



ControlaTuGobierno
Herramientas para el control social
de la acción gubernamental

CONTROLATUGOBIERNO, A.C.



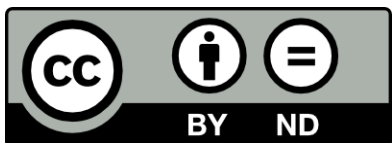
WORK NOTEBOOK No. 4

The social audit model designed by ControlaTuGobierno:

basic components

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INTRODUCTION

The social audit model designed by ControlaTuGobierno, A.C. (CTG) is the result of the accumulated experience after five years of working with marginalized communities in the Valley of Mexico. We understand as marginalization not only the lack of economic resources, low educational level, and lack of abilities for political engagement, but also the condition of having been marginalized from the spaces where decision-making about public affairs takes place.

Our approach departs from a basic conviction: people should not have to invest time and effort in supervising public management, unless it was due to a very personal choice. Rather, people are forced to pay attention to governmental action because their rights, their environment or, their property or the common goods are affected by a deficient or corrupt public administration. It is not easy to know how the government works. To untangle this riddle implies diverting attention from other daily life responsibilities to find out, to use a real life example, why did the local government decide to renovate the only street I can use, right when I need to transport my agricultural production. People stop allocating their already short time to families or work, to file requests to the “authority”, asking for explanations that are never given. Defenseless against a governmental machine that does not listen to them, citizens embark in organizational processes that are often confrontational and inefficient.

The social audit model designed by CTG seeks to approach these circumstances. Thus, we depart from the right of access to information as a key that opens opportunities for the exercise of other rights, and enrich our approach through the incorporation of formal and on-the-ground knowledge that only of the communities have about their own necessities, problems and territory, on top of the usual advocacy tools, to increase people’s ability to control governmental action. We seek social audit to become a tool for marginalized communities to control their governments, defend common goods and preserve peace in the framework of official political institutions, to benefit both citizens and governments.

In the following pages we describe in general terms the social audit model that we have built. In the first section we present a brief sneak peek of the theoretical framework that influences our proposal, and in the second we describe the four basic components of social audit that we support.

We hope that this document is useful for other groups and organizations to embark in similar activities without having to start from scratch, and provides ideas to help others obtain good results.

Mexico City, July 2018.

1. The theoretical framework and the conceptual definition.

Social audit is long established in Latin America. Thus, it is common for governments to include it as a participation mechanism within the provision of good and services. Nevertheless, the different meanings that the concept “social audit” has acquired (Hevia 2007, 11) signal very different approaches depending on the context, the actors and the reach attributed to this mechanism of citizen engagement.

Nuria Cunill (2009) defines social audit as a group of regulatory actions that civil society performs autonomously to examine and discuss governmental performance. It is indeed an eminently political practice that groups an ample spectrum of surveilling actions over governmental action, which includes the exercise of the public budget and the guaranteeing of civic rights. Thus defined, social audit is a type of citizen participation that is distinct from others (such as public consultations or participatory budget, for example) due to its critical and supervision functions over State action, different from other such as consultation, participatory budget. Its reach depends on the endowed direct or indirect power resources, the former including the capacity of denouncing and the latter encompassing certain types of actions backed by law (see Cunill 2009).

Other direct powers of social audit, which do not require institutional mediation nor a legal framework supporting them, are the powers that Cunill calls of number and communicational. Among those considered of number are demonstrations and protests, whereas communicational powers are aimed at influencing public opinion. In both cases we are talking about symbolic powers which do not have binding effects, that is, they do not legally force a response from state’s institutions.

Apart from these direct and indirect powers of social audit, Cunill mentions three other types of influence that social audit can exert over the results of public policy, governmental programs and public services. These are: certification, allocation and veto powers. In the first case, citizens have the power to grant or not their endorsement to a program or planned infrastructure, before it is approved by the responsible authority (the right to previous consultation). The power of allocation refers to the possibility that citizens choose where to invest public resources (such as in participatory budgeting). The third power emerges when citizens are actually

capable of taking part in decision-making processes, for example the decision to hire or not a specific provider of public services (social witnesses).

Peruzzotti and Smulovitz (2002, p. 36), found that actions of citizen monitoring over governmental action in Latin America are carried out through three channels: judicialization, social mobilization and media strategies. Resorting to judicialization has the double advantage of giving citizens a base layer of legitimacy as well as forcing the state to make a statement regarding a particular issue. The judicialization of social audit can happen through legal courts or by reaching out to new institutions created expressly for this purpose, which in the Mexican case are the Federal Institute for Access to Public Information, the National Commission for Human Rights, and the Superior Audit of the Federation, along its local counterparts,¹ for example.

Regarding social mobilization, Peruzzotti states that this practice implies that organizations have to obtain great support from the public opinion, to increase the political cost of public official's inadequate actions (Peruzzotti, 2006, p. 21). In some cases, these initiatives crystalize in the establishment of overseeing bodies – which in Mexico could be the specialized prosecutors or observatories- and in others, they focus momentarily on issues which acquire relevance on the face of specific political scenarios. One of the features of these type of cases is that once the social demand is met, the mobilization often dilutes.

The third mechanism mentioned by Peruzzotti and Smulovitz is the media strategy. Its strength derives from the impact achieved over public opinion. Investigative journalism plays a fundamental role for the success of this resource.

As it has been shown, the term ‘social audit’ is used to refer to different participatory mechanisms that intervene throughout the whole public policy cycle to guarantee that governmental action responds exclusively to public interest. The efficacy of these mechanisms depends on their autonomy vis a vis the State and on their capacity to represent the citizens involved in the public action under supervision (Cunill, 2009). In addition to that, we have identified that the engagement of other social and political actors, throughout the social audit process may help it achieve higher level of governmental accountability, forcing public servants to take responsibility for their actions (Fox, cited in Primer Encuentro de Organismos Auxiliares de Cuenca, 2017, pp. 33-35).

¹ Isunza and Olvera (2006, 283) refer to these institutions as transversal accountability mechanisms.

It is important to keep in mind that governmental action is a complex bundle of tiny actions regulated by hierarchical attributions, which do not occur only once and remain stable, but are constantly being enacted dynamically. Therefore, accountability should not be understood as the revision of a linear frozen set of actions, nor focused only in the final stage of governmental action. The discursive, operative, budgetary and decision-making labyrinths which governmental programs go through, from their planning to their implementation, are endless, to say it briefly.

Finalizing the construction of a street, providing contraception services, improving children's reading and writing skills, or any other action taken by the State, as small as it may be, implies the combination of wills, actions and decisions of a myriad of institutions from the three levels of government. This description is not an overcomplication of governmental action, but rather a thorough take on its process. Thus, it is not an easy task for a lay person to understand and disentangle the chain of command and the distribution of functions and responsibilities that intervene in the solution of an issue that affects her. In the majority of cases, those who undertake the task of overseeing governmental action do not do it due to a mere civic interest, but as a reaction to a specific need or grievance in the face of which they are forced to act. Their first task is therefore to understand how the government, the budget and in general public management, works.

To a great extent this complexity explains why, within the most recent academic discussions related to strategies of social audit, there are usually reflections about the translation role performed by civil society organizations and other social actors. These actors are seen as tacticians with the necessary knowledge and abilities to help oversee the performance of programs and public services from 'below', that is, departing from the results and the experience of their final addressees (Fox, 2018).

Social audits are processes that show the organizational capacity of people who seek to participate in the decision-making over public matters. These engaged citizens require, firstly, an accountable institutional counterpart, and secondly, to form alliances among diverse social actors to generate a counterweight strong enough to achieve meaningful interlocution with public powers and their representatives. These alliances increase the chances that citizens can effectively participate in the decision-making processes regarding public matters. However,

to achieve this, it is necessary on top of citizens' will, a legal mandate that effectively expands the spaces for participation.

In relation to this, the Superior Audit of the Federation has stated in its Considerations Around Legislative Work (2017, p. 35):

“The legal framework underlying the social participation in the expense of the public budget is disperse among regulations with a sectorial character, lacks integrality, and its implementation is subjected, in many cases, to the discretion of authorities and public officials.

If we cater to the content of an important part of the norms, the treatment of social participation is still lax, optional regarding the attention it should receive, and even barely discursive, thus becoming a matter that has not reached a level of generalized institutionalization”.

The Superior Audit of the Federation's proposal to tackle this situation is to enact “a General Law for Social Participation that fosters and strengthens the participative process of citizens in the management, overseeing, surveillance and evaluation of the public budget”.

ControlaTuGobierno considers that legislative improvement can, in principle, represent a good incentive for public servants to expand spaces for participation, assuming that such spaces generate a real, effective and binding impact over the decision-making regarding public matters. However, our experience also show that this outcome depends more on the political will of public servants, than on the legal framework.

2. The four components of our model of social audit.

The social audit currently recognized by the Mexican General Law of Social Development is a participation mechanism which only allows the beneficiaries of social programs to “verify the fulfilment of the goals and the correct expense of public resources” (2004). Thus, in the best scenario, social auditors can generate recommendations and observations that are administratively processed without considerable repercussions over the performance of the programs being evaluated.

This type of social audit can be a source of legitimacy from the government's point of view, given that it generates a perception that social needs and demands have been considered during the process of elaborating and implementing public policies. In light of the lack of social capital and the weakness of organizations (both from the state and citizens), the State built a social audit in its own terms and interests, which usually are not the same interests of the addressees of public policy.

As an autonomous and independent activity by organized citizens, social audit is perceived as a highly specialized activity that implies considerable investments of time, human resources and funding. In general, citizens' interventions in public policy commonly has individuals or groups with technical knowledge as main actors. Hence the relevance of engaging different types of knowledges that foster the appropriation of governmental processes from a perspective that privileges local contexts and needs.

One of the biggest challenges faced by those who seek to implement social audit processes is the profound mistrust of the government towards organized citizens (Sánchez, M., Prada, M. y Cantillo, L., 2014), sometimes it is difficult to get over this animosity and take it to a level where mistrust can be backed up with evidence in order to make clear demands, well informed critics, show real problems, point proposals and possible solutions. This wariness originates in the horror felt by public officials to be supervised during the exercise of what they consider their capacities. Thus, a defensive attitude from politicians and non-elected officials emerges towards citizens' abilities to intervene in any regard of governmental action. Such mistrust results in a constant political quest for obtaining the control of any citizen instance of social audit, which inevitably weakens its results.

The absence of a proper civil career service that fosters the professionalization of public officials (Sánchez, 2017), in addition to the lack of technical capacity and the nonexistence of work security in the public service, makes the implementation of any policy or governmental program unnecessarily complicated. Such context generates the appropriate conditions for influence peddling, patrimonialism and corruption. This conundrum is particularly grave at the municipal level, where the most effective instances of social audit should be located, given that it is the level of government closest to the population.

In this context, ControlaTuGobierno, decided to build a model for social audit that distances itself from the institutionalized social audits (Hevia, 2014) and other citizen initiatives. Our model is directed at fostering the social monitoring over governmental action, which implies a change in the way in which citizens and governments relate to each other. This shift in state-citizens relations cannot be achieved by only promoting the citizen oversight of the information produced by the government; it is necessary that society identifies how to use information with strategic purposes and develops its capacity to identify what is required in each particular situation according to specific contexts and needs, and what non-confrontational means already exist to achieve it.

Such approach includes a component of deliberative democracy, because it involves citizens in all the phases of the public policy cycle rather than just in the evaluation public management's results. We understand social audit as the participatory mechanism for decision-making over public matters that pays attention to all the forces coalescing in a specific space, whether they are public, private or a combination of both. However, this type of social audit should remain autonomous and seek to build counterweights as a relevant resource of power to foster the intervention of citizens in public matters.

For social audits to happen in these terms, it is necessary that citizens think of themselves as proper holders of the rights written in the law, and that they are capable of demanding their fulfilment when the state fails to guarantee these rights. In some occasions, such a notion of citizenship requires a previous learning process, since not in every process of citizen participation departs from the idea that what is demanded is for something that citizens are already entitled to receive. In many cases, there is a multidimensional asymmetry between people and governments that needs to be reduced through the use of information and strategies of citizenship-building. Thus, a pedagogic process is required to transform the relationship between citizens and governments, which passes through disassembling political practices of clientelism which have prevailed for many years, particularly at the local level. Citizens' helplessness against political powers often pushes them to take the short road of influence peddling and clientelism, and when that does not work, they may resort to threats and confrontation.

In contrast, citizenship building is a long endeavor. It requires a process of collective knowledge accumulation emerging from successful experiences, which

are often scarce and isolated. Therefore, it is important that communities carrying out social accountability practices remain reflexive and value intermediate successes. On the other hand, it is of particular importance that people interested in decision-making processes understand that public resources are scarce in comparison to social needs. Becoming aware of something apparently so simple turns into a key incentive for social audit: if public resources are so limited, we need to know what are the norms that regulate their management, who are responsible of supervising its correct spending and how is mismanagement sanctioned.

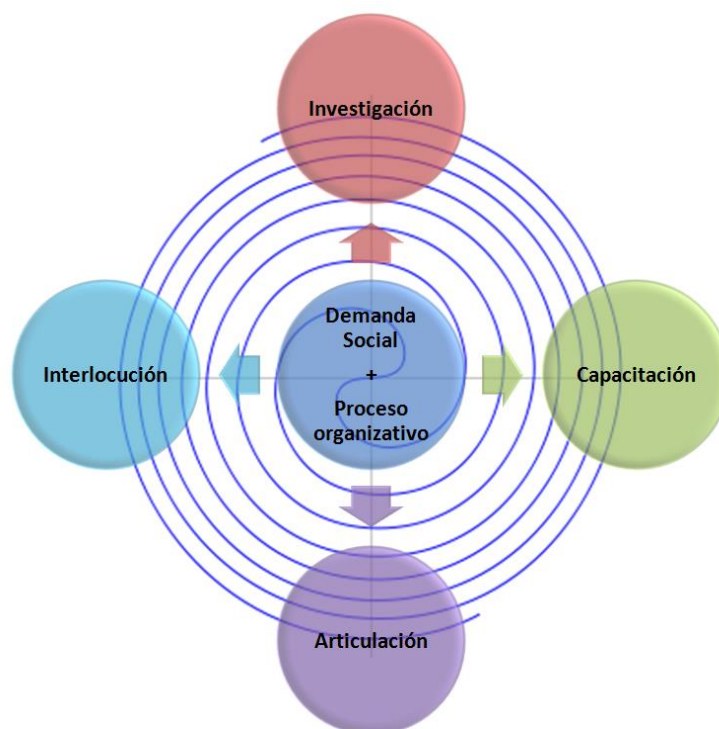
Given that social audit has no binding effects, one of its resources of power is to trigger the intervention of institutional control and auditing institutions, which are the appropriate instances to supervise and sanction public management. A collaboration of this nature can be strategic for social audit to have a meaningful impact over decision-making processes regarding public matters. Nevertheless, this approach cannot be realized exclusively from the local level. It is necessary to scale-up the process and implement actions that involve authorities at different levels of government, as well as social actors with different negotiation abilities.

Scaling up a process of social audit is only feasible after the construction of alliances between actors who have meaningful experiences at different levels. Thus, grassroots organizations need to develop ties with bigger organizations who have established contacts with the media, and support from academia, foundations and international bodies. Conversely, the organizations who work at the national or international level could nurture from the experience of local grassroots organizations, which could help them to remain up to date with the problems faced by citizens at the micro level (Fox, 2016; 2015; Fox and Acheron, 2016; Fox and Halloran, 2016).

On the other hand, the creation of alliances among members of civil society helps certain projects to survive in time. This is particularly important when big organizations, who have developed considerable experience in particular issues, support grassroots communities as part of specific projects. This is because when big organizations have finished achieving the goals set individually, they usually sever ties with the local actors, which are left unprotected not only regarding technical considerations, but also in relation to their safety.

2.1 The four components of the model.






The social audit model developed by ControlaTuGobierno is comprised of four interconnected components which are simultaneously or independently activated in successive iterations throughout the social audit process: research, capacity building, engagement and dialogue. Emphasizing any of the components depends on each particular project of social audit and its evolution. Thus, in the following paragraphs we describe the general features of the methodology without implying that this is the ideal ordering of the tasks.



2.1.1 Research

Research implies gathering and systematizing public information, academic knowledge and knowledge related to the topic of the social audit generated by communities themselves through fieldwork. The information gathered and systematized feeds different moments of the capacity building process, which is developed through trainings where the knowledge of the participants is exchanged and expanded.

Generally, the social audit processes that CTG accompanies start on the basis of a citizen need or demand. The first contact with the community involved allows CTG to understand the nature of the issue and locate whether it effectively affects a group of people. With this first input, the CTG team attempts to identify and delimit the following aspects:

-  The legal framework connected to the issue affecting the community.
-  The institutions responsible for tackling this issue, their faculties and decision-making processes.
-  The official positions of the civil servants that are legally capable of intervening to solve the issue, their names and contact data.
-  The availability of public funds and the level of government in charge of its management.
-  Statistical data, media publications, references to similar cases available online.

After this initial diagnosis, we work with the community to agree on preliminary strategies for research and capacity building. In general, the research process is deepened throughout the project and usually encompasses the following:

- a) Querying governmental information which is publicly available. Visiting transparency portals and checking public expenditure reports, audits, tenders and contracts, among others.
- b) Filing information requests and following their process.
- c) Identifying and reading reports produced by auditing, evaluation and control entities such as the Superior Audit of the Federation, the National Council for Evaluation of Social Development Policy, the Public Service Secretary, and their local counterparts.
- d) Gathering and systematizing field data, interviewing local opinion leaders, systematizing information gathered or produced by the local community prior to or expressly for the social audit project.

2.1.2 Capacity Building

The information gathered and systematized feeds different moments of the capacity building process, which is achieved through different mechanisms: from initial meetings to develop ties with the community and setting the expectations of the social audit process, to meetings with a wider reach in which the knowledges of all the social actors involved in the social audit process are exchanged and enriched. In all these cases, the capacity building is directed to the following goals:


- a) Reducing the asymmetries between the population and governmental decision makers through the appropriation of the knowledge about public resources, the legal framework, the



capacities and competencies of the government, in order for people to produce viable proposals.

- b) Generating long lasting links within communities themselves, which later serve as the basis to solve further problems that affect them without the intervention of CTG.
- c) Offering focused capacity building workshops about specific topics, or to tackle concrete needs of a specific actor. For example: accessing information (thought specifically for journalists) eco-technologies for the installation of dry toilets in rural and dispersed communities; the legal framework of indigenous communities' right to consultation (or for groups who seek to be recognized as such); management and finances tools for independent drinking water committees; and other topics that emerge during the accompaniment of CTG. This type of capacity building is not offered directly by CTG. Rather, we seek experts and connect them with the communities so they can share their knowledge with the organized citizens. The capacity building and technical assistance activities include public servants, particularly those at the local level, who have the faculties to make decisions over public matters but only occasionally receive the essential training they need to properly fulfil their functions. Training public officials is an engagement strategy that lays bridges to establish dialogue with organized citizens.

2.1.3 Engagement

As the social accountability process moves forward, we foster the engagement of different social actors to reduce their isolation and their feel of disempowerment in relation to their powerful counterparts. This is particularly important at the local level, given that the closer the government feels, the harder it is to face political pressure and prosecution. To incentivise the organizational process with other actors, we develop the following tasks:

-  Socializing social movements to prevent the dialogue process from being spoiled. This implies connecting the local perspective and knowledges implied by a particular community problem, with academic knowledge (which very often is institutionally isolated), to prevent the atomization of organizational process and bring them new life through the introduction of new ideas that allow them to rethink their actions and decisions.

-  Inviting the media to disseminate the local issues. This helps to generate public opinion counterweights that function as support for the community process we accompany.
-  Locating the local organizational processes within the sight of organizations with national or international reach. This provides a certain degree of support and a feeling of safety for groups who very often are under threat.

Opening fora beyond local and institutional communication channels helps to create a network around organizational processes who are vulnerable to threats coming from factual powers whose interests are challenged. Nevertheless, as it has been mentioned, engaging different actors implies putting in touch different types of knowledge. To foster engagement and avoiding the isolation of community processes, CTG seeks to:

- a) Provide (indirectly) specialized advice about legal or technical matters which are not within the community's reach, and sharing with them similar experiences from other groups, which can enrich other organizational processes.
- b) Organizing press conferences, field visits with the media, or sharing information directly with journalists about the issue at stake, to invite them to write about it. This is done particularly when one or more community members receive any type of threat or are subjected to any type of harassment.
- c) Inviting other Civil Society Organizations to join dissemination campaigns and/or provide specific advice according to their expertise.




Having support networks helps communities to locate under public scrutiny matters that under other circumstances would go unnoticed. Furthermore, it reduces the chances of being oppressed as a result of their political actions.

2.1.4 Dialogue

Establishing a dialogue with the decision-makers at the three levels of government is a strategic component which is built and strengthened while the social audit process moves on. It implies transforming the relation between communities and public servants, in a way in which individuals recognize themselves as citizens with rights that can be enforced through institutional and peaceful means. Such construction of citizenship generally transcends CTG's projects and, according to

our previous experience, triggers new social audit processes in participating communities. The underlying goal is to open spaces for dialogue on the basis of a culture of legality, to help change the common perception of corruption as the natural way of interacting with governmental authorities.

For CTG, establishing a dialogue implies seeking that the community process achieves a structural impact around a specific issue. That is, securing that the socio-political actors who have decision-making powers regarding the issue at stake take matters into their hands. Among the main goals of the dialogue component are:

-  At the local level, transforming the asymmetric relation that usually characterizes citizen-institutions relations: “authorities” become “public servants”. This shift is not the result of a trial of force, but of the emergence of the ability to generate feasible proposals to solve problems on the basis of cooperation.
-  At the regional level, dialogue implies developing the capacity to generate proposals as a result of the horizontal interaction with decision-makers. Organized groups are thus able to widen their scope and locate the connections between their local problems and bigger issues which may connect them to other groups or organizations working at different scales or locations, in order to produce solutions with farther reach.
-  Collaborating with auditing and control entities. That is, achieving a strong cohesion point between citizens and institutions, to secure that the diagnosis, evidence gathered and the proposals generated by social audit initiatives are incorporated into the tasks developed by auditing and control entities.

The dialogue strategy seeks to achieve two main goals: first, that communities recognize themselves as citizens with rights which can be exercised through pacific and institutional means, and second, that institutions recognize the importance and value of citizen voices.

Final thoughts

The previous paragraphs are a first take on CTG's social audit model. As it has been shown it is a citizen engagement strategy very different from other mechanisms, since it focuses on providing communities with knowledge and tools they can use to exert control over governmental actions which affect them. To achieve this goal, social audit has to be autonomous and count with enough power resources, as mentioned by Cunill (2009). In this sense, it is not a consulting mechanism nor it is limited to denouncing. It is rather a profoundly critical participative endeavour. Thus, it has to be located outside of the State's framework to function properly.

Social Audit does not aspire to substitute the attributions of auditing or institutional control entities, but rather making citizens' perspective count within governmental actions, so they respond to common rather than particular or group interests. Thus, it is a type of citizen oversight which is capable of impacting public policy in an informed and proactive fashion. Consequently, it requires public officials who are responsive and responsible. Following Cleary (2010), social audit is a type of citizen engagement which is capable of fostering a good government, and at the municipal level, it may constitute a better mechanism than electoral participation, given that it is a means for public servants to identify community needs and respond to them.

Building citizenship is a task that should ideally be accompanied by a better performance of the public service. That is, better citizens should have better governments and vice versa. In a successful democracy, social audit would incrementally become less important until turning redundant, since the more people feel their interests respected and represented, the more they will be able to delegate in the government the management and care of common goods, the attention to collective needs, the preservation of peaceful environments, and the guarantee of everyone's freedoms and rights.

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