



Organizational Capacity Building and Informal Civil Society Lessons from Central America

In Central America, like in many other parts of the world, informal civil society and citizen-led movements have played a major role in holding government to account and publicly protesting anti-democratic practices. Recent examples include the student-led movement against the social safety net reductions in Nicaragua, the *La Linea* and *Renuncia Ya* movements against impunity in Guatemala, the *Indignados* movement to cease corruption in Honduras, and the movement to end the Amnesty Law for war crimes and human rights abuses in El Salvador. In each case, these people-powered movements have drawn international interest as well as domestic political responses.

Counterpart International is working in all four countries on civil society support and responsive governance programs. In each case, we have needed to balance the programmatic commitments of capacity building to formal civil society organizations (CSOs) with the impetus to support informal movements of people advocating for more transparent, effective, and responsive government.

In El Salvador, Counterpart worked with three informal groups, two of which play leading roles in the Salvadorian LGBTI movement and one of which advances youth leadership and rights. All three initiative groups have passionate volunteers, creative ideas for financial sustainability, and a desire to formalize their operations and form a legal CSO. Because they are mostly volunteers and they were in the process of creating a unified vision of the future of their work, the time commitment for a traditional capacity building process was not feasible. Counterpart therefore modified our approach to do more up-front strategic planning work with the groups' leaders, customize our Organizational Certification Process (OCP) tool as a more streamlined framework for capacity building, and organize activities virtually and during non-working hours. This flexible approach has borne fruit; now two groups have begun working toward creating the foundations for soon-to-be registered CSOs and the third group has decided not to pursue further formalization and registration as a CSO.

Organizational Capacity Building and Informal Civil Society

Lessons from Central America

In Guatemala, Counterpart worked with the leadership of the *Justicia Ya* (formerly known as *Renuncia Ya*) movement on strategy and planning for future activities. The leaders of this movement had a few priorities: they did not want to establish a formal governance and management system, they wanted to continue work on inclusive social accountability, and they wanted to access funding for key initiatives they had such as social innovation labs. Rather than push them into formalizing the movement, Counterpart canvassed the group's members for the type of training they wanted, which we found included strategic planning, project design, grant writing, and advocacy tools and techniques. Counterpart helped a small initiative group of movement members who wanted to formalize their work as a legal CSO by helping them better understand the legal registration process and developing ideas for an organizational structure.

In addition to Central America, Counterpart has worked with informal civil society in closed spaces (Turkmenistan) and transitional contexts (Yemen and Ukraine) and on positive youth development initiatives (Burundi). Through this diverse experience, we have learned the following lessons:

- Traditional organizational capacity building methods and tools work best when organizations have at least a modicum of a managerial structure of dedicated individuals.
- Informal civic groups can benefit tremendously from initial group facilitation, strategic planning, and key capacity building inputs.
- Without a strong foundation of trust between the capacity building provider (i.e. Counterpart) and the informal civic group members, the capacity building inputs will not be effective. Two-way communication – listening and learning – is an essential element for trust-building and effectiveness.
- Informal groups often have no interest in transitioning to a formal CSO – and an ill-conceived effort to do so can cause friction within the movement and end its cohesion and effectiveness.

About Counterpart International

Counterpart International helps people build better lives and more durable futures, community by community. For more than 50 years, Counterpart has been an innovator, changing the way people look at, and solve, global development challenges.