

Closing the COVID Accountability Gap:

Paraguay's COVID-19 Budget and Procurement Portal

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de la Economía Paraguaya



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In 2021, the International Budget Partnership published an assessment of 120 countries' management of COVID relief, which found that too many governments were using the excuse of urgency to avoid being as transparent, accountable or inclusive as they could be. These shortcuts and limitations, however, are neither necessary nor inevitable. IBP's report showcased notable instances in which governments acted swiftly to put in place adequate transparency around their policy responses, where accountability institutions — such as legislatures and supreme audit institutions (SAIs) — stepped up to provide effective oversight, and civil society organizations contributed information on the needs of the most vulnerable. In a series of briefs, we have taken a more in-depth look at these good practices — delving into government objectives in implementing the practices, the impacts achieved, and lessons that can be drawn from these practices for their replication in other countries. The main goal of these briefs is to provide governments with information on good practices in fiscal openness and accountability that they can incorporate into their own policies, to be implemented during periods of crisis and beyond.

This brief offers an overview of the Accountability for the Paraguayan People (Rindiendo Cuentas al Pueblo

Paraguay) digital portal, created by the government of Paraguay as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This valuable and innovative website brings together in a single virtual space all information regarding the state budget and public purchases (expenses, contracts, acquisitions, subsidies and debts incurred related to the COVID-19 pandemic) based on Emergency Law No. 6524/2020.¹ The portal made this information available to all citizens in an accessible, standardized format.

When the first cases of COVID-19 in Paraguay were reported at the start of 2020, a series of irregular purchases of pandemic-related resources came to light in the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare (MSPBS),² the National Directorate of Civil Aeronautics (DINAC),³ and the state-owned company Petróleos Paraguayos (PETROPAR).⁴ Pursuant to Law No. 6524/2020, actions were taken to make public purchases transparent within the framework of the health emergency.

In spite of difficulties experienced by the government at various times during the pandemic and complaints about irregularities related to these challenges, the portal can be considered an example of best practices for transparency in the presentation and disclosure of public data.⁵

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¹<https://www.bacn.gov.py/leyes-paraguayas/9156/ley-n-6524-declara-estado-de-emergencia-en-todo-el-territorio-de-la-republica-del-paraguay-ante-la-pandemia-declarada-por-la-organizacion-mundial-de-la-salud-a-causa-del-covid-19-o-coronavirus-y-se-establecen-medidas-administrativas-fiscales-y-financieras>

²<https://www.ultimahora.com/contraloria-confirma-que-compra-estuvo-viciada-irregularidades-n2886463.html>

³<https://senac.gov.py/index.php/noticias/es-iniciada-una-investigacion-en-relacion-un-proceso-de-adquisicion-de-mascarillas-de-proteccion-en-la-direccion-nacional-de-aer>

⁴<https://independiente.com.py/contraloria-fiscaliza-posible-denuncias-de-corrupcion/>

⁵To analyze this case, the authors made use of information on the portal and interviews with the director general of Prevention and Transparency of the National Anticorruption Secretariat (SENAC), Julio Goguera, and with the director of Case Analysis and Monitoring at the SENAC, María Liz Garcíad.

Emergency legislation calling for transparency and accountability

In the face of the COVID-19 outbreak, a state of emergency was declared throughout Paraguay under Law No. 6524/2020, and exceptional budgetary, administrative, fiscal, employment protection, and economic and financial policy measures were established in order to reduce the economic consequences of the pandemic, strengthen the national health-care system and protect employment.

The emergency law was established to provide the state with the tools and budgetary resources to strengthen the national health-care system and minimize the social and economic impact on the Paraguayan people. The government, in compliance with the principle of information disclosure for accountability and with the aim of managing funds with transparency and integrity, recognized the need to promote special mechanisms to monitor and control the use of the resources allocated to containing the pandemic. The virtual platform was created to be a useful tool, making all information related to COVID-19 funds available to the public in a unified portal. This would allow Paraguayans to be aware of how public money was being used and for what purposes.

The initial design of the bill included a section that established transparency and accountability measures to prevent acts of corruption. The law required executive branch institutions to be responsible for ensuring the proper use and allocation of resources for the health emergency. The law also required the development of the tools necessary to publish the information on digital media.

The law addressed transparency and accountability by setting forth that the Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic (CGR) and the National Anticorruption Secretariat (SENAC) would establish guidelines on transparency and oversight of the administration of the resources allocated by the law (an amount equivalent to USD1.6 billion), thereby encouraging citizen participation in accountability processes (Law No. 6524, 2020: art. 42).

Likewise, the law set forth that the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies (MITIC) would create a portal available to all state agencies and entities, allowing them to access all relevant information on the execution of their budget in an open data format. The information on the portal had to be freely accessible to the general public, without any restrictions, and provided in easy-to-understand language (Law No. 6524, 2020: art. 45).

The law was regulated by Decree No. 3506/2020 (the law was passed March 26, 2020, and the decree dates from March 31, 2020). The law ordered the MITIC to develop the digital portal based on the technical requirements established by the SENAC and the General Auditor of the Executive Branch (AGPE) in coordination with the CGR. The platform seeks to provide transparency in how resources are used by the state, allowing ordinary citizens track the use of these resources.

The launch of the portal

Through inter-institutional work that involved the SENAC, the Ministry of Finance, the MITIC, the CGR, the National Directorate of Public Procurement (GNCP), the National Emergency Secretariat (SEN), the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare (MSPBS), as well as the support of experts from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the first version of the portal, Rindiendo Cuentas al Pueblo Paraguayo, was launched on April 29, 2020, one month after the law was enacted,⁶ using a platform called Investment Map.

Investment Map is an innovative virtual information system that allows the progress and results of public investment projects to be viewed in a georeferenced manner. The tool was developed by the Ministry of Finance with the support of the IDB in order to make public investment more efficient and to encourage citizen participation.

With the launch of the portal, Paraguay became the first country in Latin America and the Caribbean

to adapt the Investment Map tool to monitor the resources used by the various state agencies to address the COVID-19 health emergency. This represented a clear commitment by the Paraguayan government to transparency and integrity,⁷ a commitment that has been lauded by international organizations and experts.⁸

The Rindiendo Cuentas al Pueblo Paraguayo portal allows users to view and obtain both general and specific information on the resources covered by the Emergency Law. This data is obtained in open formats for subsequent processing. The data highlights the entities involved and the funding amounts allocated to each, as well as to what extent the budgets have been executed; the programs carried out by each entity; the subsidies granted to various sectors of the population; and the contracts involving the provision of goods and services. The portal also includes information about other acquisitions made during the pandemic, using resources apart from those established by the aforementioned law.

⁶<https://rindiendocuentas.gov.py>

⁷<https://www.mitic.gov.py/noticias/gobierno-pone-en-marcha-plataforma-para-transparentar-uso-de-recursos-de-la-emergencia-por-el-covid-19>

⁸<http://revistafal.com/transparencia-durante-el-covid-19/>

<https://hondurasdigitalchallenge.com/2020/05/18/plataforma-rindiendocuentas-asi-paraguay-vigila-los-recursos-destinados-al-covid-19/>

<https://blogs.iadb.org/administracion-publica/es/3-claves-para-que-la-emergencia-sanitaria-no-se-convierta-en-una-crisis-de-integridad/>

The portal has undergone several modifications since its first version, many of which were carried out based on recommendations from the public as well as from civil society organizations. Several channels were enabled for this purpose, among them chat spaces both on the portal and on the sites of various public institutions, as well as virtual worksheets for suggestions and direct contact between public servants and civil society organizations. The portal has also been used for responses to comments and queries. However, the level of participation remains low.⁹

Improvements to the portal include a control panel that features a better breakdown of the funding amounts for the programs, subsidies, contracts and

donations, as well as enhanced visualization of the government's goals and progress and of budgetary resources earmarked for each item.

The portal also added a section with all the files in CSV format, as well as the respective data dictionaries, allowing citizens and researchers easy access to the databases providing data to the site. Finally, a section devoted to sworn asset and interest declarations from public servants affected by the administration of resources for the pandemic has been added, with links to each institution's website. Similarly, users can access the sworn declarations of interest from the same platform through the link to the institutional pages required pursuant to Decree No. 3506/2020.¹⁰

⁹<https://rindiendocumentas.gov.py/Participa/Comentarios/>

¹⁰<https://www.mspbs.gov.py/dependencias/portal/adjunto/691e24-DecretoN3506ReglamentacindelaLey6524EstadodeEmergencia.pdf>



The portal's impact

The Rindiendo Cuentas portal has achieved some tangible outcomes with regard to improving transparency, participation and accountability.

First, the creation of the portal was effective in making available to citizens information regarding purchases made by the state during the pandemic (thus making public procurement processes transparent).

Second, the portal has spurred increased participation in public financial management from the public and civil society. According to statistics on Rindiendo Cuentas, 124,271 users visited the portal between April 30, 2020, and November 2, 2021, a significant number for a platform dedicated to the oversight of public resources.¹¹

Third, in terms of accountability of COVID-19 financing, members of the public have been able to channel their suggestions or claims concerning corruption through the portal. A total of 567 citizen complaints have been received and referred to various institutions.

One of the most notable initiatives was promoted by the nongovernmental organization IDEA. By cross-referencing public access databases, IDEA verified the existence of public officials who accessed subsidies for food aid without actually being the beneficiaries of the aid. Due to IDEA's efforts, together with the verification work conducted by the SENAC, 98 criminal complaints were filed with the Public Ministry on May 28, 2020. Also, through similar initiatives and investigative work carried out by the SENAC, at the time of this writing a total of 165 criminal complaints have been filed with the Public Ministry related to the management of pandemic resources (Noguera, J. and García, M.L., 2021).¹²

Finally, in terms of wider impact, the Paraguayan portal has been replicated in other countries, since it is considered a good practice in the use of open public data. (According to one of the SENAC interviewees, the Costa Rican government used information on Paraguay's design and implementation process to develop its own platform.¹³

¹¹<https://datastudio.google.com/reporting/58b83753-4411-4ad4-b8f4-263e7e05a09a/page/CMTOB>

¹²<https://www.idea.org.py/2020/05/28/senac-denuncia-a-funcionarios-que-cobraron-nangareko/>

<https://www.ultimahora.com/covid-19-senac-registra-mas-500-denuncias-relacionadas-asistencia-social-n2936413.html>

<https://www.abc.com.py/nacionales/2021/07/08/gobernacion-de-central-habria-suplantado-facturas-falsas-para-justificar-gasto-de-us-1-millon/>

<https://www.abc.com.py/nacionales/2020/09/08/senac-denuncia-supuesto-cobro-indebido-de-subsidio-pytyvo-20/>

<https://www.ultimahora.com/nangareko-senac-realiza-denuncia-penal-contra-13-personas-irregularidades-n2884265.html>

¹³<https://rendircuentas.mideplan.go.cr/home/index/>

Lessons from Paraguay

The experience of developing the Rindiendo Cuentas platform during the pandemic offers several lessons for other countries.

The rapid development of the portal was made possible because it built on existing efforts. Although the construction of Rindiendo Cuentas al Pueblo Paraguayo took place at an extraordinary moment when the country was confronting the COVID-19 health crisis, the government had already begun carrying out a variety of actions to fulfill its commitments to transparency and public information. (Among these was the abovementioned Investment Map.) So, the public sector had already accumulated knowledge on the topic with citizen participation.

This allowed the Paraguayan government, through a new collaborative action between public institutions and IDB experts (using non-reimbursable technical assistance), to complete the launch of the new portal in record time, only one month after the emergency law was passed. The portal included both data on public investments and information on the use of COVID-19 resources.

Another lesson learned concerns the importance of inter-institutional collaboration. Important synergies were achieved by the public institutions in charge of managing the portal, despite the great difficulties imposed by the pandemic. The public institutions adopted an attitude of collaboration, with openness to an inter-institutional project that utilized both human and material resources. The project did not involve an extra cost to the state, but instead was an optimization of resources.

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