Background

In December 2001, an unparalleled economic crisis unfolded, triggering high rates of unemployment and extreme poverty. Increases in informal and precarious employment, such as sub-standard jobs with low wages, reduced earnings in many households. GDP fell by 20 percent in the last four years and by nearly 11 percent in 2002 alone. Per capita income at the end of 2002 stood at an estimated US$2,695, down from over US$8,000 in the 1997/98 period.

The social cost of these figures has been enormous—poverty rose to a zenith of 58 percent in 2002, with indigence levels affecting 28 percent of the population, or approximately 9 million people. As a result, access to basic public health and education services has been severely impacted, while purchasing power has decreased dramatically.

Civil society responses to the crisis were varied and active. On one the hand, proactive participation in community activities increased considerably, especially through community support for social services such as soup kitchens, kindergartens/childcare to assist parents working under extreme conditions, communal purchases of goods, etc. At the same time, civil society found mechanisms to express discontent, including demonstrations, picketing and local assemblies that interrupted the country’s daily life. Traditional civil society organizations (CSOs), including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), churches, unions and community-based organizations serving the poorest sectors of society, demanded immediate action from the government and multilateral organizations to improve the efficacy of social programs created by the government in the late 1990s, some through loans from the World Bank (WB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). During the peak of the economic crisis, the WB’s programs were refocused to strengthen social safety nets to ensure basic health, nutrition and education for the most
vulnerable, particularly poor families with young or adolescent children.

**An Experimental Initiative**

In this context, the WB led a process to develop and implement a set of mechanisms to strengthen civil society’s capacity to influence and monitor the use of public resources in emergency social programs co-financed by the international financial institutions (IFIs).

These social accountability strengthening activities were comprised of two independent initiatives: 1.) the Social Monitor, and 2.) a training program on tools for social accountability for grassroots organizations.

The Social Monitor has sought to incorporate program beneficiaries in the assessment of the program’s results, impacts, level of transparency and accessibility to information. The program contains two critical components. First, a competitively selected consortium of CSOs has carried out surveys, interviews, workshops, and in situ observations to verify the legal and efficient use of resources. These tools complemented other analysis and all conclusions have been compiled in periodic reports to the WB. Second, a hotline has been established to receive allegations and complaints from citizens.

The capacity building training program was developed for grassroots organizations in methods and techniques for social accountability, including participatory budgeting, explanation of social program goals and mechanism to access information from public and private sources. UNDP, academic institutions and notable NGOs have provided operational support in the development of the trainings.

**Developing Social Accountability Initiatives**

By March 2001, the design process of these initiatives had begun with an intense agenda of meetings with the Government of Argentina, through the Technical Secretary for the National Council for the Coordination of Social Policy, and CSOs, including technical NGOs, community-based organizations, professional associations, indigenous communities, etc.

In April 2001, the WB organized a capacity building workshop on “Participatory Public Management”. More than 200 representatives from technical NGOs, grassroots organizations, churches, think tanks, and the government participated in the training sessions. The goal of the workshop was to expose CSOs to international experiences on social accountability. A concrete outcome of these meetings was that a wide range of organizations demonstrated a greater commitment to institutionalize mechanisms of social accountability in order to promote greater transparency of public administrative procedures.

Simultaneously, the WB and UNDP supported a Program for Capacity Building on Social Accountability that trained 630 CSOs in cities throughout Argentina in specific tools and instruments for social accountability. These included the design and execution of participatory budgets, as well as an overview of the institutional and legal framework for accountability in Argentina. The training appears to have developed among CSOs, at local and national levels, a shared commitment to strengthen social accountability, while increasing the self-confidence of civil society in its capacity to act on this commitment and demand wider participation.

In July 2002, tenders were solicited from coalitions of CSOs to serve as the Social Monitor. By December 2002, El Foro del Sector Social, a consortium of 56 CSOs, was selected to manage the program’s activities, including capacity building, coordinating local monitoring and data collection, and preparing regular reports to the donors and relevant Argentine authorities.

**Results on the Ground**

In March 2003, the WB, UNDP and IDB officially launched the Social Monitor for an initial six-month period with the possibility of extension for a maximum of eighteen months. The initiatives have offered new and productive opportunities for strengthening social accountability, yet the process has proven more challenging than anticipated. At present, the Social Monitor’s mandate has been extended for an additional three months in order to gradually put into service the hotline on a national basis. Although many of the
operational difficulties found in the exploratory phases have been resolved, additional efforts are required to successfully prepare tools that can be transferred to civil society at large.

The managing consortium already has presented several reports that contain and analyze information on irregularities observed in the distribution of social assistance, and helped identify new unmet needs of vulnerable groups most affected by the crisis.

The initiative has promoted an increase in civil society’s access to information, contributing to the exercise of the civic and social right to be clearly informed on the implementation and results of social programs financed with public funds. This appears to have two main concrete outcomes. First, by publicizing the requisites and responsibilities of emergency plans, the Social Monitor has helped to increase the dissemination of information on program benefits to vulnerable groups. Second, the Social Monitor has offered beneficiaries of emergency services, whose voices frequently are unheard, a space to express complaints and recommendations through a hotline to receive relevant opinions and allegations. This has created an environment that is more conducive to improved quality of and satisfaction with public services.

The topic of social control and accountability also has advanced higher on the political agenda and in academic and social forums. Social accountability mechanisms have been included in 10 social emergency programs financed by the WB and IDB. As additional resources are directed towards these activities, other stakeholders also could assume more of these responsibilities.

The program has linked various actors from all regions of the country, including direct beneficiaries, technical NGOs, user/consumer organizations and multilateral agency technical teams, through forums and informal discussions on the design and execution of the Social Monitor. This has contributed to a socialization process, and shared best practices of organizations in various contexts to overcome similar problems. The combination of these outputs appears to have fostered civil society’s opportunities to engage in common strategies and reduce vulnerabilities tied to horizontal competition.

Nevertheless, the Social Monitor, as an ongoing initiative, has not been exempt of obstacles. The Foro del Sector Social and the other selected CSOs have encountered several difficulties in the development of an operative network to implement the Social Monitor. One of the principal requisites of the bidding contract in building the consortium has been the demand to include a minimum of 48 NGOs, two organizations from each of the country’s 24 administrative provinces. This condition was established as a means to guarantee full national participation in the process and to compile information on social emergency projects nationwide. Yet this mandate has proven an impediment to the process, as the capacity and representation of the different organizations has varied dramatically, complicating their collaborative efforts. As a result, the schedule of activities has been compressed and readapted several times, a situation that has delayed the timely and satisfactory submission of reports and has caused some budget constraints. Learning from this experience, the Social Monitor initiatives currently underway in Paraguay and Uruguay have eliminated this requisite from their programs.

The launch of the Social Monitor was widely covered by the national media. Despite a modest follow-up during the last few months, the recent implementation of the hotline has renewed interest in the initiative. Additional efforts to further disseminate the Social Monitor’s activities could increase awareness among citizens on the availability of this mechanism intended to ensure transparency in the use of public funds.

However, there has been progress to increase the engagement with civil society in the design of new strategies to face crises, and to include social control mechanisms managed by CSOs. For example, during August and September 2003, more than 1,200 people from numerous CSOs took part in a participatory process to develop a new Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) for Argentina. Participants called for increased social participation in the decision-making processes of the State regarding public expenditures (e.g. – priorities in health, education, infrastructure). They also requested the inclusion of social accountability mechanisms so that civil society can contribute in the preparation and control of projects, including those financed by the World Bank.
Lessons Learned

Effective involvement of civil society and responsiveness to their concerns can play an important role in mitigating the risks of social unrest and discontent and help begin to restore public confidence. Hence, the different social accountability initiatives have specifically sought to help vulnerable sectors of society, and organizations that represent their interests, to become more active in the public sphere, by strengthening their capacity and serving as interlocutors to enable monitoring and evaluation of social emergency programs by beneficiaries.

Numerous weaknesses within civil society limit their ability to fully assume their newly-realized rights and responsibilities. Despite concerted efforts to develop civil society capacity, the high learning curve for effective civic participation often lags behind the demands of the timeline established for organized civic action. This knowledge gap inhibits active and effective engagement in the new spheres of influence. In addition, distrust toward the State and multilateral organizations persists, deterring civic action. Changes in attitudes require time coupled with positive new experiences.

There also is a considerable degree of competition among CSOs. The diversity of interests represented naturally generates conflicting priorities, particularly among different regions of the country. In addition, there exists an unspoken hierarchy among CSOs, with greater importance often given to organizations based in Buenos Aires, creating a sense of favoritism against CSOs from the provinces. In order to ensure the inclusion of the diversity of voices, the IFIs should be fully aware of such differences, and design strategies that consider a wide variety of organizations that represent different realities and deal with diverse priorities.

Next Steps: Moving From Crisis To Sustainability

As with all pilot programs, the social accountability initiatives are benefiting from an extensive evaluation process to distill best practices and make appropriate adjustments. An independent private agency will produce an evaluation report focusing on three critical areas in the design and implementation of the project: 1) institutional aspects; 2) management analysis and 3) strengths and weaknesses in the design and execution of the Social Monitor. The evaluation exercise also is expected to serve as a valuable tool to deepen transparency and build trust among the various actors.

Information dissemination will prove key to ensuring the quality and effectiveness of the program. Specifically, it is important to share international best practices and experiences of social auditing widely to build greater consensus and support for these activities. The use of regional networks within the country in a national monitoring system could help the government widen its own social auditing programs. Information on nationwide activities could be collected and analyzed. Regional networks also could help to identify and remedy problems of overlapping authority at the municipal, provincial and national levels.

The Social Monitor program is one of many steps in Argentina’s efforts towards better governance and participatory decision-making. In the coming months, the new government is expected to demonstrate its declared intention to open political decision making to civil society. If the commitment of government, civil society and international institutions to increase social accountability and transparency proves stronger than the tension of increasing demands, a solid social monitoring system could be established, empowering civil society to improve the poor’s access to the resources allocated to them and helping to restore trust in public institutions.

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