

Christian Gruenberg, Argentina

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Profile – from ashoka.com

Country: Argentina

Primary Field of Work: Civic Participation

A young lawyer with a passion for rooting out corruption worldwide, Christian Gruenberg is using public hearings on government projects as a means for engaging a diverse range of actors—from government, business, and multilateral institutions, to community organizations and everyday citizens—in the fight against corruption and the strengthening of democratic citizen participation.

The New Idea

Christian has developed a process of third-party coordination and monitoring of public hearings regarding government projects that give citizens the power to stop corruption and wasteful government spending before it starts. Public hearings, which provide a forum for government and businesses to dialogue with the public about bidding processes and social and environmental impact of proposed government projects, are standard components of most democracies. However they are seldom used effectively in Argentina or elsewhere in Latin America where governments, or other administrators of public works, solicit bids and go through the motions of a hearing. In contrast, Christian is transforming these meetings into open, well-managed hearings by creating an external coordinating arm for bringing the different actors involved in the hearing together, educating them about the process, and monitoring and disseminating the results. In doing so, Christian is challenging the commonly-held notion that only judges can fight corruption and instead, is providing real forums for voicing citizen concerns and making governments accountable for their spending decisions.

While each successful public hearing is in itself an accomplishment, the sum of these efforts points to a new, low-cost technique for engaging citizens in democracy and rebuilding confidence in government, while at the same time encouraging government officials, citizens and contractors alike to make transparency a priority in the administration of public works. The process also provides politicians and others interested in demonstrating their own commitment to preventing corruption with a space in which to dialogue with the community and prove themselves as partners in democracy.

The Problem

Since 1990, corruption has ranked among the three most pressing problems in Argentina, according to polls conducted by Gallup. For Argentines, politicians are viewed as the most corrupt of groups, followed by the police, unionists, public officials, and judges. In 1994, a study carried out by the Ministry of Economy revealed that State purchases of office equipment exceeded average market prices by between 80 and 415%. Such wasteful spending short-changes a country's prospects for social and economic development and, by undercutting the principles of a free market, limits commerce and discourages new investment. Decisions are made to serve private interests, rather than the public good.

Corruption is by no means limited to Argentina. In a 1997 Gallup survey, corruption surpassed poverty and unemployment as the leading social problem in Latin America.

At the global level, corruption ranked among the top three problems in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Although awareness that corruption exists is widespread, scant attention is paid unless the incident reaches scandalous proportions, with blaring media exposés and the forced resignation, flight, or in rare cases sentencing to prison of errant public officials or business executives. By the time elections roll around, some corrupt officials have been caught and ousted, and other forms of corruption remain hidden beneath the surface. Despite a nominal commitment to democracy in most parts of the world, citizens tend to feel powerless to fight corruption single-handedly, and leave the matter in the hands of judges, who themselves are often corrupt. While citizen groups express frustration that their concerns are not being heard, many government officials and businesses are now struggling to rebuild public confidence. The tools—such as public procurement hearings—which do exist by law to counter corruption and provide a space for dialogue are rarely used, and even less frequently used effectively.

The Strategy

In order for public hearings on government procurement and contracting to serve their purpose and root out corruption before it occurs, Christian has discovered that there must be an external coordinating arm to pull together the different actors, guide them through the process, and monitor the activities related to the hearing. Demand for public hearings can come from various sides: from citizen groups trying to protect their community's interests, from governments or companies interested in demonstrating their commitment to transparency and their desire to incorporate community feedback into the debate about public works and other projects, and even from multilateral financial entities such as the World Bank. The calling of a hearing, however, must come from the entity which would be financing and overseeing the project.

Once an entity expresses interest in holding a hearing, Christian and his team of volunteers work out an agreement, or "integrity pact," between the party interested in carrying forth a project, and a citizen sector organization that would be affected by the project. They set the hearing date, select a location, and commit to the principle of transparency. Information about the hearing is then disseminated through the local media, as well as through local and national citizen sector networks, to invite citizens and other groups to participate in the event. During the pre-hearing phase, Christian also works with the signers of the contract to identify the critical issues (typically 4-5, such as environmental impact, access for people with disabilities, etc.) to be discussed in the hearing and to solicit testimony from outside experts, such as academics and engineers, as well as neighborhood groups, environmentalists, and other citizen organizations. The aim is to involve those who will be able to add value to the debate.

Without careful monitoring, public hearings run the risk of being manipulated by special interests. Christian works with volunteers to review the bidding documents, organize informative workshops for citizens, solicit testimony from experts, ensure that public information is readily available and of quality, and receive commentaries and complaints from citizens involved in the process.

Preparations for a hearing take approximately one month. Each hearing lasts between two and six hours, with an average attendance of 500 people. The results of the hearing are disseminated in the form of a government report responding to the concerns of the citizens, and a report produced by Christian and his team of monitors regarding the quality of the proceedings, based in part on surveys distributed to hearing participants. Moreover, by helping advertise the hearings and later reporting on the results, the

media takes on a new role, not as the barnstorming bearers of corruption scandals, but as key actors in engaging citizens in the fight against corruption and the building of a more transparent, participatory democracy.

The methodology that Christian has developed builds upon his experiences organizing a series of hearings on the expansion of Subway Line H in the city of Buenos Aires and a bridge-building project led by the World Bank in the municipality of Avellaneda. The subway expansion, projected at a total cost of \$1.2 billion, convened the testimony of more than 70 technicians, engineers, legislators, citizen organizations, and individual citizens. Pleased with the transparency of the process and the degree of citizen participation, one of the construction companies involved in the subway project has now asked Christian and his team to organize a public hearing for the construction of a new hospital in the province of San Juan. Similarly, the government of the city of Buenos Aires has proposed a public hearing on the provision of services to school cafeterias. The Province of Mendoza has also expressed interest in holding a public hearing with regard to water services, and Christian has plans to conduct trainings and pilot hearings in the cities of Rosario and Mar del Plata.

Elsewhere in Latin America, Christian is finding fertile ground for spreading the methodology and lessons learned with public hearings carried out to date. To meet the growing demand from throughout Argentina and around the world, he has developed a training module to allow other citizen organizations and their volunteers to replicate the model. He has begun working with the governments of Chile, Ecuador, and the municipality of Asunción, Paraguay, to explore the possibility of implementing the model in those countries with the help of local citizen organizations, academics, and other actors. In addition, he plans to train members of the local chapters of Transparency International (of which he is Director for Argentina and Coordinator for the Southern Cone office) in Colombia, Paraguay, and Costa Rica to begin utilizing public hearings.

Further from home, Christian is working with the World Bank to train representatives of seven African nations in the mechanics of his public hearing methodology. The training began with a series of workshops in Washington in June of 1999 and is being followed up by a distance learning course and periodic site visits. Christian is also in conversations with the Bank about using public hearings to advance the notorious and still unfinished Yacyretá hydroelectric project, which has dragged on for 16 years at a cost of \$6.3 billion and is considered by many to be the ultimate monument to corruption.

Once he has tackled corruption in Latin America and Africa, Christian dreams of expanding his model to Asia, Russia, and beyond.

The Person

At age 18, Christian began studying medicine in hopes that, as a doctor, he would be able to alleviate suffering and improve people's lives. During his third year, he worked for six months at a clinic in Vicente López for low-income patients who were unable to afford even the cheapest of medicines. One day, the doctor in charge of distributing free medicines told Christian that they would have to cut their hand-outs in half. When he asked why, Christian was told that the other half of the State -allocated medicines had never made it to the clinic, that somewhere along the way the funds-and perhaps even the medicine itself-had been diverted. That day he realized that although he could make a difference as a doctor by saving lives, he could make an even greater difference by ensuring that much-needed medicines did not simply disappear and that doctors were

able to do their jobs. The following year, while working in an important public hospital, he witnessed the same phenomenon, and decided to leave the medical profession to pursue a solution elsewhere.

Uncertain of where to find that solution, he began backpacking through Latin America, and later extended his trip to include India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Egypt, Mali, and Senegal. He spent nearly six years traveling the world, with intermittent visits back to Buenos Aires.

Upon his return to Argentina in 1995, Christian noticed that corruption had become a recurring headline in the news. Through his travels, he had realized that what he had seen at the Vicente López clinic was not unique to Argentina, and that in most cases poverty and corruption went hand in hand. He began to see that poverty, as witnessed in each of the countries he visited, could never be conquered without an attack on corruption, without ensuring that resources-economic, medical, and otherwise -reached those in need, without bits and pieces being pocketed by others along the way. Hoping to gain the analytical tools and experience to fight more effectively for justice, Christian began studying law at the University of Buenos Aires and working as a volunteer at the Citizen Power Foundation, a citizen organization dedicated to promoting responsible citizenship.

During his four years at the organization, which gives its volunteers and staff free reign to develop their own programs, Christian has focused on finding ways to control corruption by leveraging citizen participation. He has worked as Director of the organization's monthly civic journalism magazine, and is currently Director of the Corruption Control Program. In addition, through his work with Luis Moreno Ocampo, one of the founders of Citizen Power and the President of Transparency International for Latin America and the Caribbean, Christian serves as the Director of the Argentina Chapter of Transparency International, and the Coordinator for its Southern Cone office. His involvement with Transparency International, coupled with his extensive travels, has provided him with a global vision of corruption and, at the young age of 30, has allowed him to begin spreading his anti-corruption work far beyond the boundaries of his native Argentina.