



Making citizens count | Belize

How to ensure that public resources are properly invested in Belize?



Discussion Manual

Citizen priorities and proposals
2023

The initiative *Belize Making citizens count* was designed and is currently being executed by *Corporación Acción Ciudadana Colombia - AC-Colombia*, a non-profit NGO specializing in strengthening citizen-government institution relations.

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Citizen Dialogue in Dangriga, August 27, 2023.

1. Let's have an open conversation

The way in which Governments use public resources is a matter of citizen concern. If our Government spends properly, Belize will move forward, we'll have better education, health services and better paths for development.

If we don't act when our Government isn't transparent with spending and doesn't periodically report to their constituents, corruption can happen, mistrust increases and the rights of the most vulnerable aren't guaranteed.

Freedom House's 2023 *Freedom in the World Report* points out that despite Belize's regular and democratic transfer of power and that most civil liberties are granted, there are concerns regarding Government corruption. The report indicates that Belize's anti-corruption laws are poorly enforced and that there's little political will to address this. The report points out that there are issues in procurement processes and in financial statement disclosure. Following are some statements of concerned Belizeans regarding this:

William, a teacher from Punta Gorda: *I'm troubled by the high poverty levels and by how the pandemic disrupted the provision of health and education and by a decrease in the protection of children and adolescents. Unemployment and the resulting reduction in income, is also worrying.*

Rosa, a Belize City house wife: *I'm worried by the lack of public safety and the increase in crime and violence in the city. I read a report on gangs and how every year many are killed or injured due to clashes among themselves and by drug trafficking.*

Clifford, a Belmopan NGO employee: *The most serious problem is the lack of capacity the Government has to meet the needs of the people, particularly after natural disasters. The lack of funds and inefficient resource allocation ends up affecting nutrition, health, and education of disenfranchised children.*

These are some of the issues that affect many Belizeans, and in order to search for realistic solutions and a common ground to act, we must get together and talk among our community members so that our voice is heard. If we want change, we must act upon it because we can't expect that the Government will do all the work.

This discussion will focus on the issue of *how to guarantee that public funds in Belize are well invested* as a means to contribute to solutions to the problems outlined by William, Rosa and Clifford.

For this reason, we hope that you, in addition to members of the tourism, agriculture, industry, merchant sectors as well as the media, social and non-profit organizations, Government, trade unions, professional associations, ethnic groups, women's associations, LGBTQI + groups, political leaders, villagers and all of those concerned for a better future for the country, join us in this discussion.

**Let's build a space
for dialogue discussion and action!**

Let's make our voices count!

This is how we strengthen our democracy!



Belize, Altun Ha Temples

2. What's the problem?

After having a conversation with citizens from different walks of life, cities, and villages, some expressed concern about the scope of Government programs and how public resources are allocated. Based on these citizens' ideas and inputs, the problem is summarized as follows:

The allocation of limited Government funds is often inefficiently allocated and thus, the fulfilment of basic needs such as nutrition, education, health, water, and sanitation is not guaranteed. Additionally, social protection programs for children, the elderly and women victims of domestic violence, are not reaching those in need.

After performing research, including the review of official documents, and interviews with interested parties, an open conversation with citizens followed. This allowed for a better understanding of the problem, its causes, and how it affects citizens. An open dialogue allowed participants to share different points of view, listen to each other, and propose solutions.

Many of these inputs originated at the *Making Citizens Count* community forums that took place in Belize City, Cayo, Corozal, Orange Walk, Stann Creek and Toledo on August 15, 16 and 17, 2023. Key causes and consequences of the problem are outlined in the following section.



Belize, Photo from Flickr/Suzanne Schroeter

3. What causes the problem?

- The Government's priorities are not aligned with the needs of all citizens, especially from ethnic and rural populations.
- A precarious social and humanitarian program design and implementation.
- In addition to limited funds, there's poor budgeting that doesn't meet the requirements of Government plans.
- The high costs of the State operation and public debt prevent allocating more resources to social programs.
- A poor welfare targeting system and politicization of social assistance programs.
- Corruption due to poor monitoring, evaluation and control of social programs.
- Little access to public information on programs, budgets, and audit reports.
- A weak sanction system for non-compliance with Government regulations and norms.
- Citizens have no capacity to formally express concerns and monitor Government administrations and outcomes.

4. What are the consequences of not acting to solve the problem?

- The basic services provided by the State will continue to be of poor quality and will not reach all of those in need.
- Increase in inequality - According to the 2021 Multidimensional Poverty Index of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, inequity and poverty currently reaches 35.7% in Belize.
- Increase in the levels of mistrust in the Government and the Auditing Authority.
- Increase in social violence and anti-Government protests.
- Citizens will not be able to exert their rights.
- Loss of ethical values: citizens will look for any means to access state services, even if illegally.
- Loss of interest in participating in Government affairs and working towards solving common problems.

5. What can we do to solve the problem and guarantee that Government funds are well invested?

Here are some options:

The options below may be complemented during this citizen discussion. Citizens interested in joining the *Making Citizens Count* initiative can also gather as a community and lay out their own proposals on www.makingcitizenscount.org and follow the process on facebook.com/BelizeMakingCitizensCount.

OPTION 1

Promote citizen participation in Government affairs and foster community oversight of Government management.

Active citizen participation determining investment priorities would allow the Government to better inform itself on the needs of the people. Also, citizens will be better educated on the criteria used to target program beneficiaries and how programs work. If citizens participate and know how programs are designed, funded, and executed to meet their health, education, and security needs, they will have the tools to hold the Government accountable. Promoting citizen participation in the design of programs will motivate citizens to organize themselves and present their demands to Government officials.

OPTION 2**Promote Government transparency and accountability.**

This will result in policies and social programs that would have more objective evaluations and consequently improve planning. This would make sure that program benefits reach those in greater need. Additionally, if the Government regularly reports on the way investment decisions are made, citizens would understand why money is often not enough, as well as the difficulties making benefits reach those who need it.

OPTION 3**Strengthen the Office of the Auditor General of Belize to guarantee the control of Government funds and State assets.**

The best guarantee for the proper management and effective investment of Government resources relies on strengthening the Office of the Auditor General and its ability to monitor Government spending. For this to happen, the Audit Office must have full independence and autonomy and it must be able to make its reports public. Audit results are essential to the National Assembly and its ability to hold the Government accountable for the use of funds destined to meet the needs of Belizeans. This would also facilitate citizen oversight of Government spending and management.

OPTION 1

Promote citizen participation in Government affairs and foster community oversight of Government management

Arguments supporting this option

Arguments in favour consider that promoting citizen participation in the design of Government programs and projects would motivate citizens to organize and present their needs to Government officials surpassing political barriers:

Sharon, from Orange Walk: *This would make the Government communicate better with its citizens and make them aware of their rights. We just began to find out about the content of the Constitution of Belize because there's The People's Constitution Commission that is analysing whether we adopt a new constitution or reform the current one.*

Amaité, from the Toledo District: *This would be an opportunity for indigenous peoples to be taken into account defining programs for their community and find out how much money will be allocated to the programs.*

William, from San Ignacio: *This option strengthens democracy and allows citizens to influence public decisions. If we know what decisions we are making as a country, we can monitor and identify problems and solutions to improve programs. We can also be vigilant and detect corruption, abuse of power, and report.*

Kevin, from Cayo: *If citizens participate in the design of public policies, the Government would know how we carry on with our lives. Communities could identify their strengths and use them to develop social programs and overcome the planning difficulties the Government has from their offices in Belmopan.*

Anna, from Belize City: *By recognizing the needs of the community we can commit to solutions while strengthening our sense of ownership and ensuring that the benefits of the programs are timely, efficient, and that their goals are met.*

Ophelia, from Dangriga: *The Audit Office should sensitize and educate citizens, by age range, on how to interact with the Government and hold it accountable. That's how we could get involved in solving problems. We should learn how to participate in consultations, surveys using new information technologies. However, it would be terrible if after this, the State still doesn't listen to what the citizens demand.*



Challenges to carry out this option

Elizabeth, from Corozal: *Many citizens cannot participate in Government affairs due to a lack of time and money. We're unable to participate because we don't have much knowledge on how the State and Government programs work. Additionally, in my case, I have to focus on housework and taking care of my mother, who is sick. I would like to participate more in community meetings, but this would take all my time.*

Richard, from Corozal: *There's a risk of political manipulation by some groups that take advantage of the participation of citizens disregarding the well-being of the community. Also confrontation could make things more complicated considering that some groups have a different understanding of how the Government should work.*

John, from San Pedro Town: *If citizen participation is not carried out in an orderly manner, the whole process could end up in rifts and tensions, making it impossible to achieve objectives. Also, many community members are tired of endless participation processes that have no outcome.*

Now that we're familiar with arguments in favour and against, let's discuss and share new thoughts about it:

What arguments in favour would you add?

What arguments against would you add (other negative consequences of this option)?

What specific proposal related to citizen participation in public affairs would you make to ensure that Belize's public resources are well spent?

OPTION 2

Promote transparency and Government accountability

Arguments supporting this option

Those who agree with this alternative believe that increasing transparency and accountability, including the enforcement of laws that penalize non-compliance, will increase trust in the Government and reduce corruption.

Francis, from Corozal: *This option would make the Government more transparent and officials would be held accountable for their decisions. It would make them think twice before making any illegal move or take a decision that goes against the public interest; they would have to bear penal consequences.*

Elvira, from Dangriga: *We must support whatever guarantees the independence of those in charge of public accounts, such as the Joint Public Accounts Committee (JPAC). JPACs promote Government accountability, examine the reports of the Auditor General and advise the Government on how to improve financial and operational management. They also promote transparency by publicly presenting financial and administrative matters that require attention.*

Robert, from Dangriga: *If the Government is transparent, citizens would have more information to get involved in public affairs, this would allow them to monitor Government actions, the investment of resources, request financial records, and demand a better quality of services.*

Kaycee, from Cayo: *We are unaware of what goes on in the Government. We need to be able to review the reports of the Audit Office that evaluate State programs and finances. The problem is that we don't have access to them, there are restrictions that don't allow us to know what the Audit Office really does.*

Brenda, from Belize City: *Although there's a law that requires that elected officials disclose their wealth, assets, and liabilities, it's poorly applied. Transparency would help reduce favouritism in the awards of licenses and public contracts. There are cases in which the Government contracts in a manner that harms the interests of all Belizeans. We must create an action group that makes sure that the Government is held accountable.*

Petrona, a University of Belize student: *There's technology that helps reduce corruption and guarantees public sector transparency. In other countries, audit entities use technologies that warn about corruption and mismanagement of resources. For example, it allows information to be cross*

checked to identify the companies that contract the most with the State, and identify their largest shareholders. This facilitates the identification of wrongful alliances between politicians and those who finance their campaigns.

Challenges to carry out this option

María, a University of Belize student: *If Government transparency relies too much in technology in a country like Belize, there may be problem because technological changes require a lot of money and trained staff to operate well and there's a risk that they will become obsolete due to rapid technological advances. In Belize, a great effort would be required due to the high levels of digital illiteracy.*

Peter, from San Ignacio: *Increasing transparency and accountability can meet resistance from Government officials who view this as a political risk that would expose their actions to the public. This can lead to criticism from voters who could rebuke politicians who make bad decisions and who resist being accountable for their management of public resources.*

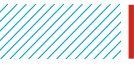
John, from San Ignacio: *This alternative is good, but there must be rules that regulate the handling of Government data and sensitive information; even if this can affect national security, this should be known by the people.*

José, from Placencia: *I think that delving into this alternative is wishful thinking: as long as there is no real political will to be transparent on the part of the Government, nothing is going to change.*

Helen, from Dangriga: *For starters, we need to remove the words "at the Minister's discretion" from all laws and policies. If this doesn't happen, how could Ministers be held accountable?*

Grace, from Cayo: *To secure transparency, we first need an overhaul of many laws and acts such as the witness and whistleblower law, a more robust domestic violence prevention and victims protection program, better human trafficking enforcement laws, stricter environment laws, and public health acts that target the poor.*

Kimberly, from Dangriga: *If we want to make the Government accountable, we need to start by the basics: we need an updated Government directory explaining who is responsible for what. Currently most websites are out of date, phone calls go unanswered, and the voicemail is always full.*



Now that we're familiar with arguments in favour and against, let's discuss and share new thoughts about it:

What arguments in favour would you add?

What arguments against would you add (other negative consequences of this option)?

What concrete proposal related to transparency and accountability would you make to ensure that Belize's public resources are well spent?

OPTION 3

Strengthen the Office of the Auditor General of Belize to guarantee the control of Government funds and State assets

Arguments supporting this option

This option considers that strengthening public control and audits by the Auditor General is the best way to guarantee that the resources are well allocated and that social programs funds reach those in greater need. Timely audit reports also support the National Assembly in its task of holding the Government accountable for its decisions and spending.

Sharon, from Dangriga: *Strengthening the Office of the Auditor General would guarantee transparency in the management of public funds and State assets. An independent and objective audit would make it possible to identify and prevent corruption, misappropriation of funds and inadequate financial practices.*

Amaité, from Dangriga: *Effective control of public funds would increase the level of citizen confidence in their Government. When citizens realize that public resources are managed in a responsible and transparent manner, we will be more willing to support and actively participate in public affairs.*

Kimberly, from Orange Walk: *If public control is strengthened, the Belize Audit Office could better assess the degree of efficiency in public resources investment and identify inadequacies in the provision of services. This would ensure that public funds are better used to provide quality services to those who need it the most.*

Carlos, from San Ignacio: *If we have access to audit reports and their recommendations to improve Government management, citizens could monitor the corrective measures to improve social programs on a timely manner. Nevertheless, engaging with multiple stakeholders and communicating about their work, requires a huge effort from the Office of the Auditor General.*

Challenges to carry out this option

Henry, from San Ignacio: *I think this is a good alternative, but as far as I know, the Audit Office has its hands tied because it has no jurisdiction over its own budget and if the Government does not allocate the resources to allow them to carry out their job, then they are not going to be able to do much.*

Irma, from Orange Walk: *They cannot hire their own staff because they are under civil service regulations. I believe that if we want this alternative to work, a deep reform that includes measures that compel and penalize government officials who don't provide information within deadlines must take place. The Auditor's Office must be able to act independently and be on par with other control entities in the world.*

Ana, from Belize City: *I know that the Auditor's report is only made public when the National Assembly approves it. This reduces the independence of this office and limits citizens timely access... can you imagine if the National Assembly decides to indefinitely delay the publication of an audit report? I believe it's important that citizens empower themselves to support the Audit Office when it is under attack due to their reporting.*

Miguel, from Dangriga: *A profound reform of public control is important. However, if a reform is encouraged there will be political interference and pressure to limit the scope of the changes because nobody likes, especially Government officials, to be controlled when it comes to investing money.*

Francis, from Dangriga: *Even if a reform to strengthen the Belize Audit Office is approved, including better public control, there will be pressure against it. Also, excessive control could lead Government officials to become overly cautious in making decisions, preventing social programs from reaching those in need on time.*

Now that we're familiar with arguments in favour and against, let's discuss and share new thoughts about it:

What arguments in favour would you add?

What arguments against would you add (other negative consequences of this option)?

What specific proposal linked to the Belize Audit Office would you make to ensure that Belize's public resources are well spent?



6. Conclusions

After having shared each other’s opinions with other community members, let’s draw our own conclusions:

What do you think is the most important aspect of this topic?

What concrete proposals would be the most appropriate to guarantee that Government resources in Belize are well invested?

How could our community be part of a course of action associated to the proposed alternatives we just discussed?

Don’t forget to share your opinions in
<https://www.facebook.com/BelizeMakingCitizensCount>
Also, please go to www.makingcitizenscount.org and submit your proposals!