

Mexico City's Citizen Comptrollers Program

A "bottom-up" approach to cost-effective fraud prevention

No. 4: August, 2016

Since 1997, Mexico City has had an autonomous, elected government responsible for meeting the needs of nearly nine million metropolitan citizens. Controlling corruption has been a key public priority. In 2004, the city government passed the Citizen Participation Act ("[Ley de Participación Ciudadana](#)"), which established a landmark program to enlist citizen volunteers directly in the day-to-day work of procurement oversight.

Author:

Patricio Martínez Llompart

Patricio is a student at Columbia Law School. He previously served as a New York City Urban Fellow and helped advise the Governor of Puerto Rico on criminal justice policy.

These trained volunteers, called "citizen comptrollers," act as ground-level watchdogs to observe and evaluate public contracting processes. The "bottom up" approach to municipal anti-corruption control pioneered by the Citizen Comptrollers program can serve as an innovative model for cities and states worldwide seeking cost-effective approaches to combat procurement fraud.

A New Line of Defense Against Procurement Fraud

Mexicans have long expressed concerns about a lack of transparency and accountability in public administration both at the national and local levels. The [Corruption Perception Index](#), which measures perceptions of corruption among countries worldwide, ranked Mexico 95th out of 168 countries in 2015. Corruption reduces citizens' confidence in government and engagement in democratic processes.

Like other major cities worldwide, Mexico City has struggled to ensure transparency and accountability in public procurement. Abuses of government contracting processes not only waste taxpayers' money, they can jeopardize the quality and reliability of public infrastructure and citizen services. From [unsafe tunnels in Boston](#) to [inflated technology costs in New York City](#) to [padded school supply contracts in Detroit](#), procurement fraud can undermine public trust and public safety.

Unfortunately, oversight of procurement processes can be expensive and time-consuming for municipal governments. New regulations introduce red tape and bureaucratic hurdles that favor entrenched market players and discourage innovation. Investigations and monitoring efforts require scarce resources and manpower.

With these considerations in mind, Mexico City turned to its citizens to monitor government performance firsthand. Engaging citizen volunteers not only saved the city money, it helped cultivate a culture of citizen engagement in a city that [long suffered from a lack of local government accountability](#) under decades of federal control.

Program Objectives

- 1. To monitor governmental activities and ensure compliance with laws and procedures.**
- 2. To facilitate direct engagement between government and citizens in the pursuit of public integrity and the proper use of public funds.**
- 3. To identify areas for improvement in the delivery of public services and to promote social welfare.**

Basics of the Citizen Comptrollers Program

The Citizen Comptrollers program is managed by the [Comptroller General of Mexico City](#) (CGCDMX), the office responsible for overseeing, auditing, and investigating Mexico City's public agencies, local government entities, and quasi-governmental agencies. The Citizen Comptrollers program connects citizens with government agencies and empowers them to evaluate the use of public resources and implementation of public contracts. Citizen comptrollers, however, do not conduct formal audits. Rather, they review the expenditures of public agencies through their observations of public procurement processes. If they observe any irregularities, comptrollers file complaints that may lead the Comptroller General or other authorities to conduct a formal audit or investigation.

The program is based upon the 2004 Citizen Participation Act, as well as other laws and policies promoting participatory government, such as the General Program for the Development of the Federal District ("[Programa General de Desarrollo del Distrito Federal 2000-2006](#)") and the Act for the Development of the Federal District ("[Ley de Planeación del Desarrollo del Distrito Federal](#)").

Who are the Citizen Comptrollers?

The program is open to all adult residents of Mexico City, except for current and former public employees and individuals with a criminal record. Selected participants serve a minimum of two years. To recruit new comptrollers, the CGCDMX actively publicizes the program and its application process in the city's public transit system, and through [social media](#), radio, and television. By mid-2016, 893 individuals were registered citizen comptrollers; their names are publicly available on the [program website](#).

Two thirds of Citizen Comptrollers have a university degree. When possible, citizen comptrollers are assigned tasks based on their background. For example, the Comptroller's Office tries to recruit citizen comptrollers with backgrounds in architecture or engineering to monitor public infrastructure projects.

To assist with recruitment and training, the program has signed 36 collaboration agreements with academic institutions, including the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), and Instituto Politécnico Nacional (IPN). Besides assisting with training, partner academic institutions create a direct pathway for students to volunteer as citizen comptrollers and complete their [public service requirements](#) while contributing their own expertise. In 2014, the Citizen Comptrollers participated in 119 capacity building courses that amounted to 837 hours of training.

How Does the Program Operate?

Within the Comptroller General's Office, the program is operated by the General Directorship of Citizen Comptrollers ("[Dirección General de Contralorías Ciudadanas](#)"). This directorship is organized into three units: (1) regulation and information, (2) coordination and training, and (3) programming and evaluation.

1. The regulation and information unit oversees the recruitment process for citizen comptrollers and selects program participants. The call for applications to become a citizen comptroller is published in [Mexico City's Official Gazette](#), the press, and social media.
2. The coordination and training unit oversees the training of citizen comptrollers.
3. The programming and evaluation unit assigns citizen comptrollers to particular city agencies and channels their reports of irregularities towards the respective authorities. This unit also produces and publishes reports on program activities, including an annual report to the [Legislative Assembly](#), the district legislature.

Although they are volunteers, citizen comptrollers are expected to participate at least once a month in a procurement, bidding, or budget-planning meeting upon notification by program directors. The 2004 Citizen Participation Act requires all city agencies to inform the General Directorship of Citizen Comptrollers about upcoming procurement, bidding, and budget-planning meetings. Citizen comptrollers are also invited to meetings of the *Órganos Colegiados*, the oversight boards that manage the discretionary operating budgets of all city government agencies.

The Citizen Comptrollers program benefits from the engagement of several non-governmental sectors:

Academia: Public and private university students participate as citizen comptrollers while gaining work experience; academic institutions also provide space for forums, assemblies and discussions.

Private Business: Companies, through Chambers of Commerce, support the review of projects by providing subject-matter expertise; businesses also use their promotional spaces to broadcast citizen comptroller activities.

Civil Society: NGOs and other organizations provide technical and specialized training for citizen comptrollers and contribute ideas to improve government review processes.

Citizenry: Everyday citizens participate as citizen comptrollers.

Upon notification, the General Directorship assigns Citizen Comptrollers to attend these meetings and monitor the integrity of their proceedings. Citizen Comptrollers are entitled to review all documents related to the contracting or budgeting process. If they note any irregularities, citizen comptrollers file reports through an online platform known as the [Citizen Comptroller Complaint System](#), which channels complaints to the Comptroller General for further investigation. The Comptroller General's office also gives Citizen Comptrollers regular opportunities to voice their concerns and propose new reforms during open assemblies.

After the citizen comptrollers submit their reports to the Comptroller General, the results are forwarded to the relevant local government office, along with recommendations for remedial actions and reforms. The citizen comptrollers also receive information about the outcomes that result from their complaints. The general public can learn about the results of the program through publications in different media and the [Citizen Comptrollers](#)

[website](#). Participating academic and private-sector organizations receive reports as well.

The budget of the Citizen Comptrollers program is fixed at one percent of the total budget of the Comptroller General's office. In 2014, the Comptroller General had an annual budget of approximately \$421.9 million pesos (US\$27.5 million) of which the Citizen Comptroller program received \$4.2 million (US\$270,000). Since the citizen comptrollers are unpaid volunteers, funds cover staff salaries and operating expenses such as recruitment, training, and media outreach.

Challenges

Although the 2004 Citizen Participation Act mandates all city agencies to inform the General Directorship of Citizen Comptrollers about upcoming procurement, bidding, and budgeting meetings, the law does not provide an enforcement mechanism to ensure the full participation of all city agencies.. Thus, it can be hard for the citizen comptrollers to monitor all relevant meetings. In addition, program leaders have cited recruitment as a challenge. It has been hard for the program to recruit enough trained, capable volunteers to cover the hundreds of agencies, boards, and offices governing Mexico City.

Results

Citizen comptrollers have conducted oversight activities on a range of projects. During 2016, they are expected to monitor 21 grants and programs in matters ranging from water management to urban renewal. In 2012-13, citizen comptrollers conducted 112 monitoring visits for five federal social development programs, including a sanitation project worth \$345 million pesos (US\$22.5 million). In 2013-14, citizen comptrollers reviewed the quality of citizen services at public prosecutors' offices, surveying more than a thousand citizens across 109 offices. The program's review of the Support Program for Investment in Equipment and Infrastructure (PAIEI), a federal program to promote production and competitiveness in Mexico's agricultural and fishing industries, resulted in the identification of corruption by public servants in the process of determining beneficiary eligibility.

In 2015, the Citizen Comptrollers conducted 43 site visits to oversee the adequate provision of public services and implementation of social-impact government programs, which represented an increase of 400% from the three site visits completed in 2013. Since the online Citizen Comptroller Complaint System became fully operational in March 2015, 33 complaints filed by citizen comptrollers have led to formal audits, according to Ana María Morales, the deputy director of the program.

Conclusion

Although the program is still too new to yield definitive results, Mexico City's Citizen Comptrollers program may be a promising model for participatory oversight. Benefits of the project include its low cost of implementation, potential to boost citizen engagement (particularly among students), and increased scrutiny of public procurement processes. Ultimately, the program may provide a force multiplier to increase the reach of over-stretched municipal watchdogs, just as neighborhood watch groups can provide tips and reports to local police. As Manuel Carlos Martínez, an engineer with six years' experience as a citizen comptroller, put it: "Not everything that happens in our cities is the responsibility of the government. Citizens must also play a role." He added that the program provided an opportunity to both directly participate in urban government and develop a greater understanding of public administration.

Sources

This brief was based on interviews with Citizen Comptrollers Program Director Irene Muñoz Trujillo (iremuno@cdmx.gob.mx), Deputy Director Ana María Morales, and six-year Citizen Comptroller Ing. Manuel Carlos Martínez. Further references include:

- [*La participación ciudadana y sus retos en México*](#), Alberto J. Olvera (December 2009).
- [*La rendición de cuentas mejora la relación entre gobiernos y ciudadanos*](#), Instituto Mexicano de Contadores Públicos.
- [*Linking university students to the processes of diffusion and promotion of the culture of legality, transparency, and accountability in Mexico City*](#), International Observatory on Participatory Democracy.
- [*Red de Contralorías Ciudadanas de la Ciudad de México*](#), Dirección General de Contralorías Ciudadanas (January 2016).

Integrity in Brief
Series



This publication is part of an ongoing series of contributions from practitioners, policymakers, and civil society leaders in the public integrity community. If you have expertise you would like to share, please contact us at CAPI@law.columbia.edu.

The series is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. The views expressed here are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the author's organization or affiliations, the Center for the Advancement of Public Integrity, Columbia Law School, or the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

Published: August 2016 | © 2016, Center for the Advancement of Public Integrity/Trustees of Columbia University
Terms of use and citation format appear at <https://web.law.columbia.edu/public-integrity/about/terms-use>.