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ARGENTINA'S CARTAS COMPROMISO STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY FOR MORE ACCOUNTABLE PUBLIC SERVICES

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Background: the Institutional Reform Loan and The *Carta Compromiso*

The last institutional and economic crisis in Argentina, with five government changes in two years, a severe economic recession and the collapse of the financial system, resulted in a decline in the credibility of public agencies. This challenging context provided a window of opportunity to support more responsive and accountable services to citizens.

At the end of 2000, the government of Argentina (specifically the *Subsecretaría de Gestión Pública*, or the Sub-secretary of Public Management) initiated a program of state modernization with the support of the World Bank. This operation featured a key component around results-based management systems, specifically the creation of a *Programa Cartas Compromiso*, or Citizen Charter Program (CCP). The CCP seeks a new relationship between public service providers and users by promoting a higher degree of responsiveness and transparency to ensure greater quality of services, increased information and better monitoring and evaluation. The *Carta Compromiso* is a public management tool where the highest authority of a service-providing agency makes a public commitment to citizens, laying out a number of goals and results to be met within a given timeframe.



The Citizen Charters program is initiated with the signature of an agreement between the public service agency and the *Subsecretaría* (as the central coordinator of the program) followed by an implementation plan. The actual *Carta* is a public document that establishes a commitment of the service agency to uphold a series of standards including: a) providing public explanations on user's rights and obligations; b) informing users about the services and the means to access them; c) informing users about the expected level of quality; d) establishing mechanisms for feedback and complaints; and e) setting redress processes (including appellation and reparation) for cases where the agency does not comply with its commitments.

The implementation of the CCP focuses on four main components:

1. Service quality standards.
2. Public information systems.
3. Citizen consultation and participation processes.
4. Monitoring and evaluation of activities and results for further improvements.

Although the CCP successfully has moved many public agencies towards a results-based management framework, an initial assessment of the program shed light on the need to promote a more inclusive and participatory process for the

formulation of CCP goals. By doing so, the program can help ensure that users' opinions are taken into account in setting standards and measuring indicators.

Capacity Building for Civil Society and the Government in the Implementation of the Program

In November 2001, a joint assessment on the implementation of the program was conducted by the World Bank and the government. Several challenges in the program were identified:

- Limited analysis of users and key actors involved in the program.
- The Charters were often too technical and not shared with users and civil society organizations for feedback earlier on.
- Users' and civil society views were not included in the quality criteria in a systematic way.
- There were no formal feedback mechanisms for social accountability.
- Civil society organizations (CSOs) had limited capacity to collect data, analyze information and organize collective action.

As a result, improvements were made in the dissemination of the CCP and the participation of civil society in the program's activities through the creation of a Civil Society Unit (CSU) within the Subsecretaría, as well as the organization of training workshops.

An initial workshop for officials from the various signatory agencies and civil society representatives was carried out in July 2002 on participation and consultation processes, stakeholder analysis and information campaigns. Based on the success of the first workshop, two agencies, including the Social Security Agency (ANSES) and the Superintendent of Health Services (SSS), were selected to pilot citizen report card initiatives (See Text Box-*Citizen Report Cards*). In November 2002, an implementation workshop on citizen report cards was held in Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata, training officials from the Subsecretaría, public agencies, consumer groups, CSOs, universities and World Bank experts. The planned report card project will be based on the input from focus group discussions around social services such as pensions, unemployment benefits and cash transfers.

A large component on capacity building for the Subsecretaría de Gestión Pública will focus on the design, implementation and evaluation of a pilot citizen report card process for several public agencies.

Additional participatory mechanisms used throughout the program include public hearings, consultations and the creation of an NGO-based technical coordination groups.

Additionally, the information component has been strengthened through the creation of an email address for comments and queries (compromiso@sgp.gov.ar) and a website (<http://cartacompromiso.sgp.gov.ar>).

A pool of 31 national public service agencies so far have adhered to the program, including ANSES, which is responsible for 50 percent of public expenditures at the national level and the SSS, which regulates health service provision for 11 million citizens. Of these, 25 have actually signed and implemented the Charters. Additionally, a second round of Charters have been signed to extend the guarantee of quality services, which brings the total number of legal documents to 38 as of May 2003. A total of 1,300 civil servants and over 40 civil society organizations have received capacity-building in various participatory techniques.



Empowering Citizens to Hold Service Providers Accountable

The *Cartas Compromiso* explicitly recognize rights that are meant to assist citizens in their interactions with public institutions. Greater access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability and capacity building are the main elements for the empowerment of citizens to hold institutions accountable. These elements are also expected to contribute to creating, and in some cases restoring, the level of confidence in the public administration and to increasing its effectiveness and good governance.

The adherence of service agencies to the CCP has resulted in substantive improvements in the **access to information**. The Charters incorporate a summary version of all relevant information on services provided by public agencies including objectives, mission statements, services provided, standards, as well as expected improvements. Additionally, since the creation of the CSU, there have been several coordinated events that have promoted exchanges of information between interested parties (CSOs, agency personnel, the program's technical staff, the private sector and universities).

The program also features two dimensions that promote **inclusion and participation**. First, the creation of the CSU

Citizen Report Cards

Citizen score or report cards are public accountability mechanisms based on citizen surveys of the performance and quality of government services. They allow citizens to monitor state performance. In addition, they:

1. Provide quantitative information from the perspective of public service users which can help government agencies make changes and improve service;
2. Can assist in prioritizing reform efforts and allocating public resources;
3. Aggregate and communicate the realities faced by the poor to government officials, decision makers, and the public;
4. Foster voice, discussion, and debate, and build demand for reform; and,
5. Treat users of public services as clients or customers whose voices matter in the design, delivery, and assessment of government services.

Source: World Bank (2002), *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction Sourcebook*, 317.

meant a step forward in the inclusion of CSOs in the program's activities. Second, the capacity building component has provided the necessary technical support to undertake activities, such as consumer satisfaction surveys, public hearings, focus group discussions, etc.

Clearly, one of the main objectives of the program has been to introduce an element of **accountability** in the relationship between service providers and users. In this sense, it is of fundamental importance that the causes for complaints from users are investigated and corrected in order to both promote confidence on the part of users, and ensure the sustainability of the program. Ultimately, it is as much about restoring public confidence as about ensuring accountability.

Finally, in terms of **capacity building**, the program has provided specific training to all organizations that are signatory parties to the citizen charters in the design and application of varied methodologies to consult and incorporate user's views into the planning, implementation and evaluation of services, as well as on how to communicate effectively. In this regard, the role of the Bank has been instrumental in providing the financial and technical resources needed, in promoting social auditing mechanisms for greater civil society engagement, and in convening diverse actors to work together.

Challenges

Given Argentina's crisis, a major challenge for the CCP program has come from the wavering political commitment to push the initiative forward, given the frequent government changes and the inherent limitations (both in terms of resources as well as decision-making power) of public agencies during the last couple of years. The key element of the program since its inception has in fact been that it is demand-driven: it requires interest and political commit-

ment, as well as the allocation of resources and staff, from the participating agencies.

This points to a very important first challenge that needs to be addressed earlier on in this type of initiative: the organizational culture and incentives of agencies and their staff needs to be altered as well as, or before, technical, material, and legal components. It is fundamental to change inward-looking practices to understand that there are external clients and that service provision and management should be transparent.

Currently, and given the improvements in terms of civil society involvement introduced to the program, the two main challenges focus around: a) opening up and coordinating with other civil society actors; and b) generating substantive modifications in the new charters currently being drawn up for signature.

Lessons Learned

These types of initiatives require sound political commitment and should be demand-driven to be sustainable. At an early stage, it was key for high-level civil servants to understand the benefits and usefulness of the CCP for better outcomes, and dispel the image that it was a new obligation forced by the *Subsecretaría*.

Crises can be windows of opportunity for change. Even during crises, where the most urgent prevails, actions can be effectively taken to improve and change institutions and the way they work. For actions to be sustainable, processes should be predictable and focused on results. It may therefore be important to have as short an interval as possible between the initial show of interest from an agency and the actual signature of the *Carta*, particularly in contexts of

political volatility. In fact, the CCP survived the many institutional and staff changes and provided continuity to the reform agendas.

Investing in capacity is a must. The World Bank's involvement in the program has brought an increased focus on capacity-building, particularly for CSOs and public officials on the use of social accountability mechanisms, an important step to remove obstacles to inclusion and participation. As a result, strategic partnerships have been forged and innovative experiences have been promoted.

Internal participation is key for participatory planning and management, and contributes to the sustainability of policies. Commitment to both internal and external participation is key to ensure a sense of ownership within the agencies instead of a top-down reform approach. In this regard, the CCP promotes the idea of an external client and a new relationship between users and providers.

The establishment of an open dialogue among the central government, public service agencies and citizens in a structured and systematic way helps create confidence. When there are sustained processes, there is a higher level of predictability and confidence is built step by step. But, as previously mentioned, cultural and institutional changes to increase transparency, openness and accountability take time and create resistance. *Therefore, it is also essential to manage tensions arising from change.*

While working with heterogeneous actors is key, having an integrated approach helps to build partnerships. It is important to develop integral strategies to promote synergies between the comparative advantages of each set of actors. This positive tension between the diversity of interests and common goals should be managed carefully.

The Program could benefit from a higher degree of horizontal coordination among governmental agencies. There is little intra-governmental coordination in the CCP institutional framework. Currently, the *Subsecretaría de Gestión Pública* handles its relations with each participating agency bilaterally, and there is little coordination or exchange of information among them. It is a radial system that may be missing synergies for network building and capacity sharing.

Promote notions of co-responsibility, public confidence, governance. Good governance and democracy are increasingly perceived in many countries as dependent on the reduction of inequalities and the maintenance of public confidence. Argentina's economic, social and institutional crisis is a case in point. Programs like the Citizens Charters help to ensure that the concept, design, and implementation of public programs and projects are done through management processes that involve a variety of actors, including public agencies, the private sector, civil society organizations and multilateral institutions, as well as the central government.

Conclusion: Towards Participatory Evaluation of Outcomes

Policy changes as a result of the initiative have resulted in improvements in social accountability, increased capacity of CSOs and government actors, the removal of obstacles for inclusion and participation, and the strengthening of strategic partnerships. An additional policy change that could be explored at a later stage might include the dialogue among different levels of government, including national, provincial and local levels to coordinate services to users.

In terms of the immediate next steps, the efforts to strengthen participation in the program are now looking to:

1. Implement the pilot citizen report cards initiative.
2. Continue evaluating the participatory processes undertaken so far.
3. Explore the possibility of scaling up these participatory instruments to cover a greater number of users and agencies.
4. Promote greater participation of users in the design and content of Citizen Charters.
5. Develop a clearer communications strategy for all parties involved in the program.
6. Institutionalize the CCP within the national government to ensure long-term sustainability.

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See <http://www.worldbank.org/laccs>

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