



## FUNDAUNGO

# Making municipal governments transparent

With its *Transparent Municipality* program, the *Dr. Guillermo Manuel Ungo Foundation* (FUNDAUNGO) aims to make local governments in El Salvador more open and accountable.

**SETTING THE SCENE** —The right of access to information is fundamental to any democracy; it is a necessary condition for citizens to participate meaningfully in public policy processes and to hold government accountable. In line with this, in 2011 the Government of El Salvador passed the *Law of Access to Public Information* (LAIP), to ensure the right of every person to access public information. It defines obligations and specific processes that must be met by public institutions, and establishes procedures for appeals and sanctions that encourage their enforceability. LAIP applies to all levels of government, including municipalities. As evidence of the law's success, in 2012 President Funes announced that the government had released more than 87,000 documents to the public and responded to 98 percent of the more than 2,300 citizen requests for information. Indeed, according to the 2012 *Global Right to Information Rating*<sup>1</sup>, El Salvador ranked among the top five nations worldwide with the greatest access to public information.

However, while the application of the law improved visibly in many national government institutions in 2012,

its application at the municipal level was still weak. Staff had minimal knowledge and understanding of LAIP and there had been little progress in terms of the appointment and training of information officers and the set-up of *Access to Public Information* units guiding the implementation of LAIP. In addition, there were weaknesses in the implementation of information management processes, data processing, and applications and appeals processes.

**WHAT FUNDAUNGO DID** —The Dr. Guillermo Manuel Ungo Foundation (FUNDAUNGO), a think tank founded in 1992 to contribute to El Salvador's democratic development, identified an opportunity to make LAIP more effective and sustainable. In January 2013, FUNDAUNGO launched an initiative known as *Transparent Municipality* to promote LAIP at a municipal level. The initiative seeks to improve citizens' awareness of and ability to exercise LAIP, to support municipal governments to implement the conditions of the law and to help establish accountability practices for applying the law at the municipal level. In particular, it seeks to encourage:

- 1) local authorities implementing LAIP to understand

<sup>1</sup> For further information see: [http://www.rti-rating.org/country\\_data.php](http://www.rti-rating.org/country_data.php)



what they need to do, 2) local actors to understand and take advantage of *Access to Public Information* units and 3) local and national actors to use methodologies for monitoring and controlling the implementation of the LAIP by municipalities.

Between May and July 2013, FUNDAUNGO studied 61 municipalities and 218 administrative units throughout the country to explore the application and limitations of LAIP and to determine the needs for training and technical assistance. The resulting report, the *State of the Application of the LAIP in the Municipalities of El Salvador* revealed that 77 percent of municipalities had designated information officials and four out of five mayors had created an *Access to Public Information* unit.

**THE OUTCOME** —With additional support from the United Nations Fund for Democracy and the European Union, there are currently 27 municipalities from across El Salvador participating in *Transparent Municipality*. Since *Transparent Municipality* was rolled out, the participating municipalities have demonstrated many benefits from the project. They have all appointed or hired an Information Officer, and most now have a Head of Archives. In addition, they have carried out self-assessments, developed during training seminars, to guide their work. Along with creating the structure and processes required for *Transparent Municipality*, various municipalities have also worked to engage new

people in their communities. Six municipalities have undertaken outreach projects on disclosure of information for community leaders, women and youth. Some local schools have also developed youth outreach sessions with students, while others have organized visits to learn from neighbouring municipalities. In addition, a group of young scholars from the Dr. José Matías Delgado University is carrying out research on the impact of FUNDAUNGO's project.

FUNDAUNGO remains engaged in ongoing training and technical assistance efforts with diverse stakeholders. In July, FUNDAUNGO delivered a course aimed to strengthen the capacity of local actors to implement and promote a culture of transparency and citizen participation in the municipalities. To date FUNDAUNGO has developed three editions of this course through which it has trained 103 people, including teachers and principals from 36 public schools in 21 municipalities. The organization expects to reach more than 1,000 people directly, and thousands more through a multiplier effect.

FUNDAUNGO also conducted a parallel series of trainings to help local government implement the LAIP and to encourage public demand for information in an active, responsible and reflective manner. To date, it has delivered five seminars to 158 municipal officials from 27 municipalities - evidence that the think tank is working closely with policymakers to achieve its goals.

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For more information on FUNDAUNGO, go to <http://www.fundaungo.org.sv>

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