

Application

Participant: Costa Rica Team

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS:

As you consider which initiative to put forward for the Open Government Awards, please consider the following questions:

(1) Does the initiative seek to improve a public policy or service?
 Yes No

(2) If yes, does the initiative seek to improve the ability of citizens to provide feedback and/or to make decisions in the design or implementation of a policy or service? For examples of initiatives, see: <http://www.opengovguide.com/topics/citizen-engagement>
 Yes No

If you have answered "Yes" to BOTH of these questions, please proceed with your application.

A. THE TEAM

The following information is required to capture a basic understanding of those responsible for your initiative and any partnerships that have helped you to meet your goals.

INITIATIVE NAME (required)

Provide the name of the initiative that your team is submitting for consideration by the judges of the 2014 Open Government Awards (under the inaugural theme, Citizen Engagement). If the initiative is operating under one or more alternate name(s), provide the name that is most commonly recognized.

Transparency and participation through Open Contracting in Costa Rica

THE NOMINATION (required)

Begin by describing how this initiative was selected. For example, mention any nomination or consultation process held with civil society partners or others when selecting the initiative. Please offer your explanation of this process in 200 words or less.

Costa Rica included in its first Action Plan of Open Government the commitment to "Implementation of a single procurement system in the State".

The past year the Finance Ministry and the President of Costa Rica have declared that Mer-link will be the exclusive electronic procurement system for all public agencies.

Mer-Link is the technological platform for government procurement that allows state agencies purchasing and selling products and services electronically. It works as an e-commerce portal operating with a one-stop access available at www.mer-link.co.cr or www.mer-link.co.cr. Mer-link is well-known due to the transparency it offers. Citizens can find complete and updated information on the procurement processes started at the platform, statistical data, and dossiers of government procurements carried out through the platform.

Transparency and participation through Open Contracting are possible thanks to Mer-link's functionalities, but also because the demands of citizens to participate at all stages of the contracting cycle.

Open Contracting in Costa Rica is a great example of how governments can use technology to promote and enhancing civil society participation, that's why this initiative was selected to be nominated to the Open Government Awards.

GOVERNMENT POINT OF CONTACT (required)

Provide the name and title of a single point of contact for the purposes of communicating with your team. The person should be the most senior individual responsible for overseeing the application submission. Provide the phone number(s), email address(es), and physical address of your designated point of contact. You may provide alternate contact information, if it is a direct means for reaching the designated point of contact.

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CIVIL SOCIETY POINT OF CONTACT (strongly recommended)

We strongly encourage applicants to submit a joint application from a government agency and a civil society partner. If submitting a joint application, please provide the name and title of a single point of contact at the partner organization. If not, please be sure to focus on the "validation of claims" in Section B (see pg. A-3).

OTHER PARTNERSHIPS (optional)

If you are partnering with one or more other government agencies, private sector entities, media, or other organizations, please list each partner. In 250 words or less, provide a brief narrative of the partnership, including the roles that each partner assumes in the initiative.

B. THE INITIATIVE

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is prepared to celebrate a range of successful applicants to the Open Government Awards. This year's theme is "citizen engagement." To qualify for recognition, we need to understand the various elements of success for your initiative and its sustainability over time.

PROBLEM DEFINITION (required)

In 200 words or less, please identify the specific problem your initiative intended to solve. Why was this problem important to solve at a particular time and for the particular context in which you are working?

Accounting for roughly 20% of the Costa Rican national GDP, government procurement plays a very important role in ensuring effective and transparent management of public resources. According to a poll held by the University of Costa Rica (UCR), public contracting has been identified as one of the government's activity with the highest perception of bribery risk. In a recent Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability Program Assessment on Costa Rica's transparency in procurement ranked as low as D+.

The transparency in government procurement, together with citizen's positive perception and participation, constitute a critical needs in Costa Rica.

In this context, the transparency and participation through Open Contracting in Costa Rica, based in the use of Mer-link as the the National IT platform for e-Procurement, helps to enhance and accomplish this challenge.

TARGET POPULATION (required)

In 100 words or less, please identify the target population who may benefit from this initiative. Highlight your understanding of the needs or demands of the target population that were addressed by your initiative.

The target population of the initiative are:
 1) Public sector agencies
 2) Private sector companies and small and medium enterprises (SMEs).
 3) Civil society and citizens.
 4) Media.

INITIATIVE DESIGN (required)

In 350 words or less, describe your initiative's goals and objectives. Focus specifically on how the initiative was designed to meet those objectives. For example, identify stage(s) of the policy/service design or implementation when you solicited citizen participation. What kind of participation did you seek from citizens (e.g., feedback, consultation, joint decision-making, monitoring of activities, etc.)? Explain why this particular approach was best suited to achieve the initiative's goals. How did you encourage citizens to participate? Describe any innovations in the design of the initiative.

Mer-link is the Costa Rican National IT platform used and designed for public e-procurement. Developed since 2009, Mer-link system was launched in 2010 connecting citizens, businesses and government; transformed paper and red-tape-based public services to online, multi channel and one-stop transparency-based services.

Mer-link's model was selected as a result of a benchmark analysis executed in cooperation with INCAE Business School, which included best practices such as Chile (Chile Compra), Panama (Panama Compra), Republic of Korea (KONEPS), Mexico (Compra Net). This study culminated in the adoption of the public procurement model in South Korea. Being the world leader in electronic procurement, through its management system called KONEPS (Korea On Line e-Procurement System).

Once the Korean model was approved, both Costa Rican and Korean governments proceeded to sign a cooperation agreement. Through this agreement the Republic of Korea donated the source code of their public procurement system to the Costa Rican government. The adaptation of the business process reengineering) was done through a task force team that included representatives from various public sectors (municipalities, banks, universities, health, insurance, and telecom) and also civil society and private sector representatives.

For example, thanks to the recommendations of both civil society and private sector representatives, Mer-link offers the facility that any citizen, without requiring prior log-in, can search basic and advanced data and seek approximately 15 combined reports, such as: e-Contracts (all data and details on every contract issued between the government and any private supplier), Contracted Amounts, Percentage of Awarded Contracts/Amounts per Institution, Types of Contracting Processes Awarded to which suppliers, Types of Suppliers, Awarded Supplier History (per contracting modality, amounts or institutions), Types of Procurement Processes used by institution, Contest Invitation History, Sanctioned Participation History, Claim History, Sanctioned Supplier Report and Electronic Contest Report.

INITIATIVE OUTCOMES (required)

In 250 words or less, describe the intended outcomes and the actual outcomes that the initiative achieved. Who were the ultimate beneficiaries, and what benefits did they experience? For example, list any concrete improvements in policy, services, behaviors, or power relations between the government and citizens. Try to present your case from the perspective of the various stakeholders involved (e.g., your agency, citizens, Civil Society Organizations, media, et al.). If there are any baseline indicators or standards to measure the outcomes of the initiative, such as the breadth or depth of engagement, please describe them in detail.

The benefits obtained from the National e-Procurement System can be summarized as follows:
 • The upgrade of the Costa Rican public procurement model through an intensive use of technology and adoption of international best practices.
 • Greater transparency in procurement processes
 • Obtaining lower prices of products by encouraging the participation of more suppliers. Taking advantage of economies of scale and procurement consolidation, savings are estimated between 13% and 18%.
 • The implementation of a paperless model and virtualization of Supply Chain Management in public sector.
 • Enhancing competitiveness of national private sector and government services.
 • Encouragement of a shift of paradigm, enabling citizens to audit and monitor the public contracting.

Also, by keeping the track of all stages of the procurement cycle 100% online, allowing ubiquitous access and 24 hours/day availability, the platform has made that the civil society, the National General Comptroller Office, legal departments, audits and the Judiciary Branch becomes frequent users of these electronic files.

INITIATIVE SUSTAINABILITY (required)

In 200 words or less, please describe any plans for scaling up and/or sustaining the initiative in the future. Base your description of the strategy on information provided in the previous sections, such as how you intend to leverage your current success and increase your reach or capacity. Address any threats or operational challenges to your initiative and describe how you intend to manage those risks on a regular basis.

In order to sustaining the initiative of the "Transparency and participation through Open Contracting in Costa Rica" the following actions will be done:

- 1) Develop and promote an Open Public Procurement Observatory as a permanent publicly available channel to promote the audit and monitor the government procurement by the citizens and the public servants.
- 2) Establish a team that constitutes the core of the Open Public Procurement Observatory within the Mer-link organization structure.
- 3) Develop a Capacity Building Project in order to: guide the team designated to operate and maintain the Open Public e-Procurement Observatory on the startup process; and train the team designated to operate and maintain the Open Public e-Procurement Observatory by building enough capacity among the selected staff to become specialized trainees and trainers in Procurement processes, auditing, monitoring, reporting, and identification of corrupt practices, data mining and statistical analysis.
- 4) Develop a Change Management and Communication Program to disclose the existence, results and impact achieved with the development and implementation of the Open Public e-Procurement Observatory and promote and encourage citizen interaction with procurement statistics.
- 5) Ensure that the Observatory becomes a permanent part of Mer-link's Operating Budget.

VALIDATION OF CLAIMS (required)

While it is strongly encouraged that each initiative includes partners, such as Civil Society Organizations, private sector agencies, media entities, etc., it is not a requirement. However, you are required to secure and upload documents from one or more credible nongovernmental actors who can attest to the veracity of any claims made in your application.

You are only allowed to upload one file. If you have multiple documents, please zip them into a single file first. The file types that are allowed to be uploaded have an extension of .ZIP, .PDF, .DOC, .DOCX, .XLS or .XLSX.

CRECEX_Support Letter.pdf

C. THE PITCH

The following information allows each applicant to make their strongest (and final) case for consideration.

BEST CASE (required)

In 250 words or less, please present the most compelling facts for why your initiative should be recognized. This is an opportunity to distinguish your initiative, based on any factors that you have not had the opportunity to describe in the previous sections. What is your best argument for why your initiative has achieved a meaningful outcome? What elements of the initiative make it different and better than others, that have been tried and tested? Be creative and concise.

Mer-link, the National IT platform for e-Procurement, and the Open Contracting initiative in Costa Rica, are strategic instruments to pursue government objectives, such as strengthening citizen and civil society accountability, G2C and G2B relations, innovation on public services, and development of advanced public policies that may impact our job creation capacity, environmental protection, and the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Citizens can find complete and updated information on the procurement processes started at the platform, statistical data, and dossiers of government procurements carried out through the platform, with all those information and data any citizen can participate in the process of audit and monitor the performance of public institutions.

Empowering citizens through a real accountability on how their taxes are being spent and facilitating management process to key players, such as: General Comptroller's Office, Legal departments, Internal Auditors and the Judiciary Branch. Those facts are some reasons for why our initiative should be recognized.

VIDEO SUBMISSION (recommended)

OGP does not offer a venue for applicants to meet our judges during the application process. In order to provide the opportunity for making a personal connection, you are encouraged to upload a short video to complement your application. You may also depict an individual participant in your initiative and describe his or her experience. We do not need to know actual names or personal details. Take this opportunity to tell a story, to connect with our panel of experts, so that they might better understand your attention to specific needs.

Video submissions should follow these guidelines:

- Maximum length of 3-4 minutes.
- Please focus on personal presentations; it's not necessary to develop a sophisticated or polished video.

Here are some logistical and technical suggestions:

- Video cameras, digital cameras, and phones are easy ways to record a video.
- Laptop and desktop computers can typically record video through Skype or other software.
- If possible, set to a low resolution to reduce file size. This will enable an easier video uploading process.
- If you are having difficulty uploading the video file, try logging out of the application and logging back in using another Internet browser.

Here are general suggestions for delivering a high-quality video pitch:

- Include the following:
 - Introduce yourself and your initiative.
 - Focus on describing your intended benefits and/or services and how they have been effective.
 - What is unique about your initiative, partners, or technical approach?
- Have your content:
 - Keep your description and language simple.
 - Demonstrate passion through your words and enthusiasm.

*If the burden of developing a video presentation is either prohibitive or might not reflect the best characterization of your initiative, then you are **not required** to submit one, and the judges are instructed not to discount your application because it may not include a video. We hope that this option offers a new and inventive way in which you can best express the results of your work.