

Citizens In Mexico Participate in Streamlining and Innovating Service Delivery

By Guido Bertucci

Sometimes, when trying to obtain a service from government, have you wondered why you have to fill so many forms or to provide so many documents for a simple service? Bureaucracies have the tendency all over the world to add more and more requirements and procedures for each service, creating thus layers of burdensome processes for citizens. Some of the requirements are essential because of provisions of the law or to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the process. Some others have been added along the way by zealous public officials, more concerned about facilitating their own work than keeping light the administrative burden on citizens.

To redress this problem, a number of countries have initiated “administrative simplification” programmes aimed at reducing the administrative burden and at streamlining the procedures required to obtain services or documents. Most of these programmes are supply driven, as they are implemented by the administration itself.

Mexico devised an innovative initiative which involved citizens in identifying cumbersome and useless procedures required by government. It consisted of a nation-wide competition to identify: “the most useless process”. The purpose of the competition was not only to simplify processes in administration, but also to increase citizens’ participations in public affairs.

In 2008 the Ministry of Public Service, in cooperation with “Mexican Transparency (TM)” a civil society organization which promotes a public culture of transparency integrity and accountability, disseminated nationwide through the press, the radio, the television and the internet, a call for proposals to identify costly, lengthy, time consuming and cumbersome administrative processes. Citizens were encouraged to submit their suggestions together with their ideas, from the user perspective, on how to eliminate a given process altogether or how to simplify it or improve it.

The competition aimed to achieve the following goals:

- ✓ To ascertain citizens' opinion on which public services needed improvement
- ✓ Obtain specific innovative and feasible suggestions on how to reduce and simplify processes
- ✓ Improve the capacity of the public administrations to respond to citizens' needs and preferences;
- ✓ To increase transparency in public administration; and
- ✓ To recognize publicly those citizens who submitted the most useful, innovative and feasible suggestions.

The call for proposals included a brief questionnaire designed in such a way as to clearly focus the citizens' submissions on specific processes required for the delivery of a service. The questionnaire aimed to capture the following:

- ✓ How complex and cumbersome was the procedure
- ✓ What was the individual's experience in following the procedure and obtaining the service
- ✓ Recommendations on how to improve the process

The competition attracted more than 21,000 proposals from citizens concerning federal, state and municipal services. A great majority of the submissions were made through the internet. But a special "Call Center" was also established to provide information on the competition and to receive submissions. The citizens' proposals were initially reviewed by a consulting firm hired by the Ministry according to a methodology that organized and classified them by level of government, type of service and complexity.

The proposals were subsequently evaluated by an impartial Jury composed of academics, experts, representatives of civil society organizations and the press. The Jury established its own rules of procedure and specific criteria for the evaluation of the proposals, paying particular attention to the problems and burden experienced by the individual citizen in relation to each administrative process.

Three citizens won the competition for having identified "the most useless procedures"; for having explained how cumbersome it was to comply with all the requirements; and for having proposed very concrete steps to improve the process.

The Jury subsequently submitted all the proposals that they deemed worthwhile to the agency of the government concerned with each procedure. The agencies initiated specific projects to revise the procedures on the basis of the suggestions made by the citizens, in consultation with their respective organs of internal control and the Ministry of Public Service.

It should be noted that a number of Latin American governments have expressed interest in replicating this initiative and have requested to share the methodology followed to run the competition and to evaluate the proposals. This innovative experiment received in 2011 one of the United Nations Public Service Awards.

The initiative achieved a number of important results:

1. It showed to the citizens recipient of services that public administration is open to inputs and suggestions to improve its performance;
2. It opened a space for dialogue between citizens and administration and created a vehicle to submit such suggestions, which otherwise could not be heard;
3. Given the high response, it showed that citizens do have an interest in improving services that affect them and in being pro-active towards government;
4. It confirmed that in today's Mexican society the internet is a powerful tool to foster citizens' participation and to improve service delivery;
5. It enabled government to identify those practices and processes which, from the perspective of the recipients, created an unnecessary burden;
6. Provided public administration with innovative suggestions on how simplify and innovate service delivery mechanisms; and finally
7. It spearheaded initiative and innovation in the various agencies of government responsible for implementing citizens' suggestions.

This one-time initiative required a considerable investment in terms of financial, technical and human resources and, as outlined above, was quite successful. This initial investment should be used as a basis to create an ongoing mechanism for obtaining citizens' feedback on cumbersome and useless administrative processes and for institutionalizing public administration's response to their suggestions.

Dialogue between service providers and recipients is part of private sector practices, as companies seek the views and preferences of users in order to design or improve products or services. It should also become an integral part of public sector practices, so as to ensure that service delivery is focused on providing what service citizens need and how they want it delivered, rather than on what is suitable for the administration.

This is one of the main messages that can be derived from this experiment. Governments around the world cannot operate according to obsolete paradigms: they have to modify the systems of service delivery to suit the new ways society operates and involve citizens in determining how the administration operates.

Also it should be borne in mind that today's society functions on fast results and immediate conclusion of transactions (e.g. e-mail, internet shopping, ticket purchasing, etc.). Citizens and even more businesses expect to operate in the same way in their transactions with government.

Replicating a similar exercise to eliminate cumbersome procedures would certainly produce concrete results. But it is not cost effective to go ahead and unilaterally design administrative procedures which may not suit the citizens' needs and would subsequently need to be revised or eliminated. It would be wiser to seek citizens' opinions and preferences at the design phase utilizing various means, particularly social media.

This opinion should be sought on an ongoing basis so as to constantly simplify, innovate and improve public administration's delivery of public services.