

Dialogando BA: knowledge, participation and consensus in the co-creation of public policies

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges that governments face during the decision-making process is reaching consensus. It is challenging because it involves the participation of many stakeholders. One of the government's main flaws has been its inability to reconcile the interests of all the participating sectors. In this context, we created Dialogando BA, an initiative whose main goal is to provide a space for dialogue, debate and exchange of ideas among the government, across the entire political spectrum, academia and civil society.

This program is innovative because the outcomes of these forums are used as input when designing public policies, providing legitimacy to the decisions, and therefore strengthening institutional quality. This open government tool has paved the way for drafting and passing several bills in the city of Buenos Aires, as well as for reaching agreements among actors across the political spectrum.

What is Dialogando BA?

Dialogando BA was created as an open, horizontal initiative in an effort to reach consensus in the context of the design of public policies. The program took inspiration from two cases that marked Argentina's public agenda: "*Diálogo Argentina*", a dialogue forum convened by the then President Eduardo Duhalde together with the church and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the context of the socioeconomic crisis of 2001, and "*Argentina Debate*", Argentina's first ever presidential debate, which was then institutionalized in a national act.

Our values and our interpretation of how public policies should be designed in modern democracies were key in the design and development of Dialogando BA. We believe that citizens play a crucial role, not only in terms of presenting demands, but also because of their ability to put forward public policy proposals. For us, the relationship between government and citizenry is one that must constantly be explored and developed. We also believe that academia and civil society have a lot to offer in this process.

The main goal of the program is to promote transparent dialogue, debate and exchange of ideas to represent a key input in the design of public policies.

Goals:

Dialogando BA aims to:

- Create a space for public dialogue that allows for an exchange of ideas and different perspectives in the process of creation/reform of public policies
- Reach a majority of the involved and interested sectors and offer them a space for dialogue
- Settle dissents and reach consensus
- Ensure transparency in the debate process
- Strengthen institutional quality and therefore improve public management
- Promote citizen participation in public life, open government policies and institutional management



Methods

Dialogando BA consists of a series of events where members of civil society organizations, universities, research centers and representatives of the executive, legislative and judiciary branches and other jurisdictions participate. In these events, guests from the different sectors put forward an agenda to be discussed in several roundtables. This stage is where public officials and civil society representatives have the opportunity to present their demands and concerns.

Feedback was given at all stages of Dialogando BA, both during the events through the use of Periscope, and after them, as we published the meeting minutes following each discussion. In this way, participants were able to ensure that their opinions were taken into account, while stakeholders who were not able to attend the meetings were able to learn about the outcomes and submit their opinions. The exchange was strengthened by a strong social media presence.

The approach of Dialogando BA is based on three main action items.

Knowledge

In order to ensure that all discussions were productive, it was key to gather exhaustive knowledge about all the issues. For this, we conducted thorough research about each subject and gathered insights to understand sources of conflict and the different positions adopted by the government, academia and civil society at the international, national, and subnational levels.

Participation

One of the key characteristics of Dialogando BA is its participatory nature. In this spirit, the events were open to all and welcomed participants from the whole political spectrum, academia and civil society. The roundtables were arranged to reflect the diversity of participants and speakers. This stage was supported by a thorough preparation process and circulation of the roundtable minutes.

Consensus

One of the main goals of Dialogando BA is to reach consensus. Thus, the program has led to discussing all the topics put forward in the agenda. No topic was left aside, even when there were controversial issues to discuss. All positions were heard and reflected in the minutes. This process allowed us to identify points of dissent in each topic and, in turn, manage expectations on how to proceed when drafting bills.

Since its launch on April 20, 2016, Dialogando BA has hosted 21 events on six different topics:

- Access to public information (access to public information as a human right, rules on access to public information, active transparency, solid institutions, implementation of Act 104)
- Electoral reform (participation in the elections, electoral authority, electoral campaign, technology to support the electoral process)
- Consensus “Clean city and a responsible campaign” (Clean City Seminar, Dialogando Clean City)



- Conflict and interest management (regulations around conflict and interest management for a transparent and accountable city)
- Port of Buenos Aires (port authority, licenses and sanctions, geography – port exploitation and passing of the Ports Act)
- Civil registry (affiliation and assisted reproduction, gender identity, marriage and civil unions, birth, names and legalization)

Dialogando BA combines our commitment to dialogue as a tool to create solid, long-lasting consensus and our idea of a vibrant democracy with significant citizen participation, beyond just showing up at the voting booths. Dialogando BA allowed us to unite these two principles – dialogue and significant citizen participation – in the development of democratic institutions and sustainable public policies.

