



SAN ANTONIO PAJONAL, EL SALVADOR

VULNERABILITIES TO CORRUPTION
APPROACH REPORT

JANUARY 2018

I. INTRODUCTION

The International Republican Institute (IRI) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization headquartered in Washington, DC. IRI works with civil society and governmental partners throughout the world to strengthen democratic practices and empower democratic leaders. With support from the National Endowment for Democracy, IRI has created a Vulnerabilities to Corruption Approach (VCA) to assist local governments in identifying risks to corrupt practices as a first step for improving transparency and accountability at the municipal level.¹

El Salvador has made great democratic and economic progress since the end of its civil war in 1992. However, corruption continues to be a serious challenge that along with gang violence weakens the rule of law and acts as a push factor of migration from the country. Building on IRI's longstanding work supporting municipal development in El Salvador, the Institute is partnering with selected Salvadorian municipalities to help them identify and address corruption vulnerabilities.

The municipality of San Antonio Pajonal sits at the edge of the Trifinio region where El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras share a border. Though this region has faced historic challenges in terms of crime and lower standards of living, opportunities exist to improve governance, basic services and infrastructure. The past decade has seen some economic growth in San Antonio Pajonal thanks its compost center, which is the only one in the region. San Antonio Pajonal then collects refuse and recycling from the whole region for re-purpose, creating jobs and further income for the municipality. IRI identified San Antonio Pajonal as a potential partner municipality for programmatic support because of the successes that the city achieved with respect to its current violence prevention initiatives and its efforts to strengthen the relationship with the local governance association *Corporación de Municipalidades de la República de El Salvador* (COMURES.)

II. METHODOLOGY

The VCA assessment in San Antonio Pajonal was conducted by three IRI staff, representing the Washington, DC, El Salvador and Guatemala offices on a four-day site visit to the municipality, from December 11-14, 2017. The team used a qualitative methodological approach that takes into consideration stakeholders' perceptions to assess vulnerabilities to corruption within government processes and practices. In total, the team conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 individuals (10 women). Before each interview, a team member did an introduction of the project that clarified what kind of information was sought, the origin of the IRI team, the purpose of the evaluation and the benefits that the final report would bring to the municipality. The mayor, her team, and the local *Unidad de Adquisiciones y Contrataciones* (UACI), or public procurement office, helped IRI identify and contact the informants.

The number and type of interviewees selected was intended to include broad representation of civil society, elected officials, municipal staff and community leaders. All the interviews and subsequent transcriptions were conducted in Spanish. The methodology for this assessment was based on similar VCA programs conducted in Mongolia, Ukraine, Indonesia, Cambodia and Tunisia.

Through the exploratory phase of the VCA process, IRI determined the scope of this assessment in

¹ The VCA is a methodology that IRI created that bolsters anti-corruption efforts by partnering with local stakeholders through a steering committee comprised of representatives of both government and civil society. The VCA identifies corruption-related risks and gaps in government processes and supports government responses to these issues. It comprises four steps: explore, assess, enact and showcase. This report represents the outcome of the assessment step.

partnership with local authorities. Prior to this assessment, IRI conducted a political economy analysis of San Antonio Pajonal to identify windows of opportunity and potential bottlenecks for reform. Most interviewees identified additional challenges to transparency which are reflected in this document. The report is structured around two key findings: the need for investing on capacity of civil servants and the need for additional to engage citizens on transparency issues.

III. PROGRAMMATIC CONTEXT

IRI has conducted governance-related programming in El Salvador since 2008. Projects in the country have sought to apply governance best practices to respond to immediate community needs, and to support relevant national initiatives. Over the past two years, IRI’s programs in El Salvador have focused on crime and violence prevention. Prior to citizen security, IRI worked closely with municipalities in El Salvador to strengthen their capacity to perform effective and transparent governance. Past projects featured opportunities for mayors and other municipal staff to share best practices through domestic and international exchanges and provided specific technical assistance for a variety of governance functions such as public rendering of accounts. Several political leaders and civil servants in San Antonio Pajonal were partners of IRI through these projects and have been engaged and exposed to programming on citizen security and economic development.

San Antonio Pajonal’s situation is very particular as the town is located in the heart of the Trifino region, which lies at the convergence of the borders of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. The Trifino region could be defined as one of the most violent and vulnerable in the world. Economic development has been precarious and the opportunities for young people are scarce, leading a significant portion of the youth population to migrate to the United States of America for better opportunities. To mitigate economic asperity, IRI has worked with Mayor Silvia Chavarria in San Antonio Pajonal to strengthen the relationship of the municipality with local associations and to build the capacity of the municipal security council on anti-violence strategies.

IV. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The municipal administration is professional, but additional efforts are needed to comply with the transparency and accountability framework

Problem Statement

A persistent challenge for many municipalities in El Salvador is the inadequate funds to train civil servants in public administration principles and techniques and in the technical and legal components of *Ley De Adquisiciones y Contracciones de la Administración Pública* (LACAP) and of the Public Procurement Law. Based on the interviews, the trainings that municipal employees have received to date primarily covered general aspects of customer service and did not cover practical skills or administrative topics. In addition, many interviewees reported feeling isolated from their counterparts in neighboring municipalities and neglected from the national government.

Key Strengths

1. **Municipal financial management is conducted properly.** Despite the findings from a previous audit, for the most part public procurement, municipal budget and the overall management of finances are done proficiently and properly. The tracking of expenses and the solicitation of goods is done in accordance with the law and with very few exceptions. Many interviewees have praised a culture of due-diligence, also reporting that they have faith in most of their public institutions and officials.
2. **Municipal staff demonstrated willingness to improve municipal systems and practices.** The municipal staff have access to periodic capacity building opportunities offered by COMURES and to local development social investment fund (*Fondo de Inversión Social para el Desarrollo Local* or FISDL.) However, all municipal employees interviewed still vocalized a desire for additional trainings on their roles and responsibilities. With the introduction of computers under the current Mayor, greater opportunities exist for municipal employees to improve their knowledge of proper management techniques.

Key Vulnerabilities

1. **Some administrative procedures are not in accordance with the LACAP law.** Many interviewees were concerned that certain procurements were done either hastily or without the full adherence to the LACAP process. This practice was often caused by the time-sensitiveness of certain projects in the municipality as well as political pressure to have such projects completed in a timely and efficient manner. When inquired about administrative centralization, one interviewee explained that they believed it was due to well-intentioned desire for expediency. This was in line with other interviewees who also stressed that sometimes a rushed process might have politically favorable outcomes.
2. **There is limited public knowledge on citizens' right to access to public information, particularly in rural and poorer areas of the municipality.** Oversight by citizens is often limited to voting or municipal meetings, and in many instances, citizens in San Antonio Pajonal are unaware or uninterested in the available opportunities to engage in dialogue with their elected officials. One interviewee believed that most of the population did not know about public information coming from the Mayor's office or anything about the *Ley de Acceso a la Información Pública* (LAIP), or Law of Access of Public Information. This was even more applicable to rural and poorer parts of the municipality.

Recommendations

1. **Better trainings for municipal staff and public leaders on the LACAP process and its importance.** There should be more efforts to improve staff capacity. Municipal leadership should undertake greater efforts to provide more opportunities for its staff, particularly in the procurement office, to engage with their counterparts in neighboring communities, to share best practices and to discuss lessons learned regarding LACAP procedures throughout the Trifinio area.
2. **Hold awareness raising events for the public and municipal leaders on the importance of citizens oversight.** Given the lack of public knowledge on the LAIP, an awareness raising campaign would be beneficial so that citizens are better informed about their rights, the current opportunities to conduct citizens' oversight of municipal spending and procurement practices. This might in turn give

citizens a chance to build their trust in public institutions. Such campaign should specifically target and include rural communities which do not always have as much access to oversight and accountability raising activities.

The public lacks opportunities to hold the local government accountable and demand transparency

Problem Statement

Municipal staff remain open and available for citizen input, however, outside of the regular council meetings, there are few structured opportunities for meaningful citizen oversight. Therefore, the volume and the kind of opportunities for citizens to engage meaningfully in oversight, transparency or accountability for the municipality could be improved. As the municipality does not have an official website, many citizens can only access online and engage with the municipality through Facebook, a platform where the lines between official and personal remains blurred.

Key Strengths

1. **Positive recent efforts in the municipality.** San Antonio Pajonal has made considerable strides in bringing further access to education and development opportunities to its residents. For instance, the municipality has improved the announcement of public rendering of accounts sessions in more distant areas. Moreover, municipal staff remain keenly aware of the challenges they face and take special notice of the precarious situation of many lower-income and rural citizens, women and youth.

Key Vulnerabilities

1. **Structural impediments to citizen engagement.** Several interviewees commented on the structural impediments to oversight they face when trying to monitor local government activities. For instance, one interviewee expressed frustration with the online presence of the municipality that appears to be predicated through personal Facebook accounts. In addition, the municipality has had a difficult time delivering information through traditional media sources such as the newspaper, radio, television, etc. However, interviewees reported that there are open-door sessions of the municipal council which the public could attend.
2. **Municipal projects lack effective citizen oversight.** In many interviews, informants were concerned about the allocation of funds from the municipality towards municipal events or allocated to several projects that they personally deemed 'non-essential.' Many interviewees raised questions specifically around the tourism center which has yet to demonstrate a clear profit or utilization. These concerns, fueled by the perception of a lack of citizen oversight, led many informants to speculate about the integrity of the project. One interviewee skeptically questioned the enforcement of the municipalities' liquor law which forbids bars from serving alcohol after 10pm.

Recommendations

1. **Engage citizens, in particular from rural areas, in transparency and accountability initiatives.** The

inclusion of every citizens, the ones coming from the most distant villages, can help the municipality better meet their needs. Many interviewees commented on how consistently difficult it is to meaningfully engage the rural communities on municipal issues. This is mainly a consequence of infrastructural barriers (poor roads, sewage lines, geographic distance) and low-grade communication technology (limited internet, cell phone penetration.) Opportunities to adjust for these barriers and ultimately engage these citizens may be:

- **Posting notices or important municipal information in multiple public and central locations.** Key informants discussed the opportunity to provide more information to these communities by regularly and predictably posting printed out materials in town squares or public locations.
 - **Making municipal contact information readily available.** To date, many citizens rely on interpersonal relations to reach out to municipal staff, however, not everyone can have access to Facebook or to the relevant phone number. There should be an effort to provide opportunities to post in a public location the relevant phone numbers for services such as the municipal office, the women's office and the municipal clinic, so that everyone can have a phone contact.
2. **Bring the municipality online.** As the current Mayor's administration introduced computers, further investments on an online presence would help to provide citizens public access to important municipal information. Currently, information is primarily housed on employees or the Mayor's personal Facebook pages, providing a potential conflict of interest as government services can blur the line between political and professional. In developing a website, the municipality should consider utilizing the online portal to collect taxes on properties from citizens and from the diaspora community, many of whom still have their homes in San Antonio Pajonal. Some additional opportunities for the municipality online are:
- **Take greater advantage of social media:** Capitalizing on the increasing proliferation of smart phones across the municipality, as well as the increasing interconnectedness of the citizens on platforms such as Facebook, the municipality should create an official Facebook page for the municipality. This Facebook page could help streamlining updates, points of contact for various offices and provide other useful information.
 - **Develop an online communication strategy for the municipality:** Social media, websites and other online tools are important mediums for engaging and informing the public. To best utilize these tools, the municipality should develop an online communication strategy. The strategy should address and try to answer questions like the following ones:
 - *Who is the target audience for the municipality's online presence?* (youth, people who live far from the municipality, etc.)
 - *What does the municipality want to achieve through its communication strategy?* (improved citizen awareness of initiatives, policies or public services,
 - *How will the municipality engage online* (Who will manage the accounts and what will be posted as well as the frequency of said posts.)