institutions and instill greater faith in democratic systems of government. To IRI, democratic governance distinguishes a system of government in which citizens meaningfully participate in planning and decision-making, while those in office exercise accountable responsiveness to citizen needs. The best practices found in this manual are guided by IRI's principles of democratic governance – accessibility, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness, equity and inclusiveness, responsiveness and transparency.

# CITIZEN MANUALS

## INFORMING CITIZENS TO INCREASE INSTITUTIONAL EFFICIENCY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

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A **citizen manual** is a quick-reference handbook that details the necessary steps and requirements for citizens to quickly complete municipal procedures. It also provides information on which government office is responsible for each transaction and provides the respective contact information of key staff. Perhaps the easiest to implement of all the best practices illustrated in this guide, the citizen manual is a user-friendly tool that improves each citizen's experience interacting with local government.



# Benefits

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- **Improve government efficiency** - Providing the necessary information for common processes and procedures in an easy-to-use handbook can reduce the number of people in lines at municipal offices, and allow municipal staff to spend more time helping citizens complete processes and less time providing instructions. As a result, government staff can be more efficient and productive.
- **Increase citizen satisfaction** - By providing citizens with the information they need on how to process a request in an easy-to-use manual, citizens can adequately prepare to complete their transactions and processes in one visit. This allows local officials to ensure that citizens have a positive experience interacting with their local government.

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## STEPS TO GET STARTED

1. Allocate funds from the annual budget for the project.
2. Work with department heads and key staff to compile and prioritize the information that will be displayed in the manual.
3. Ensure the content is presented in a clear and user-friendly format that can be easily referenced.
4. Use government and local media outlets to publicize the new citizen manual.
5. Ensure a wide distribution of the manual.

# Things to Remember

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- **Include only essential information** - It is important to prioritize the information included in the manual so as to provide the most essential and useful information to citizens. Determine what services and processes are most frequently requested by citizens and include this information. Involve staff from as many departments as possible in order to provide information that is accurate and up-to-date.
- **Present information clearly** - Work with a graphic designer who can present the information in a clear and attractive way. The layout and format should be easy to read and reference. Include the date of publication so that citizens know when it was printed and create an incentive for successive administrations to keep the information updated.
- **Make the information available online** - If the municipal government has an online portal, ensure the information provided in the manual is also available on the site. Always ensure consistency between the information available in print and via the Internet.
- **Ensure wide distribution** - Information is only useful to citizens if it is available when they need it. It is important to work towards ensuring every household has a manual. In addition to distributing the manual, an information and media campaign can help raise citizen awareness. The manual should also be available in print at all government offices.



## Citizen's Public Services Manual in El Salvador

In San Salvador, citizens looking to process a request, elicit services or conduct any business with their local government need only turn to the Citizen Manual to obtain detailed information on what office to approach, what documentation to present and the cost of individual services. In 2009, the mayor created a special commission of representatives from each municipal department to standardize processes and procedures within each office and compile this information in a manual to inform citizens of the various steps required to complete municipal processes and let them know what offices provide what services. The Citizen Manual was widely distributed among households and contained clear and concise information on the government services most requested by residents. While the resource was originally designed to improve citizen experiences interacting with government, the manual has also allowed the local administration to make progress toward standardizing processes and improving effectiveness in service delivery.

# PUBLIC RENDERING OF ACCOUNTS

## INFORMING CITIZENS AND INSTITUTIONALIZING TRANSPARENCY

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**Public rendering of accounts** is a practice whereby government publicly reports to and informs citizens of government expenditures and investments over a given period of time. The forum is similar in structure to a town hall meeting and is open to all citizens.

These forums are another way in which citizens can see how their government is investing public funds. These exercises can be participatory and allow citizens to ask questions and comment on government spending, or non-participatory, where government simply presents information to the public.





# Benefits

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- **Create citizen buy-in** - By creating opportunities to inform and discuss public finances with citizens, local government can foster an informed and involved citizenry. Providing citizens with information regarding government budgets can contribute to constituents feeling they are part of a community development process, and as such cultivate citizen buy-in.
- **Increase government transparency and accountability** - Informing citizens of municipal spending, especially if done on a regular basis, is an effective way for government to fulfill its responsibility of being transparent and accountable. These types of initiatives can also reduce outside opportunities for negative speculation looking to undermine the work of a particular administration.

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## STEPS TO GET STARTED

1. Schedule a date to hold a town hall gathering to discuss the budget and render accounts to citizens.
2. Work with staff to gather up-to-date information and figures to present to citizens in a clear and easy-to-understand format.
3. Develop a procedural methodology for this exercise, taking into account the benefits of allowing citizens to participate in a question and answer segment.
4. Create fliers and other print materials to complement the presentation in order to provide citizens with additional and more detailed information they can refer to during and after the presentation.
5. Use media to inform citizens of the event and invite citizens to attend.

# Things to Remember

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- **All pertinent public officials should be involved** - It is important to emphasize the institution of government, and not any one individual when discussing budgetary issues. After all, the mayor is not the only person involved in running the local government and executing the budget. Other municipal officials and council members should be involved in rendering accounts, answering questions and addressing citizen concerns.
- **Promote citizen attendance** - Citizen attendance is very important to the overall success and effectiveness of the initiative. It is essential that formal efforts be made to adequately publicize the event to encourage participation. At the opening of the first public rendering, it is important to encourage citizens to ask questions and express concerns, whether that be during an open microphone segment or by writing questions on notecards.
- **Materials presented should be clear and provide as complete a picture as possible** - It is the obligation of government to ensure that the information provided to citizens is clear and accessible to citizens of all education levels and social strata. Ensure that the material provided is simple and straightforward and presents a true picture of the financial situation of the municipality. Be sure to provide a variety of up-to-date information, including information on the status of projects and programs. Be open regarding advances and setbacks.
- **Make information available to citizens that were unable to attend** - Encourage the local government to make the information presented at the rendering of accounts available to citizens who were not able to attend the event. For example, the fliers, budget summaries and other information presented at the public rendering of accounts can be uploaded on to the municipal website or distributed in print form at the municipal offices. Additionally, providing the information to local media can enable distribution and dissemination through alternate channels such as newspapers and media websites.



## Public Rendering of Accounts in Colombia

Citizens in Cucuta felt their local government was not open to their concerns or transparent in providing information to citizens. As a result, municipal officials decided to establish public rendering of accounts as a mechanism to inform citizens of government activities and provide a forum for citizens to hold government accountable. At the first public rendering of accounts event held in 2009, more than 800 citizens attended. The event was so successful, that the mayor's office worked with the city council to institute the methodology in the municipal code, making it mandatory for future governments. As part of the methodology, public officials from each of the major departments in the municipality—including health, education, water and sanitation—participate in the rendering of accounts, informing citizens of the activities, expenditures and investments in their departments. Finally, the mayor addresses citizens, personally responding to their questions and concerns. This public accountability initiative has been successful in rebuilding citizen confidence in their local government.

# PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

## WORKING TOGETHER TO FUND CITIZEN PRIORITIES

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**Participatory budgeting** is a practice whereby a government reserves funds from the annual budget and allows citizens to determine the allocation of these resources. Working alongside government representatives, citizens discuss and determine community needs and priorities, and subsequently identify projects (or programs) to address these. Participation is not limited to organized civil society, but rather is open to all citizens.



# Benefits

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- **Engage citizens in decision-making processes** - Providing citizens a direct voice in the budgeting process allows for their meaningful involvement in decisions that directly affect their communities. By allowing citizens to participate in prioritizing development projects in their communities, local government can additionally foster citizen buy-in and ownership of local projects which can significantly increase acceptance of development initiatives within a community.
- **Improve government transparency** - Citizen involvement in the budgeting process can help reduce citizen speculation and misinformation regarding the work of government. In addition to heightening transparency of the management of public funds and decentralizing certain aspects of decision-making, participatory budgeting allows for meaningful citizen participation.
- **Improve government responsiveness** - By developing a methodology to directly engage and consult with a broad group of citizens on municipal expenditures, government can use real-time information to inform its planning process as well as respond to citizen needs in a direct and transparent way.

# 5 STEPS TO GET STARTED

1. Call on experts to help devise a culturally sensitive methodology and design a legal framework in accordance with local laws.
2. Allocate funds for this initiative.
3. Determine dates for participatory workshops and make these known to the public.
4. Train staff on the methodology and how best to conduct public budgeting workshops with citizens.
5. Use media and local advocacy groups to inform citizens of upcoming workshops and provide recommendations on how best to participate.

# Things to Remember

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- **Manage citizen expectations from the start** - Resources are often scarce and as such it is important to manage citizen expectations regarding the budget by clearly explaining how much funding is available for projects. Citizens should also know that final decisions regarding the budget are made by the town council and its members have the ability to remove projects through a vote.
- **Ensure identified projects are technically viable** - It is disheartening for citizens who have spent many hours working on a proposal to be told that a project is not technically viable and cannot be considered for funding. It is important, therefore, to ensure that citizens work with an engineer or technical advisor who can consult with citizens throughout the project development process to ensure the technical and financial viability of prioritized projects.
- **Prepare staff to answer tough questions** - Budget allocations and prioritization are often complicated and controversial topics that can generate significant friction if not properly and transparently managed. It is imperative that staff be well trained in the methodology and fully prepared to answer tough questions as well as clearly explain any existing limitations. However, staff should also understand that this is not a pro-forma process and that they need to take citizen input and recommendations seriously.
- **Invite media to workshops with citizens** - The media plays an important role in informing citizens of government actions as well as promoting government transparency and accountability. Local government should seek to involve media whenever possible in order to promote citizen participation and knowledge regarding various initiatives. Inviting media to the sessions adds another level of transparency to the process and informs those who did not participate.



## Participatory Budgeting in Honduras

Thanks to a participatory budgeting process adopted in 2009, the municipality of Cane now boasts a new community women's clinic and a new educational scholarship fund for single mothers. Every year, municipal officials and members of the community meet to identify needs and viable community development projects that subsequently make their way into the annual budget. To begin the process, citizens elected a group of representatives to form a participatory budgeting council to present their petitions to government. Together with municipal officials, council members received a series of trainings on basic budget literacy. Workshops were subsequently organized which brought government officials and citizens together to analyze and collectively identify municipal priorities and sound community development projects. The municipal government of Cane adopted participatory budgeting as a means to garner greater citizen participation in decision-making processes as well as heighten institutional transparency. These participatory activities have ensured that public funds are invested in a way that addresses citizen priorities in addition to those identified by the administration.

# LIVE MEDIA SHOWS

## COMMUNICATING WITH CITIZENS THROUGH RADIO AND TELEVISION

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**Live media shows** are a mechanism through which government officials can directly and effectively communicate with constituents. Through radio or local television, governments can provide up-to-date information on the work of government as well as foster discussion on local issues. Over the course of these programs, citizens have the ability to call in and ask questions or express thoughts and concerns to government officials and staff.





# Benefits

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- **Increase government transparency and accountability** - Live media shows provide citizens with information on government projects, activities and programs. Greater citizen access to information on the work of their governing institutions is one of many ways in which to increase institutional transparency. Likewise, creating opportunities and mechanisms for citizens to directly engage government officials will lead to increased institutional accountability.
- **Stay engaged with citizens on key issues** - Live media is an effective mechanism for enhancing direct communication with constituents. Frequent programs allow government to keep citizens up-to-date on public initiatives underway in the community as well as discuss any pressing issues within a relevant time-frame. Live media shows are also an effective tool through which to gauge citizen response to the work of government.
- **Improve government responsiveness** - By having an established medium through which citizen can express concerns and raise questions on anything from public safety to a poorly lit street corner, government officials can more effectively respond to pressing needs in the community as well as use citizen feedback to shape future policies and projects.
- **Increase government accessibility** - Live media shows have the ability to reach a large audience on a regular basis. Broadcasting programs during prime-time will also ensure more citizens are exposed to important information.

# 5 STEPS TO GET STARTED

1. Work with a local radio or television station to develop a standard procedure and format for producing the program.
2. Ensure programs cover a wide variety of topics.
3. Inform citizens of the existence of the show and how they can participate.
4. Guarantee sufficient time for citizens to call in and ask questions.
5. Set an established time and day for the show in order to foster a regular audience.

# Things to Remember

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- **Ensure that other municipal officials are involved** - While the mayor is the leading figure of a local government, it is important to also ensure the participation of town council members and department heads in the broadcast. This approach will help ensure the program strengthens the institution of government rather than build the political image of one individual.
- **Be honest and well prepared** - All those participating should be prepared to answer potentially difficult questions in a candid manner when responding to a citizen complaint or request. Officials must be careful to only commit to that which they can realistically accomplish. This is especially relevant as citizens will have the ability to call in during subsequent shows to hold government accountable for promises made.
- **Citizen awareness is key** - The program should be publicized to encourage citizen viewership and participation. This is particularly important during the first two months of the program. Word-of-mouth will later spread the news within the community.
- **Sustainability** - Ensure sufficient funds are allocated for program production over a determined period of time. To suddenly discontinue broadcasting due to budgetary constraints can lead to losing listeners and viewers in the future and can have a negative impact on citizen perception.



## Live Media Shows in Guatemala

In Guatemala, the municipal government of San Cristobal Totonicapán hosted a live weekly local cable television show during which the mayor and town council members reported on the work performed by their institution and elicited citizen feedback on government services or particular issues of concern, such as public safety. In an effort to increase government accountability and accessibility, the programs allowed citizens to call in and ask public officials questions. This media initiative was the first of its kind in the municipality and has since been adopted by other municipal governments in the country.

# COLLABORATIVE PUBLIC POLICY

## WORKING TOGETHER TO BETTER MEET CITIZEN NEEDS

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**Collaborative public policy** is a practice by which government officials engage outside actors such as academics, think tanks, issue experts and civil society organizations to obtain input and recommendations for the development of new public policies. Participatory meetings allow public and private actors to exchange ideas that foster the creation of policies that are more responsive to the citizenry at large.



# Benefits

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- **Engage citizens in decision-making processes** - Public policy development is one of many complex tasks that fall within the mandate of government. In an effort to ensure policies are representative of the needs of a given constituency, it is highly recommended that government engage a variety of actors in the deliberative and design process of new policies. While the exchange of ideas among different actors can enrich the final policy, it can also serve to build stakeholder consensus for new initiatives.
- **Increase government transparency** - Allowing stakeholders to participate in the deliberative and design process of public policy is another method through which government can promote institutional transparency. In this sense, the public can be assured that decision-making is not conducted in an arbitrary fashion, behind closed doors, or has come about by means of dishonest proceedings.
- **Build citizen buy-in** - Stakeholder participation in the development of public policy has the ability to foster greater acceptance of new courses of action when they are defined through debate, negotiation and consensus. Though policies may not be fully representative of the interests of any one stakeholder, a negotiated policy will likely encompass various viewpoints and recommendations.
- **Heighten government responsiveness** - When allowing citizens to participate in decision-making processes, a government is able to obtain first-hand feedback and information on citizen needs and priorities. With this information, officials are able to construct new policies that more suitably address and resolve issues.

# 5 STEPS TO GET STARTED

1. Identify the most appropriate government and nongovernment actors who can provide information and meaningful input into the policy development process.
2. Develop a participatory methodology for discussion and debate.
3. Use the first meeting to outline the intention of a new policy and follow-up meetings to analyze information and data, and allow for debate and discussion.
4. Assign a working group made up of citizens and government representatives to draft policy recommendations, based on the discussions.
5. Use the media and local advocacy groups to generate interest and support for the process and new policy.

# Things to Remember

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- **Ensure participants represent a diversity of opinions** - It is recommended that meetings are made up of a manageable number of people who, at the same time, represent a diverse set of opinions. It is important to ensure there is sufficient time and opportunities for differing opinions to be discussed and considered as this will also enable new policies to be representative and meet local needs and priorities, as well as encourage buy-in.
- **Clearly communicate methodology** - Prior to addressing the issue at hand and discussing policy alternatives, it is important to ensure that all participants are familiar with how the collaborative process will be conducted. Establishing rules for discussion at the outset will help prevent confrontation between different or opposing points of view as well as facilitate constructive debate and negotiation.
- **Remind participants that a deliberative process may amend policy recommendations set forth by the collaborative working group** - While the working group will set forth recommendations on the framework and content of new public policies, it is ultimately a larger legislative entity that is responsible for voting and officially adopting new policies. As such, it is important to manage the expectations of those participating in the working group and clearly state that amendments may be made to any policy submitted.



## Collaborative Public Policy in Bolivia

Citizens in the Yungas Valley were growing increasingly concerned with waste disposal and environmental degradation. In response, the municipal government of Coroico decided to get citizens involved in developing solutions to the problem by creating the Environmental Defense Committee to design strategies that reduce pollution and promote conservation. Made up of public officials, civic leaders and representatives from civil society organizations, the committee met every two weeks to discuss the issues in roundtable sessions. At the end of each session, different groups committed to accomplishing agreed upon tasks and presenting results at the subsequent session. This allowed the committee to develop well-informed and well-crafted policy recommendations to present to the local government in a relatively short timeframe. The committee also worked to obtain public and private funds for public works projects that responded to environmental public policies.

# OFFICE OF TRANSPARENCY

## CONSOLIDATING INFORMATION FOR CITIZEN ACCESS

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A **transparency office** is an entity to which all government departments channel information and documentation that is not designated as classified or sensitive. The office is open to the public and facilitates access to government data and information upon request.

In addition to housing public documents, the office also provides citizens with information on government services and serves as a location where citizens can lodge claims or complaints regarding government employees or services.





# Benefits

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- **Increase government transparency and accountability** - Availability of information is the bedrock of transparency and the primary tool with which individuals and institutions can combat corruption. By facilitating access to documents and information, governments are better able to keep citizens informed of how public resources are spent and invested as well as more effectively curtail and reduce citizen speculation regarding the actions of government.
- **House public information in a central location** - An important variable of institutional performance relates to the effective organization and management of information. Centralizing data in one location facilitates easier access to information, by the institution itself, as well as to the public. Once compiled, available data can be systematized to ensure it is also easily searchable.
- **Increase citizen knowledge of the work of government** - The absence of reliable information can often lead to misunderstanding and a lack of knowledge on any given topic. Increasing citizen knowledge of the work of government can play a strong role in strengthening institutional legitimacy.
- **Create alternative avenue for citizen claims and complaints** - It is not uncommon for citizens to be hesitant to report irregularities related to government administration or to the institution of government itself. This office can therefore serve as a safe and alternative location where citizens can file complaints. Garnering citizen confidence in due process is an important foundation for building citizen trust in governing institutions and in cultivating a culture of participation.

# 5 STEPS TO GET STARTED

1. Identify office space suited to house documentation and that is easily accessible to the public.
2. Determine office hours (preferably the same as government office hours), what information will be provided by the office and assign staff to manage the office on a daily basis.
3. Set up mechanisms for channeling information from the various government departments to the office and vice-versa (include how often documentation should be updated by the government) and provide the office with diverse and up-to-date information.
4. Train staff on what information is available and how to interpret it, how to engage with the public, and how to process requests for information as well as claims and complaints.
5. Use media to inform citizens of this new initiative, its purpose, the services it offers and where it is located.

# Things to Remember

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- **Create sound mechanisms for government to supply up-to-date information to the office** - To ensure the office truly becomes a depository of information, there must be an established and institutionalized chain of command that determines how information is to flow to and from the office and the government. Set procedures for information management will also ensure that the supply of information does not rest on the willingness of a handful of individuals, or become unavailable as the result of others.
- **Ensure staff is prepared to answer questions and follow-up on questions for which there are no immediate answers** - Staff assigned to directly engage with the public must be familiar with the type of information housed in the office, know how to access it and be able to interpret its contents. If requested information is not readily available, it is important to ensure staff is trained on the process and procedure on filing requests for information with agencies. It is also important to establish a timeframe for follow-up to requests to ensure petitions are answered within a reasonable amount of time. Because the office may also have the ability to lodge citizen claims and complaints, staff must be trained on what information to solicit from citizens, how to safeguard the identity of citizens (if necessary), and how to formally deliver a complaint to the government institution.



## Transparency Office in Colombia

The Colombian cities of Cartagena, Cucuta, Soacha and Valledupar are pioneering efforts to increase transparency and fight corruption through Transparency Offices or *Salones de la Transparencia*. These offices allow citizens to perform oversight of public resources by providing access to government contracts and budgets as well as local development plans and annual reports. Citizens can also visit their city's office to receive civic education materials and file complaints related to the local administration and the use of public resources. In 2009, the Colombian Federation of Municipalities recognized the *Salon de la Transparencia* as one of 30 innovative practices in local government.

