Utilizing disparate partners and embracing a grassroots and social media groundswell to fight corruption in Mexico
OVERVIEW

Mexico, which ranks 95 out of 168 countries on Transparency International’s corruption perceptions index, loses billions of dollars due to politicians using their position for personal gain. The country’s anti-corruption laws are simply not effective—starting with their failure to define what constitutes corruption.

In order to tackle this crisis head on, Instituto Mexicano para la Competitividad (IMCO), through its “3de3” (translated 3of3 or 3for3) initiative, implemented the following steps to improve government transparency and reform corruption laws in Mexico:

1. Pick an issue that crosses all political ideologies and is popular enough to receive media attention. Engage nontraditional allies that will support your issue.

2. Turn your grassroots agenda into campaign issues by encouraging voters to praise candidates who support your proposals and criticize those who do not.

3. Draft legislation for your issue and use the groundswell of support created from previous campaigns to garner national media attention.

4. Focus on one aspect of your legislation that is popular and easily understood to get buy in from voters and the media.

Because of the team’s tireless work and the success of this initiative, IMCO was the winner of the 2017 Templeton Freedom Award.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTO MEXICANO PARA LA COMPETITIVIDAD (IMCO)

IMCO is a non-profit, non-partisan, evidence-based think tank and advocacy organization located in Mexico City.

The organization studies economic and social issues affecting Mexico’s competitiveness within the global economy. IMCO advocates for a transparent and accountable government; an objective and reliable legal system; sustainable use of the environment; an inclusive, well-educated and healthy society; a stable and functional political system; efficient markets of production and consumption; along with innovative and vigorous competition within industries.

The group leverages technology to expand access to information and civic engagement on issues central to its mission, specifically increasing competitiveness across different sectors.

1 IMCO defines competitiveness as the capacity of a country, state, or city to attract and retain talent and investment.
Stories of corruption have dominated Mexico’s headlines for decades: helicopter rides for officials’ family members, housing deals from favored government contractors, the unexplained disappearance and assumed murder of 43 students, and a drug lord’s escape from a maximum-security prison—twice.

So it’s not hard to understand why Mexicans recently listed corruption as the country’s top problem, ahead of security and the economy.

The scale of corruption in Mexico is staggering. According to the World Bank, 9 percent of the nation’s GDP is linked to corruption. Transparencia Mexicana, the Mexican chapter of Transparency International, determined an average household in Mexico spent 14 percent of its income on bribes and other forms of corruption just to receive basic services. Ghost schools in Mexico—public schools that don’t exist but that are registered and receive public funding—cost citizens about USD $230 million a year.

Pervasive corruption slows down economic development by stifling entrepreneurship and innovation, inhibiting investment, exasperating class inequalities, and limiting mobility. It’s estimated that Mexican business owners spend between 25 to 67 percent of their revenues on corruption-related costs annually.

Perhaps worst of all, this level of rampant corruption contributes to a sense of disenchantment with democracy and threatens democratic gains. When citizens know about corruption and nothing is done—as is the case often in Mexico—voter turnout falls and the informal, black market expands. This limits the collection of revenue necessary to provide basic public services such as education, healthcare, and safety.

Incited by two events that occurred in 2014, Mexican citizens became eager for an end to the corruption that plagued the nation.

In September of that year, 43 students were kidnapped in the state of Guerrero. Details of what happened during and after the assault remain unclear, but the official investigation concluded that once the students were forcibly taken into custody, they were handed over to the local Guerreros Unidos (“United Warriors”) crime syndicate and killed.

Two months later, photos were published of the First Lady of Mexico’s USD $7 million dollar mansion owned by contractor Grupo Higa. Days before the news reports surfaced, the government suspiciously canceled a contract for a
project where the sole bidder was a consortium including Constructora Teya, a Grupo Higa company.

Stories of the First Lady’s spending habits, including lavish trips to Beverly Hills and Europe, and her purchase of a luxury condo in Miami, are not new for the people of Mexico. However, this information came out amid reports indicating that 2 million more Mexicans had fallen into poverty since the president took office. This proved to the country that corruption had truly reached the highest levels of government.

GETTING TO ACTION

IMCO took up the cause of anticorruption reform after research proved how harmful it is to a country’s competitiveness. In addition, because of 2014’s events, Mexican citizens were more engaged than ever on the issue; they refused to wait any longer for their politicians to tackle the country’s rampant corruption issues.

In 2015, IMCO joined Transparencia Mexicana to launch Transparent Legislator, an online platform that allowed citizens to take action against corruption. The initiative, which aims to encourage transparency and reduce corruption, is known as the three-of-three (3de3) because it requires officials to submit three documents on their platform:

- First, IMCO asked legislators to provide a declaration of income and properties before and during their public appointment. With this information, citizens could then verify that civil servants were not obtaining personal gains from the power entrusted to them.
- Second, they were asked to declare any potential conflicts of interest.
- Third, legislators were asked to submit their tax returns for the last three years.

Armed with the information included in these declarations, citizens would have the information needed to hold their representatives accountable.

This initiative mobilized Mexico’s voters and was the starting point for IMCO to promote legislative changes that
built the foundation of a new political era in Mexico.

Unfortunately, instead of seeing 3de3 as a way to showcase their accountability and transparency, legislators put up a strong resistance to the initiative. In the first month, only two Senators and four members of Congress—out of 628—participated. Given the disappointing and limited impact, IMCO turned its focus on the June 2015 midterm elections.

In April 2015, the organization launched the parallel campaign, Transparent Candidate. Through this platform, citizens were able to identify their candidates, verify whether they had presented their 3de3 declarations and, if not, use the platform to generate pressure through social media. The online platform provided an auto-generated tweet: “[Candidate], if you want my vote I want your #3de3.”

Mexican voters latched on to this social media campaign during election season. Social media analytics show that from April 14 – June 17, 2015 the hashtag “3de3” garnered more than 486 million impressions (the number of people who potentially saw posts about the campaign) on Twitter and 331,367 impressions on Facebook. In addition, the webpages for Transparent Legislator, Transparent Candidate and www.3de3.mx (which were all merged) received 1.8 million visits.

In the following two years nearly 3,000 candidates for public office and civil servants registered their 3de3 declarations. It became such an effective public accountability tool that the National Electoral Institute promoted the 3de3 initiative as a means to provide informed voting in 2015 and 2016.

The 3de3 initiative ultimately expanded its mission to include legislation that would make the disclosures mandatory. This occurred, in part, because of the failure of the Mexican legislature to enact supporting laws for the National Anticorruption System that was created in May 2015.

Because of a civil participation law passed in 2014, Mexican citizens had the ability to propose legislative changes if they obtained the signatures of .13 percent of registered voters, or about 120,000 people. Unfortunately, while voting in elections is conducted digitally, petitions like this require the collection of physical signors.

Capitalizing on the citizen support and media coverage received during the 3de3 campaign, IMCO turned the 3de3 into a legislative proposal by fostering an unprecedented alliance between the public and academia to write, review, and promote a new General Law of Administration Responsibilities —or Ley 3de3 (Law 3of3) for short.

IMCO’s challenge was daunting. From the campaign’s start in February 2016, the goal was to submit the initiative before the end of the legislative period in April, giving the team only two months to amass the signatures necessary to move the proposal into the legislature.
Ley 3de3 proposed several policies to directly address the shortcomings in Mexico’s anticorruption policies by seeking to prevent, sanction, and correct cases of corruption. At that time, Mexico did not have laws that defined what corruption was or the penalties associated. Ley 3de3 identified and defined the 10 types of corruption that constitute serious administrative offenses and laid out penalties for these corrupt actions. It also provided guidelines for how to apply those sanctions in a particular case.

The legislation recognized the need to protect whistleblowers and also expanded those who could be held accountable for corruption to include transitioning political groups, individuals, and private companies. Finally, it proposed the mandatory filing of all 3de3 declarations.

“The 3for3 Law aimed to spark a two-fold change: improving the efficiency of the body of laws that fights corruption, and channeling citizens’ anger in a constructive way through the existing institutions,” said Juan Pardinas, general director of IMCO.

The team built a groundswell of support through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The hashtag #YaFirméLey3de3, which roughly translates to “I already signed the three-out-of-three law,” was employed to turn page views into signatures. The campaign asked supporters to download, sign, and deliver the official form required to get the proposal in front of Congress.

Through Google Maps, the online platform also provided directions to the 140 stations around Mexico and the United States where citizens could drop off their signed petitions.

With time running short and only 2,000 signatures gathered, IMCO pursued more partnerships—this time with David Noel Ramírez, then-head dean of Tecnológico de Monterrey, one of...
Mexico’s top universities. In a YouTube plea, Ramírez asked his students and the broader community to sign the petition. His plea gained traction as various groups flocked to join the campaign. Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana (COPARMEX), the largest national association of business owners with over 36,000 memberships throughout the country’s 32 states, also became an instrumental ally in promoting and gathering signatures.

Throughout the campaign IMCO was also heavily involved in providing Congressional testimony. Floor proceedings discussing the anticorruption initiative were conducted under “Open Parliament” which allowed citizens to hear about and defend the initiative. The momentum IMCO was able to build for the campaign created an urgency that dominated the legislative agenda. As a result of the public support for the campaign, the Mexican Senate passed IMCO’s proposals into law.
IMCO received great support for its intensive two-year campaign. When the organization, along with Transparencia Mexicana and COPARMEX, first delivered the law along with the signed petitions to the Senate on March 17, the campaign had over 300,000 signatures. Nineteen days later, they delivered 325,000 additional signatures. In total, 634,143 signatures in support of Ley 3de3 were delivered, five times the number of signatures required for the initiative to be discussed by Congress.

POLITICAL

As a result of IMCO’s project, corruption is, for the first time, categorized as a crime in Mexico. These changes signal a new culture of accountability for the country. Ley 3de3 became the first citizen initiative to make it through the Senate and within six months, Congress passed seven laws, drafted by IMCO, to create the National Anticorruption System.

Beginning in July 2017, every politician is required publish his or her 3de3 declarations. In the 2016 elections, 40 percent of candidates published their 3de3 declarations. Additionally, every single candidate elected as a state governor submitted a 3de3 document.

Mexico’s 32 states also began complying with the National Anticorruption System in 2017. IMCO also drafted a model state law to serve as a template and 13 states have adopted at least 70 percent of its suggestions.

Further, IMCO tracks the progress of the adoption of local legal frameworks and the degree of compliance with federal standards.

As Ley 3de3 has gained public support, governors and other elected figures have come out in favor of the legislation and much of the debate in the legislature currently centers on how the various parties’ proposals stack up to Ley 3de3.

Seven new laws, which created the legal framework for the new National Anticorruption System, were drafted by civil society and academics led by IMCO, and passed by Congress through unprecedented collaboration. In addition, new criminal, administrative, and audit boards have been created in order to fight corruption within all branches of government.

Now backed by law, the 10 types of corruption are defined along with their accompanying punishments. The Ley 3de3 framework also established a collaborative group of government agencies with full investigative power to fight and prevent instances of corruption.

Importantly, the group created to monitor the implementation of the new anticorruption system – the Citizen
Participation Council (CPC) – is composed of citizens not bureaucrats. Pursuant to the laws passed by Congress, notable academics and public leaders were nominated to participate in a selection process that was open for public application. This Selection Committee then appointed all members of the CPC.

In another unprecedented departure from politics as usual, the selection process of the CPC was so transparent that candidate interviews were live streamed, and the swearing-in ceremony of the CPC was held at IMCO’s office.

SOCIAl

Ley 3de3 is an extraordinary example of civic engagement. This project joined academics, business people, citizen action groups, and the media to demand government accountability in Mexico and in other parts of Latin America.

For too long, Mexico has been linked to corruption. However, IMCO’s successful 3de3 campaign has given the people hope that Mexico will become known as a beacon for transparency and accountability.

ORGANIZATIONAL

IMCO coined “3de3” which became common language in Mexico and is now prevalent in public debates about anticorruption, integrity, and economic prosperity in the country.

Through dogged determination IMCO strengthened the rule of law in Mexico by building anticorruption institutions, opening up a new chapter in the country’s development and economic competitiveness by completely changing the rules of the game and realigning incentives.

“Ending corruption and fostering respect for the rule of law where it does not exist is exceedingly difficult – and extremely important,” said Atlas Network CEO Brad Lips. “Congratulations to IMCO for creating popular demand for this change and seeing it through.”

From left to right: Instituto Mexicano para la Competitividad’s Regina Portilla, Juan E. Pardinas, and Guadalupe Mendoza accept the 2017 Templeton Freedom Award for the organization’s Anticorruption Reform Initiative for Mexico, “3de3.”
OBSTACLES & FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Factor for Success: BUILDING A NETWORK WITH UNLIKELY ALLIES

Many NGOs banded together on the issue of corruption and transparency. Mexico’s chambers of commerce, the main public employees union, and a popular chain of pharmacies helped collect signatures in support of the legislation at their offices. Even Mexican Internet stars and radio hosts got involved.

“Corruption is a non-ideological issue,” said Pardinas. “Everyone is against it, so it’s easy to find that you’re on the same side with people you might not have anything else in common with. You have to decide if you want ideological purity or if you really want to have an impact.”

Take Away

- It’s important to develop your organization’s network if you want to have impact and influence.

Factor for Success: ENGAGING SUPPORTERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

IMCO is strategic in using both traditional and social media to reach out to public opinion leaders, policy makers and citizens to take action for change. The organization’s massive success was achieved in large part due to its savvy use of communications.

The hashtag #3de3 made the campaign a household name, and IMCO garnered more than 5,420 mentions in mainstream Mexican media outlets throughout the duration of the campaign. This strategy continued throughout the campaign; when Ley 3de3 and the signatures were delivered to the Mexican Senate it was broadcast on Periscope.

Take Away

- The campaign focused its social media on the catchiest and most accessible aspect of the legislation. The catchy 3de3 disclosure requirement gained traction easier than some of the law's other more complicated (but arguably more effective) reforms.
Obstacle: Creating a Grassroots Movement with Low Internet Participation

In countries like Mexico where Internet connectivity is still low (49 percent Internet penetration), it was essential for the campaign to find supporters who could reach out to Mexicans all over the country.

Take Away

- While much of the campaign’s success can be attributed to social media efforts, traditional media and advertising—along with a cadre of vocal supporters—cannot be ignored.

Obstacle: Confronting Countrywide Pessimism

Juan Pardinas, general director of IMCO, talked about battling the systemic pessimism that stemmed from decades of government corruption during Atlas Network’s 2017 Liberty Forum:

“We found out that pessimism was our biggest adversary. When people feel that things won’t change, they won’t change. When people have the expectation that they could be agents of change, well, that’s when things started to move [for our campaign]. We were able to convince people that, even though we were a small network of organizations, we could manage to get the 120,000 signatures—and we wound up getting five times that. We believed we were able to do it and convinced others we could as well.”

Take Away

- Knowledge that your organization’s battle may be more than just a legislative issue is important before you start your campaign. Investing in market research and simply listening to your audience will help your campaign succeed. Optimism and belief in the project’s vision is contagious!
**Obstacle: OBTAINING PHYSICAL SIGNATURES**

By gathering 120,000 signatures, Mexican citizens could propose laws to Congress—and help to set legislative agendas. Unfortunately, unlike with the electronic voting that exists in the country, these signatures had to be physical.

IMCO and its partners used social media and websites to publish the required forms and provide directions to 140 drop off locations throughout Mexico and the United States.

**Take Away**

- The campaign’s grassroots network, media coverage, and penetration on social media helped to get the message out to potential signers. Providing an easy way for people to find out more information, print forms, and get directions to drop off locations was key to the campaign’s success.
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