

## Legislative Volunteering

Godoy Cruz

### CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC POLICYMAKING

## Summary

Legislative Volunteering is a meeting space designed to engage citizens in the participatory co-construction of legislative initiatives that help solve important public issues.

The programme involves a series of learning sessions that are mentored by lawmakers, akin to a style of specialised tutoring. Participants take centre stage in a social innovation process that consists of four stages: immersion in the context; definition of the issue; ideation; and prototyping and testing of the proposals made. This bottom-up co-creation process is actively fostered by the community itself and contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The initiative is based on the open government concept, appealing to the role that citizens play in the workings of the democratic system and calling for greater participation in public decision-making to lay down the

foundations of a democratic-participatory ecosystem. The educational aspect of the initiative lies in the sociocultural and constructivist theory of learning and the principles of popular education, which recaptures the community's knowledge and its context in order to generate situations of collective knowledge construction.

Its origin dates back to 2010 with an experience in the Argentine Senate and various experiences in provinces between 2012 and 2015. What's more, local experiences have been undergoing consolidation in various cities, including Godoy Cruz, since 2015.

Legislative Volunteering is the responsibility of the mayor's office of the town council, implemented by the Legislative Innovation Department in coordination with a community organisation (Foundation for Civic Development).

Since its launch, the programme has introduced a total of forty-three legislative projects prompted by citizens on issues such as the rights of people with disabilities, the fight against school violence, the creation of outreach initiatives, the recycling of unused tyres, the development of early stimulation programmes for young children, the fight against food waste, and the elimination of single-use plastics, among many others.

**City:** Godoy Cruz  
**Country:** Argentina  
**Inhabitants:** 204.138

**Topics:** Associationism and participation; Civics; Policy and administration

**Principles of the Charter of Educating Cities:** 1, 3, 5, 9, 10, 15, 17, 18.

## Context

Godoy Cruz is one of the six jurisdictions that make up the metropolitan area of the province of Mendoza (Argentina) and has a population of 204,138 inhabitants.

It is largely urban and characterised by densely populated settlements around the town centre, which are home to a wide range of administrative, retail, financial and industrial services, along with numerous green spaces (parks, squares, gardens and avenues).

The target population of Legislative Volunteering is anybody over the age of sixteen, whether or not they are a resident of Godoy Cruz. The call to take part in the programme is public, sent out by the mayor's office of the town council via local press and social media.



## Goals

- ▶ To encourage citizen engagement in the development and management of public policies.
- ▶ To optimise avenues of communication between citizens and government agents (executive and legislative) of the national, provincial and municipal government.
- ▶ To give citizens the power to use the information available in the open government concept.
- ▶ To provide tools to analyse, diagnose and design legislative projects in a participatory way.



# Methodology

Legislative Volunteering takes place over seven theoretical and practical face-to-face meetings, each lasting three hours, at the offices of the town council. The sessions are divided into four blocks:

**1. Immersion in the context.** Diagnostic stage that looks at all sectors of society and identifies key actors (resident associations, retailers, community organisations) that will provide different perspectives and criteria for prioritising social needs.

**2. Definition of the public issue.** This block sets out to explain what a public issue is, who it affects and how, by means of a reflective process aimed at providing a clear and consensual definition of the project to be developed. Participants also need to learn the mechanisms used by the public authorities, as well as their resources and restrictions. The mayor's office voluntarily makes a call for experts, social players and government agents to take part in all the stages of the volunteering programme.

Incidentally, the council receives no financial remuneration for any part of the initiative.

**3. Ideation.** This process involves brainstorming a whole host of ideas and thinking creatively about multiple alternatives for action. Efforts are made to bolster dialogue among the volunteers, who must reach an agreement for the best possible solution.

**4. Prototyping and testing.** The selected solution is constructed in terms of public policy and reflected in a statutory text. The lawmakers who took part in the process then draft the legislative texts produced jointly with the legislative volunteers.

When the legislative project has finished, it is made formal by the registry office of the town council. And once the file number has been allocated for its follow-up, the activities of the Legislative Volunteering programme come to an end. Afterwards, some volunteers might carry out promotional

activities in order to socialise the initiative and place it on the public and government agenda.

The designed project follows a standard administrative course, adopting parliamentary status and being sent to legislative committees for analysis. The volunteers may be formally invited to present the project at these committees, while technical opinions might be requested from the municipal departments involved in their future application. Finally, the approval of the initiative is put to a vote at an ordinary meeting of the council.

At the end of the programme, volunteers receive a certificate of participation at a public ceremony to present the final policies, attended by political chiefs, community leaders and the general public.



# ★ Evaluation

Since the start of the project back in 2015, public interest has increased from 175 people for the first edition to a total of 265 in 2019. Despite the huge interest, the required level of involvement (in terms of attendance and active engagement) reduces to 34 the average number of people who complete the programme and receive a certificate.

As for legislative output, 43 proposals were designed in the 2015-2019 period: 33 at a municipal level and 10 at a provincial level. Out of all the proposed legislative initiatives, 51.2% are still being analysed by councillors, while 37.2% have been approved and are currently in force. All of them are aligned with the lines of action of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Qualitatively, the project has raised awareness about issues and fostered links with very vulnerable sectors of the population, to which the local government had no access. An example of this is the local decree referring to the Animal Traction Vehicle Replacement Programme. Other important experiences include the development and approval of the Municipal Accessibility Plan (a tool to pinpoint physical barriers in the town and plan their progressive elimination), as well as regulations to reduce food waste and to foster recycling.

Another key aspect of the programme is how it has improved the town's transparency indexes, based on indicators related to accountability, institutional

communication, general information and citizen engagement. This has been mentioned in nationwide external audits and recognised by various key institutions (National University of Cuyo, the provincial legislative chamber and international Open Government forums).

One of the main difficulties encountered is the lack of knowledge among citizens about the functions of the different levels of government. To correct this, the programme focuses on developing intuitive and practical tools that enable understanding and foster citizen engagement and ownership.

# ➔ Future proposals

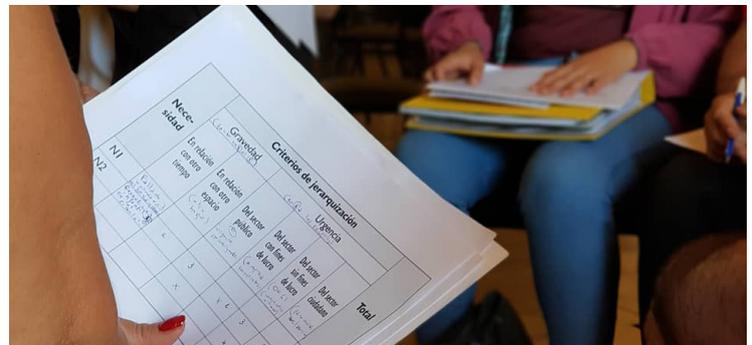
Looking ahead, a new strategy is being designed to broaden the scope of the project, either by expanding the professional team or by offering face-to-face and virtual activities.

## i Contact

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