

Holding government to account: innovative practices for stronger institutional collaboration

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In February, the EIP will launch two knowledge products: “Engagement practices across accountability institutions and actors: mechanisms, risks and benefits” and “An EIP Checklist for Supreme Audit Institutions: adopting and managing engagement practices”. Below is a brief highlighting some interesting lessons learnt emanating from our work. If you are interested in joining our group of peer reviewers for the report and checklist, please get in touch with Anna Piccinni (anna.piccinni@oecd.org).

The EIP presented initial findings from this work to members of OLACEFS (the regional body for Latin American Supreme Audit Institutions) in Mexico. Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, Paraguay and Costa Rica have expressed interest in undertaking a learning alliance on this topic. The learning alliance will gather SAIs and their external stakeholders to help further exchange and document engagement practices across Latin America. These practices will be shared and disseminated within the EIP. Other learning alliances are in the pipeline to ensure sharing of lessons learned across regions and institutions.

A Supreme Audit Institution is only as powerful as its ability to garner support for and implementation of its audit findings and recommendations; local NGOs and civil society to the extent that members of parliament or local administration raise irregularities in spending when they see a hospital or school is not being built; parliament only as effective to ensure spending is in line with priorities and principles of value for money to the extent that the external audit institution provides clear and accessible reports; and the list goes on.

The so-called accountability eco-system is complex and is composed of parliament (political accountability), courts (legal accountability), citizens, civil society, ombudsmen, anti corruption agencies and media (social accountability) and external audit institutions (regulatory, financial and results accountability). These actors need to innovate and break away from their institutional silos and collaborate more effectively to hold government to account. The benefits of doing so are being increasingly recognised.

The Effective Institutions Platform (EIP) is well placed to bring different actors together to work through problems that are multi-stakeholder by nature. At the request of its members, the Platform has produced frontline research on the engagement of external audit institutions with external stakeholders, focusing on i) why and when SAIs collaborate with external stakeholders, identifying blockages for engagement; ii) innovative practices in countries to share with and inspire others; iii) the mechanisms underpinning the benefits of engagement practices.

As part of this effort, the Platform has recently surveyed over 32 Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) on their engagement practices with parliament, civil society and the media. This truly global survey, with perspectives from high, middle and low-income countries informed the EIP’s upcoming publication: *Engagement practices between Supreme Audit Institutions and external actors: mechanisms, risks and benefits* (2016).

The report contributes to answering the following questions: *How do engagement strategies attain impact? Under which conditions? Are they replicable? What capacity needs to be built for SAIs and other stakeholders?*

Below are some interesting lessons learned from the report. We hope this research will inform EIP members in the way that they develop governance support programmes or reform strategies and enable them to think through the role of their own institution in strengthening the accountability cycle as whole.

- **SAIs in high income countries are not necessarily the most advanced in engaging with external stakeholders.** Non-OECD countries are more likely to engage in two-way more participatory and interactive approaches than OECD countries. However, OECD countries are the most advanced in terms of the type and quantity of information they disclose.
- **Engagement mechanisms concentrate at the planning and dissemination stage of the audit process** while follow-up to audit recommendations is the stage where engagement is at its lowest. However, this is the stage where external actors' engagement will have the highest impact in terms of oversight. In addition, **SAIs engage with civil society or NGOs more evenly across the audit cycle, in comparison to engagement with parliament and the media.**
- There is a lack of systematic understanding and concrete evidence of whether engagement mechanisms are successful in **reaching goals and attaining impact.** Moreover, if they are successful, we still need to understand how they contribute to such aims, and under what conditions.
- **There is poor institutionalisation of engagement practices.** For example, collaboration with parliament, beyond reporting obligations, occurs mostly informally.
- **Experience is not yet systematized nor easily accessible for other SAIs.** There is more learning on engagement with civil society but very little on engagement with parliament and media. SAIs should develop a systematic and thoughtful approach to peer learning around engagement with external actors in order to enhance its potential for diffusion of engagement innovations.
- **There are complex and multiple incentives and barriers underpinning engagement practices.** These include limits provided by financial resources and normative frameworks but also the perceived risks of engagement practices such as media sensationalising and public pressure. For example, SAIs are unable to follow up on complaints or denounces filed by citizens or parliamentarians beyond the scheduled audits. Supreme Audit Institutions may also be disinclined to engage with parliament for fear of being politicised.
- Remaining gaps in knowledge include how to understand and map external stakeholders, which communication strategy to adopt, how to develop medium-term engagement strategies oriented towards specific accountability results and how to formulate risk mitigation strategies.