
Social Auditing In Central America

GOAL (Honduras)

Background

GOAL is an international humanitarian NGO which has been working in Honduras since 1998, with the aim of reducing inequality, exclusion and poverty in Central America, including by focusing on the preparation for and recovery from disasters and by integrating a focus on the protection of vulnerable groups. Since 2005, with the support of DIPECHO, GOAL has focused on plans of action to increase the resilience of communities to disasters in the remote area known as la Mosquitia that spans across the Honduran- Nicaraguan border.

In partnership with another international non-governmental organisation **Civil Volunteer Group** (GVC in Italian), GOAL implemented the DIPECHO IX funded project, *“Preparation for Disasters with a Focus on Strengthening Community and Institutional capacity to Increase Resilience in the Homogenous Cross Border area of la Mosquitia”* in 4 municipalities of La Mosquitia both the Honduran and Nicaraguan. This is the zone most affected by hydro-meteorological threats and where greater breaches occur under normal circumstances in the fundamental rights of women, the elderly, boys, girls and persons of different capacities and whose vulnerability is aggravated in emergency situations.

Amongst the project activities, measures were included to promote the protection of vulnerable groups. This led to the establishment of two Social Audit Committees (or CAS in Spanish, *Comités de Auditoria Social*), one in Honduras and the other in Nicaragua which integrated representatives from civil society, whose purpose was to follow up on the compliance by municipal and regional authorities of a number of measures identified in a participatory workshop. This was one of a number of measures identified in participative workshops that took place during the roll out of the *“Toolkit for Management of Risks in Protection”* by GOAL.

Description of the approach and rationale for its use

The Social Audit is a process developed for citizens that promotes vigilance and monitoring of public affairs with the aim of collaborating in a transparent and accountable manner.

The thinking is that community oversight is a powerful means to promote:

- a Do No Harm approach and act as an early warning system.
- the efficient and transparent use of resources.
- empowerment of communities in playing an active role in their own development.
- effectiveness through community ownership supporting sustainability and by tapping into local knowledge for continued relevance.

In addition Social Audit can also provide the practical benefit to the NGO of an additional level of project oversight which might be difficult to otherwise sustain, due to the high costs and access difficulties that hinder frequent travel by staff to those remote or insecure locations. For GOAL Social Audit was an element in the overall management of risk.

The steps in the roll out were as follows:

1. GOAL developed the *“Toolkit for Management of Risks in Protection”* in 2014. The toolkit was first used internally by GOAL staff to assess and manage protection risk and is made up of six sections with specific questions for vulnerable groups including based on sex, age, disability and chronic illness. In 2015, with the support of DIPECHO, it was decided to pilot the use of the toolkit externally, whereby local civil society in remote areas of La Mosquitia would be enabled to have greater oversight of GOALs projects.
2. The Social Audit methodology was identified as the best means by which the already developed and project tested Protection Risk Mitigation Toolkit could be applied by local civil society. Key Social Audit resources to support this were identified through a literature review and included the Social Audit Guide for Risk Management by Landaverry and the Transparency and Social Audit Manual by FOSDEH (Social Forum of External Debt and Development of Honduras).
3. Established a Social Audit focal point in the country head office and assigned a field technical staff member for ongoing support. In GOAL, the Social Audit initiative was led by the Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) unit in the capital Tegucigalpa working closely with a field staff member dedicated for the accompaniment and follow up in La Mosquitia.
4. The GOAL Social Audit focal points adapted the literature review resources so that it is suitable for a workshop format, feasible in the time available and to ensure the language used would be accessible for the target audience.
5. The GOAL & GVC regional programme management coordinated with local civil society and district authorities to discuss the need for protection in emergency situations, risk management and the value of Social Audit approach as one form of risk mitigation.
6. A 2 day participative workshop was organised with the representatives of civil society selected and invited who advocate for the rights of the vulnerable groups in each location. As discussed under the challenges section, in some locations there was no civil society presence so the project team had to adapt their selection to include locally respected journalists and religious leaders.

7. The content of the workshop included;
 - 7.1 Examining overall protection themes in situations of emergency.
 - 7.2 Explain the purpose, function and role of a Social Audit Committee in applying and following up the measurement of protection risk.
 - 7.3 Purpose and content of the *“Toolkit for Management of Risks in Protection”*.
 - 7.4 Using a participative analytical process, the attendees applied the toolkit to analyse the risks that their different groups were exposed to, and identify potential mitigating protective measures which government institutions should implement in the coming year.
 - 7.5 Regional and municipal authorities signed agreements committing to the efforts necessary to implement and follow up the Social Audit Committees.
 - 7.6 Action plans were drafted for the year on the 29 protection measures that the four municipality authorities had agreed to, and which would be followed up by the Social Audit Committees.
8. Conducting quarterly progress reviews by GOAL & GVC field staff with the Social Audit Committee in Honduras and Nicaragua using the action plans together with regular accompaniment support.
9. Conducting an internal assessment of each of the Social Audit Committees after one year to understand the progress made against the agreed action plan.

In this intervention the CAS was responsible for:

- Identifying, together with the relevant authorities, the protection measures that could be feasible to develop during the coming year.
- Conducting planning meetings and coordinating with regional and municipal government institutions for the exchange of information to enable follow up.
- Organising interviews and arranging meetings with key institutional actors in municipal and regional institutions.
- Conducting field visits and interviewing members of the community.
- Documenting the findings and recommendations in a report.

Resources necessary to implement the approach

8,000 Euros was the approximate cost associated with the functioning of the two Social Audit Committees over a 12 month period. To set up the Social Audit Committees two participative workshops were required. Considerable amount of staff time had to be invested at the start to facilitate the local authorities signing commitments and in order to form the two Social Audit Committees, each made up 6 to 7 persons.

Success Factors

- The political willingness of the regional and municipal actors to support the implementation of the measures to protect the vulnerable groups.
- The signing of a municipal order enabling the formation of a Committee with its respective action plan for the protection of groups in situations of vulnerability.
- The accompaniment, technical assistance and financing by the non-governmental organisations in the area for roll out of the methodology.
- The high level of knowledge, experience and organisation of the civil society actors advocating for the vulnerable groups over the years.
- The participation of personnel from different municipal institutions, in a certified training where they received the necessary knowledge to develop sectoral plans, and in which protection measures were defined.
- The willingness of the donor to finance the development of the Social Audit method.

Challenges Overcome

- This was the first civil society experience of implementing Social Audit in Honduras and Nicaragua, and also GOAL's first experience so there was learning curve.
- In the Honduras part of la Mosquitia civil society representation was relatively weak. So the project had to adapt the approach to include locally respected journalists and religious representatives as members of the CAS.
- Following the withdrawal of one of the members of the Social Audit Committee in Nicaragua, a representative of the women's organisations in the area was integrated.

Results and Impact

- Of the 29 protection measures for the vulnerable groups that the authorities agreed to in the four municipalities, they were successful in implementing 25 of them.
- In one of the countries a vulnerable group's commission was formed and a municipal order was signed for the compliance with the protection measures and the same were included in the Municipal Disaster Preparation and Response Plan.
- The Nicaraguan protection efforts in the municipalities during the project period were significantly greater. Although it is worth noting in this regard that there is history of more cooperative community initiatives in Nicaragua, supported by the government which is likely to have made it a more conducive environment.
- Coordination was strengthened between government institutions at regional and municipal level, both through the Social Audit Committees and by the initiative at a national level on protection of vulnerable groups.
- Awareness raising and advocacy on the theme of protection of vulnerable groups by the Social Audit Committees, enabled greater visibility and sensitisation of representatives of different institutions, providing a base from which to develop actions that will address the different needs of the groups in vulnerable situations.
- The President of the Social Audit Committee in Nicaragua was given the opportunity to become the municipal representative for the disabled during 2016.

Lessons Learnt

The follow up visits conducted by the technical staff of the different government institutions enabled them to be in closer contact with the vulnerable groups, making them more sensitive to and aware of the challenges faced by those groups.

It was observed that the dialogue space which the key interviews generated strengthened communication between the Audit Committees and the authorities, providing the opportunity to advocate for other development initiatives.

Include in the budget stipends for the Committee members' activities and seek other mechanisms to finance the activities after the intervention period.

Conduct a diagnostic of the protection measures that the government institutions have previously applied prior to the measures identified by the Social Audit Committee, in a way that will support them following up and to avoid proposing actions that have already been developed.

Next Step

Social Audit empowers communities to be protagonists in their own development, advocating for the fulfilment of their rights and at the same time strengthening accountability; for that reason GOAL Honduras has sought to continue to use this method in future interventions as a participative tool that strengthens community resilience.

Links or references for further reading

The development of this methodology was based on the Social Audit Guide for Risk Management by the consultant Robert Landaverry and the Transparency and Social Audit Manual by FOSDEH (Social Forum of External Debt and Development of Honduras).