

Paraguay

Establishing Municipal Development Councils
for Local Planning

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Early Results 2018

Results of Early OGP initiatives





Going local

A platform for citizens to influence local development

Martín González, former mayor and current advisor to the Paraguayan municipality of Itaugua, is a passionate local activist and a highly respected member of his community. He dreams of a day when Itaugua will develop to become a model sustainable city, “In my role as a citizen, in my role as former Mayor, I always have a vested interest in my city, my community.” For people like Martín, Paraguay’s new Municipal Development Councils (MDCs) have been an opportunity to engage more actively and deeply in improving the health and welfare of the local community. Piloting the MDC model has been a key part of the government’s strategy to improve development outcomes by decentralizing governance, emphasizing more participatory decision-making in local development planning, and encouraging public sector responsiveness and accountability.

With a population of nearly 7 million people, Paraguay ranked 110 out of 188 countries in the 2016 United Nations’ Human Development Report. Despite visible progress—reflected in growth of income per capita over the past few decades and Paraguay’s upgrade to the status of Middle Income Country—a number of significant challenges still remain. To illustrate, 80 percent of the population still practices self-medication due to the high costs of healthcare, and only 3 in 10 Paraguayan students complete 12 years of schooling with only 1 in 10 students going on to attend university (Giménez, 2015)¹.

¹ Giménez Caballero, E. et al. (2015). Derecho, Acceso y calidad en salud. Conceptos fundamentales para el debate de la cobertura universal en salud. Servilibro: Asunción.

Over the past couple of decades, the government's strategies to stimulate equitable development have gone local, featuring a decentralization of government administration. Such efforts originated in the early 1990s with the restoration of democracy in the country, and through the establishment of democratic rules in the 1992 Paraguayan Constitution² (Rodríguez y Villalba, 2015). Under the new constitutional mandate, MDCs were meant to be established as a means for local development.

As a forum that provides a voice to local residents, activists, and civil society organizations, MDCs serve as a much needed platform for citizens to influence local development agendas, and have their most pressing needs addressed. The MDCs are consensus bodies for local, current, medium and long-term issues. Through them, citizens and vulnerable groups interact more closely with their authorities and influence public policy decisions.

Municipal development councils: How they began

Paraguay's government is comprised of 17 departments (or provinces), each having governors elected by popular vote, in addition to 254 municipalities with mayors elected by popular vote. Before the Ministry of Planning for Economic and Social Development (STP) set up the guidelines to create the MDCs, the main actors taking the decisions at the local level were Mayors and Governors. Decisions were likely to be made unilaterally.

Florencia Villalba, General Director of Development and Territorial Planning for the STP notes, "All decision making was done by the Mayor and his closest team members on general issues. But for other cases there were several councils established by laws that are sectoral in nature, such as the Local Health Councils, the Children's Council, Education Councils etc., and they had already established regulations and procedures for the decision-making process. Nevertheless, in many instances, instead of facilitating decision making it often became a problem for the mayors of municipalities as they were required to participate in all of them."

Having been a member of Open Government Partnership (OGP) since 2011, Paraguay's government redoubled its efforts to improve local governance through its second action plan (2014-2016), committing to strengthen and create MDCs across the country. The Ministry of Planning for Economic and Social Development (STP) led the initiative with the aim of creating at least 50 MDCs across the country. While the goal of creating 50 councils was achieved within a year, the real ambition had always been to scale up coverage throughout the country.

As of July 2018, 232 MDCs (for 254 municipalities) and 15 Departmental Development Councils (for 17 departments) had been formally established.

To operationalize these development councils, the STP set up a few important milestones such as holding a forum for key actors in territorial development, and conducting a diagnostic study on their present capacities. The STP also established important strategic alliances, including one with the Ministry of Finance requiring all municipalities to draft and present participatory Local Development Plans (LDPs) as a condition for receiving funds. LDPs were prepared following the decree of the Ministry of Finance, and had to be delivered to the STP in June 2016 according to the regulations.

² Rodríguez, J.C. y Villalba, R., Consejos de Desarrollo departamentales y Municipales. Diagnóstico y perspectivas. Alternativa. 2015

The new approach mandated an open and participatory process to develop the LDPs. First, the STP held regional meetings to inform the public about the establishment of MDCs. Second, municipalities and governors were trained on how to follow a participatory process to draft the LDPs and align them with the main objectives of the National Development Plan–Paraguay 2030. As a result, 2800 trainings of local actors from the public and private sectors and from civil society took place to support the participatory planning process in accordance with the National Development Plan.

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The story of Itauguá: How participatory planning took root

Itauguá, known as the ‘City of the Ñanduti’ (a traditional embroidered lace), is home to more than 89,000 inhabitants and is located in Paraguay’s most populated province, the Central Department, 30 kilometers from the capital. The dynamic coexistence of rural and urban areas is one of the most extraordinary aspects of Itaugua, receiving migration from other rural areas as well as from the capital, due in part to new and complex government housing policies. The social diversity in this community is rich and unique, yet development challenges such as poverty and service delivery failures remain significant.

When Martín, the former mayor of Itaiguá, learned about the mandate to co-create LDPs, he decided to take a leadership role in the initiative. Under the leadership of the mayor of Itaugua Miguel Acosta, Martín consulted with a few key actors to establish the group that would draft and implement the Local Development Plan in Itaiguá. The first person he contacted was Noelia, Martín's former colleague who was also one of the founders of Itaiguá's Local Health Council. Both Martín and Noelia had the difficult task of initiating a participatory process to co-create the LDP within a short period of time. They knew that this plan could only achieve lasting success through the full ownership and participation of the community.

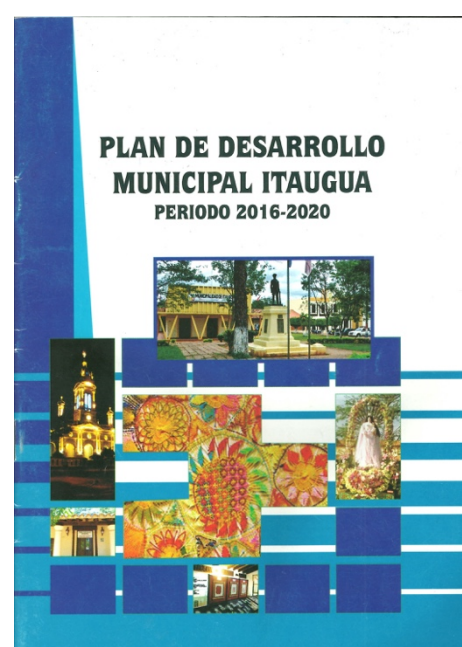
Local authorities in Itaiguá initiated planning activities starting with an institutional diagnosis, which identified the strengths and weaknesses of the municipalities. This was followed by an invitation to the most active and representative organizations in the city to develop a participatory budget that identified the city's challenges and prioritized solutions.

Both for the creation of the MDC and for the elaboration of the LDP of the city, a large scale participatory process was held, including substantial representation of the public. Councilwoman Mirian Salinas, vice president of the Itaiguá MDC recalls those first moments: "First of all, we had a big meeting with the whole community and the local authorities. People from the Ministry of Planning and Economic and Social Development also came to support us and to explain what the Municipal Development Plan consisted [of]. Then, we began to organize the sub-committees." The sub-committees were by issue area: Production; Health; Education; Childhood and Adolescence; Environment; Security; Infrastructure; Culture, Manufacturing and Sport; and Youth. They were composed by direct citizen inputs, neighborhood organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs), and executive branch and municipal civil servants.

Martín knew that community development planning processes are difficult and exhausting, but according to him, changes within the community are possible. He emphasized that it is only through civic participation and engagement that local governments become more open, responsive, and citizen-oriented. "We are interested in working to strengthen citizen participation, thus we have implemented public consultation mechanisms in order to hear the neighbourhood commissions' demands." The important thing was to give a voice to community members at the neighbourhood level. The mayor of Itaiguá voiced a similar sentiment, saying that "In fact, the neighbourhood committees are the strong point of all the work, without the committees and the people, we would not have achieved what we did."

The Local Development Plan: How it led to improvements in public services

Participatory budgeting was carried out under the MDC through a citizens' assembly. Under the framework of the MDCs, and considering key strategic areas identified by municipal civil servants (from the institutional diagnosis of capacities), the residents of the city defined and prioritized their needs which were approved as part of the budget for the year 2018. "We were already doing certain things in the framework of the Local Health Council and the Education Council, but after the LDP, the Security, Environment and Economic Sub Committees were formed, as a result of the main priorities of the Plan", recalls councilwoman Mirian Salinas. The following thematic sub committees were also created: childhood and adolescence council, the youth council, and working groups for agricultural production. The MDC platform and the LDP allowed the public sector to be more responsive and deliver more efficient services.



Health

Martín recalls one of the demands that emerged during the consultations was dealing with mental health issues such as depression, suicide, and drug addiction problems. Aureliano Vivé, member of the Local Health Council says, "the demand arose to hire a psychiatrist who now attends the District Hospital." He pointed out the collaborative approach adopted by the community: "the answer from the public sector was scarce and there was no professional crew in the Psychiatry Department. [Thanks to the plan] we had the opportunity to work with a recently graduated doctor who was doing her internship in psychiatry, so she came to work at the district hospital, through the Health Council [. . .]. She worked with a young person with depression by channeling his interest in music, providing him with guitar lessons from the Culture Department of the Municipality, as a part of his therapy."

Thanks to public participation in the MDC, they have also addressed the demands of people with disabilities. As Nunila, mother of Matías, a patient of an assistance centre for people with disabilities in the city of Asunción said, "the municipality arranged an ambulance to go to Teletón (a private assistance centre) from Itaugua. Itauguá is the only city from which we go in an ambulance provided by the municipality [. . .] it give us a ride, it brings us back, it looks for us from our house and we do not pay fares, nor fuel, even in rainy days."

Agricultural Production

Farmers have also benefited from the assistance generated by the MDC. There were 42 committees of agricultural producers that presented their projects and currently the municipality has initiated a procurement to get the requested elements for their farms. The Municipality also acquired a property to pilot a greenhouse field to test the feasibility of hydroponic nutrient film technique (NFT) production.

Cecilio Gonzalez, a producer of tomatoes in the Potrero Guazu district, recollects the technical support provided by agriculturalist, Rodolfo Villasboa, from the municipality: "I used to plant tomatoes closer to one another, because I thought that they would give me more production and yet I was wrong. He said 'you should plant your tomatoes 50 to 60 cm apart to be able to aerate them and create a wind channel. That's how I learnt about this technique. I implemented the measure and it proved to be good. Since then, I have been able to harvest a better product...the quality is better". Cecilio says that Rodolfo also taught him how to grow produce throughout the year, and he is currently able to have year-round production that is being sold in local markets.

The producer coordination committee is a platform that aggregates inputs from the local farmers and helps to follow up the demands and the implementation of the LDP. The platform was established after the participatory budget process. Rodolfo comes from a humble farming family from the area, and as a civil servant he is committed to improving local development. He emphasizes that social accountability is essential in making public administration more transparent: "The reason we created the Producer Coordination Committee is to have more control. It allows me to monitor the contracting process for each tender. I believe that the producers are now calmer because they have an ally, so to speak. I always work in favor of producers because I am a producer myself, my parents are producers and I know the scarcity they go through". Rodolfo also highlights the importance of working above partisan interests for broader community development goals: "I do not consider any partisan affiliation, if a producer is conservative or liberal, or whatever his political party, if they need my help, I will be there to support them."

Water and Sanitation

The LDP has also established goals to expand coverage of potable water to families and latrines for homes. Following a commitment in the LDP, the municipality has also built toilets in public squares. The municipality also executed a project of cleaning water channels, reducing the problem of wastewater.

Education and Nutrition

One of Itauguá's LDP annual goals is to support public schools with school lunches. The School Feeding Program, which includes school snacks, school lunches, and healthy canteens, is implemented by the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MEC) in coordination with the regional government and municipalities throughout the country. They implemented a procurement process with the requirement that vendors will acquire the ingredients through the association of local producers. This initiative is funded through the Public Investment and Development National Fund. 1,429 children have benefited from this program, each school has a cook and a kitchen assistant for every 100 children.

Traditional Manufacturing

One of the sectors recently organized under the MDC has been the Ñandutí weavers. The weavers fall under the Culture, Manufacturing and Sport subcommittee. While they do not receive any direct funding, they receive support from the municipal culture department to organize more effectively for trade fairs. The weavers were able to participate last year at an international fair in Spain, albeit through their own funding. The sector has also had a tourism proposal accepted, called the "Vivencial Circuit of Ñandutí", which offers tourists day trips through the cities of Pirayú and Itauguá. The municipality is further working to have closer coordination with the executive branch for the promotion of weavers' needs.

The Promise of the Municipal Development Councils

The open government approach underlying the MDCs emphasize the value of public participation, as development is not simply about coming up with technocratic solutions. "Although LDP elaboration is an obligation because the Municipal Budget Law obliges municipalities to do so, it is only through civic participation that it makes a difference. Here in Itauguá, there was a lot of participation from many people coming from different sectors and different political parties", says Noelia Torales, a volunteer in the local development planning process.

Participatory budgeting in Itauguá forced municipalities to be more responsive in the allocation of resources, since it is the citizens themselves who identify and prioritize which problems will be addressed. This culture of participation was enhanced by sharing information about the resources at the municipality's disposal, its budget constraints, and the capacity of various departments and civil servants. "The municipality made its management transparent so that people understand the functioning of the institution and want to engage themselves when they observe that the municipality is working. Additionally, people are actively trying to improve their habitat - if in their neighborhood they see a need, they organize and work with the municipality", notes Martin.

Councilwoman Mirian Salinas pointed out, "People liked the approach to civic participation - many people got up and thanked us because it was the first time that this opportunity was given and that motivated them to work on this initiative because if people have the chance to participate they do so...it's a matter of giving it a go."

Active stakeholders of the Itauguá MDC provided some key insights on what enabled a good participatory planning process:

- Political and institutional leadership are highly important to create the space for public participation - When such conditions do not exist, the task of creating LDPs fall on technical consultants or mayoral cabinet members in silo, and are often not in line with the priorities of citizens or municipal authorities.

- Conducting an institutional diagnosis of the municipalities' capacity is critical in understanding their constraints to resolve challenges and address citizen demands
- Progressive public officials committed to transparency and fighting corruption identified participation processes as a key means for accountability and putting the interests of citizens above exclusionary practices.
- Active and engaged citizens and civil society organizations are key drivers of the reform process.

Conclusion

While Itauguá is a successful example of MDCs being put in practice, the quality of the participatory processes varied substantially among the 225 municipal and 15 departmental councils that were established. Each municipality developed its own process and focused on topics according to their context and constraints. Florencia Villalba, General Director of the STP notes:

“We must recognize that the participatory process is not very uniform across councils. Some have strengthened enormously and managed to influence decision-making in their municipalities. Others have focused on working on specific issues such as generating income through municipal fairs, tackling environmental issues, or on the needs and problems of their districts”.

STP's officials note that their main challenge is to keep the councils running. To achieve that goal, the institution has prepared support material to strengthen the operation of the MDCs, as well as developing a monitoring plan for the process of implementation. These resources have been provided to all the formed councils, including a "Matrix for Monitoring the Municipal Development Plan", an instrument that serves as a reporting tool to measure progress on commitments.

Ultimately the sustainability of MDCs depends on the strong ownership and capacity of national, departmental and municipal authorities, with well organized coalitions of civil society actors and residents. It is critical to ensure that adequate resources have been budgeted and allocated for the Ministry of Planning for Economic and Social Development, and for local government units so that the process does not lose momentum. A strategy to further sensitize and engage all the institutions involved in local development on successes and challenges of this initiative is also necessary for future iterations. Additionally, having a publicly accessible website with information on MDCs will be crucial to compare how the different municipalities and departments are doing in terms of process, commitments made under local development plans, and progress on implementation. Finally, the MDCs also need to have a strategy in place for continued engagement, so that residents and civil society actors are able to bring up concerns outside of the LDP cycle.

Martin noted that a cultural shift is also needed within the civil service, “We cannot deny that corruption is prevalent in the country. The civil servants generally believe that they can do whatever they want, and that nothing is owed to citizens. You have to make the civil servants understand that [service delivery] is their duty. [...] I have a deep commitment with the Municipality and we are always making an effort to work in a better way. However, we know that there is still plenty of room for improvement in our work, especially in health, social and economic welfare for historically marginalized groups”.