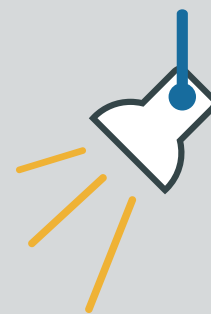


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Accountability Note



## The Women of Caltongo Who Opened the Government's Doors: Social Accountability at the Edge of Mexico City

Daniela Rea

Photos by Mónica González



PIE DE PÁGINA

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A logo for the Accountability Research Center featuring a stylized rainbow arch.  
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Cover Photo: Caltongo Organized members share the results of their community mapping, carried out with @espaciosentregua.

Credit: Jonathan Fox

# Contents

About the Author and Photographer .....	4
Acknowledgements .....	4
Summary .....	5
I. Introduction.....	6
II. The Main Avenue of Caltongo .....	7
III. The Xochimilco District of Mexico City .....	9
IV. Mobilizing for Monitoring.....	11
V. Caltongo Organized: Creativity and Strategy .....	15
VI. Costs of Activism .....	18
VII. The Struggle that Continues .....	21
Endnotes .....	24



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# Summary

## The Women of Caltongo Who Opened the Government's Doors: Social Accountability at the Edge of Mexico City

The government's plans to repair a central avenue in the Mexico City neighborhood of Caltongo brought together a group of women of diverse ages and backgrounds who were concerned about the government's corruption and its lack of public consultation and transparency. They began to organize themselves, forming the group Caltongo Organized, and with the help of the civil society organization ControlaTuGobierno, they accessed government budget and contract information and learned about laws and regulations. They educated their fellow community members, advocated for the community's concerns to be taken into account, and monitored the execution of the road project, which allowed them to successfully engage with government authorities to carry out its responsibilities. In this struggle, they learned that the authorities exist to serve the community; they also learned that information is power. With their struggle, the women of Caltongo sowed the seed of a community organization that seeks to make decisions about their territory and their own lives.

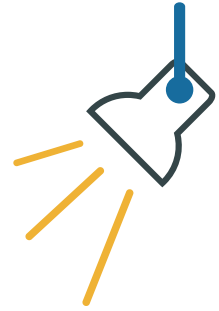


Women of Caltongo Organized at the Plaza de San Francisco Caltongo. Credit: Citlali Hernández Jiménez.



Caltongo Organized logo designed by one of the members.

# I. Introduction



In April 2017 the residents of the neighborhood of Caltongo in Xochimilco district, Mexico City, learned that the government was going to repave one of their main avenues without consulting the community. A group of women organized and mobilized their neighbors to oversee the road project. If the government was there to serve the citizens, the women thought, the government had to listen to citizens' opinions and report each decision it made, and the local population had to oversee these decisions to prevent corruption or the political misuse of resources.

The residents agreed to meet every Thursday at five o'clock in the afternoon in the plaza of Caltongo. When the struggle began, as many as one hundred people would attend, interested in listening and speaking about something that was having an impact on the entire community. But over time the plaza gradually emptied out.

Martha Patricia Gómez, 56 years old, one of the residents who organized the assemblies, recalls the experience:

"At first there was a lot of interest on the part of fellow residents, but as the project continued to progress, some

people no longer came to the assemblies. The truth can be discouraging—something we all need to pay attention to—and at the end of the road people become indifferent."

No longer were 100 turning out, but 50, and then only 10. And eventually one day only four women were left.

For 11 months the "grandmothers" (*abuelitas*) of the community came to the assembly at the Caltongo neighborhood plaza, never missing a single meeting. With their presence, they represented the community's commitment to oversee the government.

"What is surprising is that a group of senior women continued attending the assemblies every Thursday, without fail, they were there," Martha recalls.

"This has been a struggle on two fronts, one with the government, to get it to pay attention to what we have to say, and do what the people decide, and another with the members of the community, to get them to take an interest in the community's problems," she adds.



Neighbors meeting at the plaza of Caltongo. Credit: Citlali Hernández Jiménez.

## II. The Main Avenue of Caltongo



One April morning in 2017, as people were leaving Sunday Mass, city workers from the Xochimilco district government distributed flyers to report that Avenida Nuevo León was going to be repaved. The avenue is one of the two principal access roads in Xochimilco, connecting the local neighborhoods, including Caltongo with the rest of Mexico City. It is also the access point for boat landings and for those who sell plants, which are two of the main economic activities in the area. Microbuses pass through the area, bringing children to school and back home, and taking families to market, health centers, and shops. The government's proposed construction project would severely disrupt this key artery which links Caltongo to the rest of the city, so the project's duration and effectiveness would be crucial to the community's wellbeing. If the road project was ineffectively managed or plagued by corruption, the project would cut off the neighborhoods for an extended period. This is why the project was seen as a threat, and why community activists saw this as an accountability issue and took on the task of conducting oversight.

The flyers distributed also announced that the project would begin the next day.

The concept of citizen participation is complex—certainly it cannot be expected to be homogeneous. Some residents in Xochimilco understand the government as a higher power that cannot be questioned. Others expect the government to provide information and explain its decisions—and if the government fails to listen and serve the community, then they struggle to get it to do so. A group of women (and some men) who held this latter view of the government's responsibilities, were unhappy that the authorities were simply informing them that roadwork would begin, with no consultation. They demanded that the authorities come back the next day with information: How much money was to be spent on the project? And what did the project entail?

The residents began to meet to think about what to do.

Martha Patricia Gómez is the daughter of *chinamperos*, or family farmers who grow vegetables and flowers using an ancient practice cultivation on *chinampas*, which are raised beds built on lakes or canals with stones, reeds, and soil, allowing for year-round food production. Her father did not want her to be a farmer, and he sent her to school. Martha had a technical career, working for 14 years with two companies that manufactured and sold cosmetics and kitchen supplies. When she was laid off in the 2009 global economic crisis she went back to the family trade: growing and selling plants. She was forced to return to her origins, but as she would later discover, it was also the beginning of a new way of understanding herself as a person who is part of a community. This was her situation when it was announced that the avenue would be rebuilt.

At the meetings, Martha met Citlali Hernández Jiménez and Amalia Salas Casales. *Abuelita* Amalia, a Náhuatl indigenous woman, was already recognized in her community for her participation in social struggles. She recalls in particular the struggle in the late 1980s when the Xochimilco campesinos' lands, which had been stolen once before and been recovered during the Zapatista movement, were expropriated by the administration of president Carlos Salinas.<sup>1</sup> The Salinas administration used the pretext of the Plan for the Ecological Reclamation of Xochimilco to appropriate the lands that were part of the community-based *ejido* land tenure system.<sup>2</sup> The administration wanted to transfer the lands to direct government control and then divide them up to sell them to private buyers.

"That's where my struggle for the land began, it was a very great struggle. For me, well imagine that they cut off my hands, because I could no longer plant in the *ejido*. I would go there for corn, to feed my 10 children. For it was as if they had cut off my hands, I no longer had anywhere to plant," recalls Amalia.

Amalia, Citlali, and Martha recognized one another at the first community meetings about Avenida Nuevo León because they were ones who raised their hands most often, engaged in discussion, and asked questions. Amalia instilled the other women with the sense of belonging to a Náhuatl place and culture, a force that they would need to draw on to assume the responsibility that lay ahead.

“A group of us stayed who were thinking about coming up with a strategy to prevent the project from starting the way the local government said it would,” notes Citlali. The government wanted to begin the project in

the San Gregorio neighborhood, a zone inhabited by relative newcomers. These residents lived in irregular settlements and had become clients of the local political machines, often joining political gangs to do the machines’ dirty work against longtime residents. The longtime residents of Caltongo feared that if that area were prioritized for the improved road, it would grow even more, thus increasing the threat to the *chinampas*.

### Profile 1. Martha Gómez Trejo

Imagine I’m going to tell you a story. I was born to peasant farmer parents and grandparents. My grandmother would tell me that back in her day, their vegetables, small reed baskets known as *chiquihuites*, purslane, and *chayotes* would be transported in the canals of Mexico City. My father, in addition to being a *campesino*, was a streetcar driver. He would get off work at 3 or 4 in the afternoon and spend the rest of the day in the *chinampas*. “I don’t want you to have the same lives we’ve had,” my father would say. “Working the land is very tough and you have to do better than we did.”

My mother never completed primary school; they sent us to school, made sure we got an education. I studied to be a programming technician; when I completed my studies, without any guidance, I went out to look for work. I was a bit of a liar because my objective was to find work. I would tell the guards, “I’m a student, I want to speak with the head of systems for a homework assignment,” and in this way I was able to introduce myself to the directors and tell them, “I want to work.” They hired me at Fuller Cosmetics, and after one year I became Chief of Control.

I worked there for 14 years and they gave me the reward as Best Employee, based on serving and helping. I believe that it is best to ask for help, and one must learn to offer help instead of scolding people, and that way you get more done than if you just want to impose yourself. I lost my job with the 1994 and 2009 financial crises, they fired me. I remember that I was cutting my veins.

So I went back to my origins, to the countryside. I went back to my parents and grandparents, to the work in my greenhouses, and it began to go well. Until the whole issue with the street happened. They wanted to impose a project on us, in their way. I was indignant, upset about the way they were treating us.

Something that I learned from my fellow women of Caltongo is that I have dignity. From *abuelita* Amalia, I learned to appreciate my roots, to feel my identity, that I belong to my community, my values, what my grandparents and parents have inculcated in me about caring for the environment in which we live. With my colleagues from *ControlaTuGobierno* I learned that I have rights, concepts such as social peace, transparency, I’ve learned about information, how to relate to the government, to make demands of it.

All this gave me the strength and valor to be able to take on a responsibility that in my whole life I had never imagined could be of such proportions.



Credit: Mónica González.



### III. The Xochimilco District of Mexico City



**X**ochimilco is one the 16 districts that make up Mexico City. It is situated in the south of the city, covers 122 square kilometers and has a population of 500,000. In all, 4.7 percent of the population of Mexico City lives in Xochimilco.

Xochimilco was a rural community since the pre-Hispanic era, but in recent decades it has undergone a fusion with the expanding urban zone of Mexico City, thus it is considered a rural-urban space. Its population includes indigenous people (mostly Náhuatl, who live in 14 *pueblos* (communities) or *barrios originarios* (indigenous neighborhoods), as well as migrants from different Mexican states who came to find work in recent years, due to state abandonment of rural areas and urban growth. Some of the inhabitants identify as indigenous, and express their culture through traditions such as working in the *chinampa* and joining assemblies

for community decisions, festivals or parties. Others do not recognize or connect with this indigenous history or culture.

One-third of the population of Xochimilco lives in poverty (National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy) and the district has one of the worst levels of overall well-being (Social Welfare Index of Mexico City).<sup>3</sup>

For the last 30 years Xochimilco has been a United Nations World Heritage Site. The title has not prevented the deterioration of its canals and *chinampa* areas. That decree protected 2,200 hectares, which have been reduced to just over 1,800. The UNESCO-Xochimilco Project (PUX), in Mexico City, notes that the deterioration is due to several factors: population growth in the area (from 1960 to 1990 it was 5 percent annually, double the rate in rest of the city); the demand for water



Today, the canals continue to be used to transport diverse products by canoe. Credit: Mónica González.



The Xochimilco canals are also a tourist attraction; the *trajineras* are the boats that take tourists around the canals. Credit: Mónica González.

in the southern part of the city, which was satisfied using water from the canals and springs of Xochimilco; the growth of irregular housing, which in addition to occupying environmentally protected lands has led garbage and sewage waters to be discharged into the canals; and the abandonment of traditional activities such as crop-farming to give way to services and tourism.<sup>4</sup> These lands are also used for dumping debris from the earthquakes and old infrastructure works from around the city, and to conduct illegal activities such as operating bars and selling drugs.

In 2017 Wendy González Urrutia, an assembly member from the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) political party, declared that there were more than 309 irregular settlements in the conservation zone that pressure the area of the *chinampas*.<sup>5</sup> “The population is originally of peasant farmer background, but they tell their children ‘study so you won’t be a *chinampero*,’ because life

in the *chinampa* in a context of greenhouses [which are increasingly used for horticulture, thus replacing the *chinampa* tradition] and invasion [by new settlements] is complicated,” according to Guadalupe Figueroa, a resident of the zone, a member of the organization Grupo Atzin (Action for the Sustainability of the Territory), and an academic from the Xochimilco campus of the Metropolitan Autonomous University (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, or UAM). “The people have had to come together to engage in social struggles associated with the problem of water, earthquakes, and structures,” she said. In addition to conducting studies on the region, Guadalupe has an educational forum open to the public on the importance of recovering traditional planting in the zone. In this context, fighting to recover the water and the territory a heroic act in Xochimilco. And the women took up the fight.



## IV. Mobilizing for Monitoring



In May 2017, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human right to drinking water and sanitation Léo Heller visited the neighborhood in Xochimilco named Cerro de las Mulitas—which is named for the fact that carrying water using small mules is the only way residents can get it. During that visit, the women of Caltongo met members of the civil society organization ControlaTuGobierno (CTG). Citlali and Amalia told CTG members Maylí Sepúlveda and Elvia Arzate about the problems they had with the local government authorities regarding the road.<sup>6</sup>

ControlaTuGobierno had been accompanying the struggle for water in Xochimilco for years. At first, according to Maylí, the people thought it was strange that her organization would come to offer help without charging any fee and without asking for any votes. Over time CTG familiarized community members with the concept of the public sphere, the rights they have as community residents, and the government's obligations of them.

The conversation that started in Cerro de las Mulitas continued days later at CTG's office, where the women

and CTG staff members reviewed the official project planning documents. "This was an opportunity to strengthen a project that was the community's project. After so many years of an asymmetrical political culture, where people are accustomed to expressing thanks for favors and the authorities are accustomed to controlling everything, what we wanted them to see is that they are not favors, but rather the government's duty and the citizen's right. The authorities are not beyond reach and cannot be exempted from being questioned or challenged. We explained the legal framework to them, and citizens' rights. That is what we did for them," recalls Maylí Sepúlveda, CTG director.

In other words, the residents were accustomed to taking the decisions made by the government without questioning them; yet by working hand-in-hand with CTG they learned that the authority exists to serve the community, that it is the community's right to be heard and taken into account, and that the government has the obligation to provide public information, to be accountable for its decisions, and to be subject to scrutiny and evaluation by the citizens.



From left to right: Guadalupe Figueroa, a researcher from UAM, Xochimilco campus; Maylí Sepúlveda Toledo, general coordinator of ControlaTuGobierno (CTG); and Elvia Arzate Estrada, project coordinator of CTG. Credit: Mónica González.

Since 1997, Mexico City has been governed by political parties that are said to be on the left (Morena and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática); nonetheless, old governing practices persist, such as corruption, political clientelism, and the use of violent political gangs to intimidate and break up social struggles. The administration of Avelino Méndez (the district's delegate, and a member of the Morena party) did not like that the community was making demands about the road project, and threatened to take the project elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

Also in May 2017, the women of Caltongo and CTG found out that the Xochimilco government had a budget of 38 million Mexican pesos (1,967,537 USD) from the federal government for the road repaving, water supply and drainage improvements. Most importantly, they learned that the project was “earmarked” (“*obra etiquetada*”), and therefore the money could only be used for that project in that very place. Therefore, Delegate Avelino Méndez’s threat to move the project was based on a lie.

This was a watershed moment, because gaining access to this public information enabled the women to change their relationship with the authorities. The authorities could no longer deceive them or threaten them, and the women could force them to be accountable. When neighborhood activists provided the official project information to the rest of the community, that opened up the possibility to win their trust.

“When we began asking for the information, we were not familiar with the forms, how to ask, and we began to receive support [from CTG] for obtaining the information or to file complaints. Several of us women working together is very important, because we all have a lot of experience in different things,” says Martha. “This path that we have forged has been hand-in-hand with CTG, they gave us the assurance in terms of information and we learned about the role of the government, which is supposed to serve us, the citizens.”

Once they had obtained the information on the road project, the women of Caltongo called a community assembly, which included members of CTG. The community members passed around the papers and turned each page with great interest. That day they voted that Citlali and Martha would be responsible for monitoring the project and they agreed that all the information

*“When we began asking for the information, we were not familiar with the forms, how to ask, and we began to receive support [from CTG] for obtaining the information or to file complaints. Several of us women working together is very important, because we all have a lot of experience in different things.”*

*Martha Gómez Trejo*

obtained would be made public and transparent through the assemblies held each Thursday at 5 p.m. in the neighborhood plaza. With this action, the women picked up on the ancient tradition of consensus-based decision making in public assemblies and disseminating information to the whole community and combined it with strategic actions to tear down the walls of government secrecy and hold the government officials responsible.

Their organizing forced the government of Xochimilco to accept that the project would not begin in the San Gregorio neighborhood—where the people of Caltongo suspected political use would be made of it, on irregular lands—but in the center of Xochimilco.

In the following weeks the women continued inviting their fellow community members to take interest in the road project. They would go through the neighborhood with placards or megaphones, walking or in the back of Citlali’s truck.<sup>8</sup> “When I began to get involved in the organization I was able to put a name to something I had felt, which was my sense of belonging to the community: to see my surroundings, my people, to engage with them daily, to want to defend a healthy environment that was going to be violated,” says Martha.

A few weeks later two more women joined the core group, Adriana Alvarado Tovar and Cristina Rosas Díaz.

“Martha told me: ‘We’re going to include you in the WhatsApp group (*el whats*) of Caltongo’ and there in the chat I would give my opinion; but one day she told me, ‘Come, we’re meeting at the house, we’re going to include you in the group of organized women.’ What’s my contribution? Filling in gaps, covering areas that the others can’t,” says Adriana. The group used WhatsApp and other technological tools such as Facebook and live



broadcasts to make their struggle and their organization more efficient.

Adriana is 58 years old; born in Michoacán, she came to Xochimilco as a young child. She immediately fell in love with its nature and indigenous traditions, such as the festivals. Although she considers that her work in the organization is just “filling in gaps,” what is clear is that at first she facilitated the relationship with the community, and now runs public workshops to involve the community in different issues, such as one on First Aid, which occurred to her after a child in one neighborhood had a medical emergency and the ambulance took several hours to reach the child.

“I’m the one who takes photos, videos, right at the moment, for since I have a bicycle, I could move quickly,” recounts Cristina. “They would tell me: ‘someone needs to go to Pino<sup>9</sup> to take a photo of the water intake, someone needs to go over there to take another photo.’ I learned to take photos at night because we would walk around at 2, 3 in the morning reviewing the road project and demanding that the workers do their job well ... we became such good friends, they were practically seeing us in their dreams.”<sup>10</sup>

Cristina was born in Xochimilco 53 years ago. Her maternal grandfather grew roses; she remembers how he would remove mud from the canal, put it in his canoe,

and make the raised flower beds for planting. Her parents sold live chickens in the market and Cristina grew up feeding the chickens and turkeys before going to school. She completed high school, got married at 18, and supports her children with a *taquería* that she and her husband run.

Although men were involved in the struggle at times, the organizing depended largely on these women. They had an idea of why this was so:

“We are the ones who bear the brunt of maintaining the family; if you don’t have water, what are you going to do? You have to get it because your husband went to work. And we are the ones who suffer along the way, we are going to bring it, and if you have to make the food... it’s like we’re more decided, we have to get ahead. We know how to make the money last, those things, and apart from that, that you’re always there to solve things all the time,” says Cristina.

“It’s like we’re ready for whatever may be needed in the day-to-day life of the family and the community,” says Adriana.

“Before my husband would tell me, ‘Go look for a friend and have a cup of coffee,’ because I would spend all my time at home and at work,” recalls Cristina between laughs. “This struggle means a lot because I realized



Martha and other neighbors talking with workers in charge of the rehabilitation of Avenida Nuevo León.  
Credit: Citlali Hernández Jiménez.

myself as a woman, apart from being a housewife and mom. And I felt important when they told me 'you did well, your photo came out well.' Participating, knowing more things about our own neighborhood, was for me, realizing myself." Cristina smiles when she says that her older daughter would tell her, "Mamá, you can, I'm so proud of you."

Adriana's house is a small wooden *cabaña*, more suited for a forest than a zone of *chinampas*. We met here in early 2019 with Adriana and Cristina to discuss their participation in the struggle. It's a pleasant morning. Adriana prepared tea made of lemon verbena that she grows in her garden. We imagined them like that, months ago, meeting and planning the struggle

around Avenida Nuevo León. They tell us that Adriana, Cristina, Martha, Citlali, and the grandmothers Amalia Salas Casales, Guadalupe Ovalle Lozano, and Catalina Trejo Rosas have all become friends. Sometimes they get together more, sometimes less, depending on work and life.

Their struggle shook up not only the local government, taking it to task for its omissions and corruption, but also the life of the community. The women of Caltongo broke out of the roles that keep women in the house and exclude them from public life, even though it came at the cost of criticism from their neighbors, some of whom would say "there go the gossip women," "there go the women with nothing to do" ("*las sinquéhacer*").<sup>11</sup>

## Profile 2. Citlali Hernández Jiménez

Caltongo is the place where I was born and grew up. I'm from a large family, my neighbors are my cousins, aunts and uncles, great aunts and great uncles. Counting me, we are now four generations of a family that is known for landscape design. My grandfather Pablo Gumersindo Jiménez Contreras was a garden designer who worked with architects such as Matsumoto, the Basilica of Guadalupe is his masterpiece. My grandfather produced roses and *galias* [melons]. He was known in Mexico for his work in Xochimilco and with the *chinampas*. And right here, with this story, I was born.

I was born in the neighborhood clinic. My great uncle, who made bonsais, was a homeopath and practically received me in the water. I was born during the seasonal rains. From the time I was a small child I lived with the flower producers because here in our *chinampa* plants were sold that came in from Morelos, Guerrero, Necaxa. At that time there were no markets.

I learned to speak and to name things beginning in the *chinampa*. I learned to identify when it was going to rain, when it was going to hail, or a downpour storm or a drizzle; I learned how that determines how the plants grow, with what kind of soil do they grow best in, which minerals are better for which plants. My grandfather said that Xochimilco shouldn't have greenhouses because it would be its suicide, the suicide of its land, its water, its flora and fauna. He never fell into line with the infrastructure of plant nurseries. My grandfather always struggled to put wisdom before dispossession, because the world of the *chinampas* was being expropriated and given over to tourism.

When my grandfather died my aunts divided up the land and sold it. And my mother took me with her to Colima because there were many conflicts here with the land sales. I was in high school and I went. In Colima my mother always made us participate in the home and be responsible; I worked from the age of 16 in the gardens, and transcribing law theses in an Internet café. I studied physics and half-way through the program of study I won a scholarship to produce vermicompost [compost using worms].

So I decided to return to recover the family land, and my grandfather's story. I decided to return to Xochimilco because my work was here, my life was here. I faced conflicts among outsiders involved in illegal activities, I was marginalized for being a woman. But I came to share what I knew: that the important thing is to reclaim the soil, to be able to produce. My motivation is to share with others everything I learned from my grandfather to take care of this place.

And now that the environmental movement is becoming important, I am certain that I have made good decisions, having followed my own intentions, and a collective effort.



Credit: Mónica González.

## V. Caltongo Organized: Creativity and Strategy



Once the local residents joined in, they had to organize to access government decision-making and monitor the road project. The closure of the main street was going to impact community life. To address those changes the women of Caltongo invented a mechanism: they wrote a sort of manual in which they explained to the authorities how the rebuilding of the avenue should be done, and what citizen oversight would look like. Thus, the inhabitants taught the authorities about their own obligations. That manual was informed by the women's anchoring in the community's life and observations of every-day needs: public transportation—where will transportation be rerouted while the street is closed?; water supply—what are grids that will remain open?; public security—what will the security rounds look like if the street is closed and people have to walk long distances to get home, at night or in the early morning hours?, among other issues.

"All those spheres of needs become subcommittees—between residents and authorities. All the meetings were public. That was very strategic and positioned us, no longer just in Caltongo, but in Xochimilco," recalls Citlali.<sup>12</sup>

Strategy, creativity, imagination, merger of new and old practices and tools: the ancient tradition of the assembly was recovered and it was picked up in the social media. The assembly voted to start a Facebook group called "Caltongo Organizado" ([Caltongo Organizado@organizadocaltongo](#) "Caltongo Organized"<sup>13</sup>) to mobilize and organize. It soon had 3,500 followers, all local residents: youth, young women, older women. There, residents who did not go to the assemblies at the plaza would get information, offer their opinions, and voice grievances.

And from that group, the women symbolically opened the closed doors of the government: they began to broadcast the public assemblies live, as well as the meetings with government officials in their offices, and examinations of the road construction, thereby forcing the government to respond to the residents.

"The officials came to the first working meeting and we received them with the camera on the telephone on. 'Good morning, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourselves, indicating your name and position, because it's a live broadcast and we started,'" Citlali recalls, excited and laughing. With intelligence, they understood that this strategy, in addition to publicizing the meetings, worked to make a record of the promises, and to back up their requests for public information to monitor the work and prevent corruption.

Citlali, being the youngest in the group and the most skilled in using technology, took charge of soliciting the opinions of the residents, documenting them, referencing laws and regulations, and sending them to the administration. "The official notes went out from my telephone like tortillas."<sup>14</sup> That's how I got involved in the dynamic of the community," she recalls.

Public assemblies, groups on social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp, livestreaming each action, pamphleting and loudspeakers mounted on cars to mobilize residents, press conferences: as long as a struggle was happening in the street, another was being waged around the documents. With the help of CTG the women of Caltongo exercised their right to public information and asked to see the project documents, contracts, and minutes of the meetings of the authorities. In this way they were able to learn the details of the contracts in terms of the specified thickness of the steel rods and the asphalt, and with these papers in hand were able to check on the project in real time as it unfolded.

*"The officials came to the first working meeting and we received them with the camera on the telephone on. 'Good morning, I'm going to ask you to introduce yourselves, indicating your name and position, because it's a live broadcast, and we started'."*

*Citlali Hernández Jiménez*



In light of the changes in the territory of Caltongo due to migration and new settlements, the women used another strategy for their struggle: maps, which became a tool for re-appropriation of that space, their space. Using maps the women of Caltongo and surrounding *pueblos* locate opposition groups, springs, transformations in the neighborhood, and they envision possible actions in response to these situations. Maps have been used to put power back in the hands of the residents of Caltongo and to engage them in public affairs in their territory.

On June 1, 2017, the day that was promised for startup of the work at 7 a.m., they livestreamed the moment and made a record of the government's failure to keep its promise. This oversight forced the authorities to respond and to pressure for startup of the work, which occurred the following day.

In September 2017, three months after the work began, and when it was less than one-fourth complete, an earthquake shook Mexico City to the core. It strangled Xochimilco. San Gregorio, the site where the government originally wanted to start the project for political

reasons, was heavily affected. This made a neighborhood that was already highly marginalized even more vulnerable.

Avenida Nuevo León, which was a work in progress, had to open to vehicles responding to the emergency during the day, and at night it would shut down so as to continue the repaving work. Instead of being overwhelmed by the new urgent situation, the women tapped their capacity to mobilize the community to help: during the day they recorded damage to housing, and in the early morning hours they would go out to check the work being done by the workers who were rebuilding the avenue.<sup>15</sup>

The public assemblies continued to be held on Thursdays at 5 pm, though fewer residents were attending. "Yet the *abuelitas* were always there. I'll never tire of repeating it, if we had arrived one Thursday to the assembly and no one was there, what then would our effort have been worth? We left our homes, children, husbands, all for this struggle. And they were there, the *abuelitas*, waiting for us," recalls Martha.



Caltongo Organized members share the results of their community mapping, carried out with @espaciosentregua. Credit: Jonathan Fox.

"When I found out about the road repaving project I was interested because the sewer drainage was already poor. I saw people becoming involved and participating, and I became enthusiastic. Little by little people stopped showing up because it required a great commitment to the community. In the end there was only Martha, Citlali; they did not let up, they stuck with it," recalls Guadalupe Ovalle Lozano, 72 years old, a groceries merchant and one of the older women who stuck with the assemblies. "I would see when the meetings were held, it was all on them, and it was not fair because they were working, they were up late into the night."

"When the assemblies began I saw a commitment and that pleased me, they were always there, you could always count on them, I thanked them for everything they were doing. Some gave up everything for their

commitments, yet they completed the work they had taken on. The commitment is important because it's doing something for everyone, a neighborhood that is united gets ahead," says Catalina Trejo Rosas, 74 years old, a retired elementary schoolteacher and another one of the older women who was always at the plaza.

The women of Caltongo learned in the process of struggle that "the government should obey the people, because it is the people who are in charge, who have power," as Adriana understands it. "That those who govern are public servants who are there for that, to serve, not to be served," adds Citlali; "and since it is the people who are in charge, and the government is their employee, they have to listen to us to do what the people say, and they have to explain to us what they're doing, and if they do a poor job they have to pay the consequences," says Cristina.

### Profile 3. Amalia Salas Casales

Just imagine, close your eyes and imagine a *chinampa* blanketed in flowers.

All the *chinampas*, all the neighborhoods, were dedicated to crop farming. For example, in La Asunción, the *chinampas* were full of flowers: roses, hortensias, Mexican marigolds, annual gypsophila, wallflower. In Caltongo people have devoted themselves to the plants, and you would see *chinampas* full of plants, flowering. In San Marcos they were given over to vegetable gardening, lettuce, carrots, *salchipí*, which is like a carrot but brown, very nutritional. And in San Cristóbal, chili peppers, tomatoes; in La *Santísima* they grew turnips, radishes.

We were always growing plants. Here in Xochimilco, the willow trees, known as *ahuejotes*, are the guardians of the *chinampa*, but as the *chinamperos* are no longer planting them, the trees are feeling it. Mistletoe invades the tree, and the tree allows itself to be invaded, because it is sad: Why am I going to live if no one takes care of me anymore? We are part of nature and must take care of one another.

I went to school up to the second year of secondary school, I married young and had 10 children. Some of the children are in the struggle, others are not because they are dedicated to their things, to the corn, to their plants, and having small animals. I have grandchildren who, like me, play the conch, do massages, you know small children always imitate.

In 1990 I became concerned about the territory, that's when my struggle began. It was the expropriation of the *ejido*, Salinas de Gortari expropriated us and we became defenders of the *ejido*, for which we were tormented, persecuted.

Many of our members were in hiding because it had been ordered that they be killed. We were with them in the marches, marches to protest the situation.

While we struggled I thought, how many grandparents are going to die just from seeing their lands taken away? Now here in Xochimilco we are contaminating with so much plastic, bottles of chlorine, of coca cola, of alcohol. If we don't take care of ourselves, we can't take care of anything.

I told the kids, if you have a problem, any problem, go to the largest tree that you can embrace, press your cheek against the tree, close your eyes, cry if you want and say 'tree, give me understanding, illuminate my path, what can I do,' and in the dream it will show you the way forward.

The trees have years of knowledge, they have lived and learned many years. The trees are very wise, very great, the trees.



Credit: Mónica González.

## VI. Costs of Activism



We are in early May 2019 at Martha Patricia's greenhouse, two years after the struggle began for the decisions of the community of Caltongo and one year after the work was concluded. The space is occupied, half of it by potted hortensias (flowering plants) that are just barely flowering. In these days leading up to Mother's Day, says Martha, her greenhouse should be full of pots and her hortensias should be fully flowering, bursting forth with purple, pink, and white bouquets, like her neighbors' greenhouses. Martha stopped producing in mid-2017, and all of 2018. "It takes a year for an hortensia to turn out nice, now it's maturing and good, we are giving it *chocomil*<sup>16</sup> for it to grow quickly, but it won't look nice until next year."

Martha left her household responsibilities, family, and greenhouse, for the struggle around Avenida Nuevo León.

They all talk about the costs. In addition to neglecting the house and the greenhouse, Martha recalls the nights of stress or heart palpitations due to the fear that they would be attacked in the street by the political gangs that worked for Delegate Avelino Méndez.

Confronting the public authorities was not easy. While things advanced in a "civilized" manner in the meetings with the authorities and the assemblies, in the streets and social media the tone was different. Since 2017, the women of Caltongo were stalked and threatened by political actors from the local government and by representatives of markets, transport drivers, merchants, and members of the Committee for Citizen Participation.

This committee is recognized by law as the representative of the community vis-à-vis the authorities. Yet in practice, they take advantage of this position for their own purposes. These committees, according to Maylí, felt displaced by the involvement of the women from Caltongo, and as the women got better and better organized, the committee responded by calling into question the women's role, with misogynistic undertones. The committee even broke up the meetings of the organized community.

On several occasions the women were threatened on social media. One user published the following message on Facebook:

"These women from the group #Caltongo\_Organizado are the ones who are organizing the whole shutdown of Avenida Nuevo León in the neighborhoods of San Cristobal and Caltongo this woman Patricia lives at the corner of — and —.<sup>17</sup> Burn these women and share because it is their fault that Xochimilco is having issues in the roadways #COMPARTAN."

The message had comments, in response, such as:

"They should have respect but what the damn bitches make us suffer!!!", "They should do something productive or maybe they now want to be famous. [expletive] old gossip women," "ha ha ha burn them alive ha ha ha," "lazy ladies with nothing to do," "since they have nothing to do they close the [expletive] avenue ... go to the [expletive] local government and burn whoever they have to burn."

The women were scared. Scared of going out in public, of being followed, of being identified.

Along with CTG they came up with strategies to protect themselves: they sought the intervention of the official Mexico City Human Rights Commission; and they called a press conference with local and national media to indicate that they were at risk, making it clear that anything that might happen to them would be the responsibility of the authorities. The strategy worked: the public learned that a group of women organized to oppose corruption by the authorities were being threatened because of their struggle.

The authorities of Xochimilco riled up the population against the women of Caltongo, to break their struggle and their demands for information and accountability. In addition to the confrontation with the members of the Committee for Citizen Participation, the authorities



*"They would send us their political actors...the pressure and the stress were too much. It took its toll on our health and security. I had heart palpitations at night due to the fear we were experiencing"*

Martha Gómez Trejo

denounced the women of Caltongo to the earthquake victims, saying that the local government did not have the capacity to address the emergency because it had to complete the rehabilitation of Avenida Nuevo León.

"They would send us their political actors...the pressure and the stress were too much. It took its toll on our health and security. I had heart palpitations at night due to the fear we were experiencing," recalls Martha.

For Adriana the costs were the physical and emotional wear from confronting people's apathy. "We know that with the government one is going against the current, but we don't expect the same from the local residents who, one would suppose, have the same interest in improving the community for everyone, not just for one-self. That is the hardest part. I would tell my neighbors 'let's go, we're not looking for power, money, votes.'

#### Profile 4. Cristina Rosas Díaz

My grandfather grew rosebushes, he would remove the mud from the canal, put it in the canoe, and made the flower beds in the canoe. My grandmother helped him and my mother did too when she was a child. Xochimilco was beautiful, the canoes could pass by in the canals; there were guild masters (*mayordomías*), we would make and share giant casseroles of rice, mole, and tamales.

Then my mother got married and together with my father got a spot in the market for their business of selling live chickens. He made the poultry farm. I would help them: they got me up early, I would feed them and then we would go to the business to sell them, turkeys. I was a very little girl.

From my parents I learned to be honest, to speak directly and not hide things, to be obedient, to struggle, to work. My father would get me up at 6 in the morning to work before going to school.

I studied up until high school and then I got the idea of becoming a data entry clerk, my commercial career. Then I met my husband and got married when I was 18. I raised my daughters to be fighters, not to depend on others. We still tell them to struggle for their goals, that they have to do it, because they've already started their families.

I continued living in Xochimilco and I saw how the vegetation was being destroyed, I saw how the canals were drying up.

Therefore, when they did the work on the street for me it was important that they do things well. I found out—because there was a sign in the avenue—that we should participate to share our point of view. I work with my husband at a stand selling *tacos al pastor* and have for the last 20 years, and I didn't have the time, but one day I said I'm going to make the time, because how are they going to hear us if we don't go?

I like to take photos, so my work in the organization was to take photos at different moments, videos, I would do it quickly moving about by bicycle. So, there we were, taking photos of the problems, taking photos of the rebuilding of the street... We were there so much that the workers would see us in their dreams.

For me this struggle is very meaningful, because I realized myself as a woman, in addition to being a housewife and mother, I didn't have any other life, I didn't have friends. It's as though it was more important for me to have another job outside the house, to feel important, to hear them say 'you did good'; to participate, learning more things about our own neighborhood.... In the struggle we were almost all women; I'd tell my husband 'come with me'; and he would say that it was my space - or they would come along and stay to one side.

It feels nice that all of your work has come to something, the satisfaction that we succeeded. For us, many things were done, even if they did say 'there go the gossipy old ladies.' It's great that you leave a mark in their memory, that we came out in the newspaper, that people say that we succeeded because of those women, that we are useful, it feels nice, it was all worth the effort....



Credit: Mónica González.

When people participate, when there's interest, concern, initiative, the administration has to yield to the pressure."

Cristina agrees with Adriana. The most difficult thing was to shake the neighbors out of their apathy, the impotence learned over the years, the six-year-presidential terms, the decades of not being listened to, and of being used politically. Shaking them out of their apathy and indifference. In addition, Cristina felt the wear and tear in her body: during the months of the struggle she would get up before sunrise to comb her granddaughter's hair, then she would devote the whole day to meetings, return home to prepare to make and sell *tacos al pastor*, the business she has with her husband: making the salsas, chopping vegetables, marinating the meat. And after closing the curtain on the sales at midnight, she would go to the avenue to monitor the workers, with her bicycle and cell phone. And the money for paying for the data to transmit the videos came out of her own pocket.

For Citlali, like the rest of her colleagues, the economic and professional cost was high. "I sacrificed practically one year of my work in the *chinampa* to become involved in the struggle. I had a community job in the *chinampa* with volunteers; when I told them I was becoming involved in the assembly of women, they didn't

understand that I was leaving them to become involved in the political struggle. It has been difficult because 'politics' is understood as ambition for power, which is what was understood by the volunteers, and they abandoned the community work that we had in the *chinampa*, thinking that I had betrayed them. It is not known how to link the political struggle to the social struggle. They did not understand why it was important to link the two struggles; it was interpreted that I had political ambitions given how significant that process has become."

Citlali is a young woman who breaks down the stereotypes of what a woman in the community should be: she is single, has no children, has done university studies, opens her home to persons from other struggles, and when men enter her home on account of that her morality is called into question. On a personal level Citlali had to learn to negotiate with herself. "Tolerating everyone in the neighborhood, all the neighbors criticizing my lifestyle, a lifestyle of freedom that is not understood in that space. Negotiating with myself, that even though I have human rights, all that time having to defend myself from the hostility in the social space—being aware of the cost of the organizing effort, and continuing to say that yes, I am going to continue."



## VII. The Struggle that Continues



The work of reconstructing Avenida Nuevo León finished on March 31, 2018. At least according to the government. As of mid-2019 the sidewalks were not repaired, nor were the signs installed. Nor were water supply or sewage drainage systems installed in most of the avenue, which was related to the lack of clear titles to the land.<sup>18</sup>

“Completing the avenue was like a triumph, like a coronation,” says Adriana. “I also felt it a challenge to continue onward. I didn’t say, ‘It’s so great, we’ve already done it.’ No, there are many things that need to be done. Once involved in this, very important matters for the community come up time and again. My desire, my interest, is for people to begin to get motivated, to participate.”

“The government of Xochimilco thought we were weak, me because I’m young and my compañeras because

they are women. They saw us as a [weak]—they didn’t think we were going to cause so much conflict, and they didn’t succeed in diverting those funds, and they had to spend every single peso on the project. This was not a process of individual persons; rather, the whole community gave us direction with a moral context, the other women placing their trust in us, sharing the history of this place with us and how to defend the decisions made by everyone,” says Citlali.

“It feels very nice to see that all of your work and late nights turned out to be useful for the community. And the satisfaction that we accomplished it. It’s nice that you are remembered, that we appeared in the newspaper, that people say, ‘we did it because of the women,’ that we are useful, it feels good, it was all worth the effort...,” adds Cristina.



Sunrise over the Xochimilco canals. Credit: Mónica González.

*"Now the struggle is social, working with the community—to secure improvements, yes, but also so people begin to become involved. We are not going to give up this space in the street."*

*Adriana Alvarado Tovar*

The last stage of the repair work coincided with the election campaign, and the Xochimilco district delegate promised to install water supply services in the irregular zones run by political gangs to benefit his party in the elections.

"It seemed unfair to us. Although we needed drainage, we agreed not to expand the drainage grid in Caltongo because there weren't any proper land use permits (*uso de suelo*)<sup>19</sup> in the whole neighborhood; only the already-existing grid would be replaced. We didn't want to agree to accept negotiations that are [corrupt]," recounts Citlali. "Ultimately the delegate could not to keep his campaign promise because there was already considerable oversight, we had filed information requests to find out the possible legal underpinnings of that decision." One part of Caltongo that has grown in recent years is situated on officially protected conservation lands (*suelo de conservación*), and, therefore, is irregular, just like the San Gregorio neighborhood.

### Profile 5. Adriana Alvarado Tovar

I'm from Michoacán. I came to live in Mexico City after getting out of high school, because my aunt was alone and I came to be with her. Once I came to live here, I became involved with our ancestral cultures. Had I stayed where I am from, it would have been difficult to come closer to our roots, but here I did have that opportunity.

When I saw this place for the first time, I came on an errand, and it grabbed me, it won me over, it made me fall in love with it because the traditions are very much preserved here. Here I learned about medicinal plants, nature, the constellations. But now I focus much more on nature as an alternative to the issue that we are facing in the world. Nature, the indigenous world, taking up our traditions, is all the antithesis of the Western world.

I have always been struck by the social struggle. At one time, as a seller of crafts and Aztec calendars, we had conflicts with government authorities and I participated in the struggle. We were Comerciantes Unidos. I learned a great deal; it was my school. I began to lose my fear of speaking in public, speaking with public officials, I felt that going to see them was going to see a viceroy and it would get to me. Later I learned that no, they are there to serve us.

And when the effort around Avenida Nuevo León came to pass, I got involved with monitoring and oversight, to make sure they would not fool us. I attended the meetings, I made proposals, I expressed my ideas and opinions. As I participated, little by little I became well informed and became more and more involved.

There are several of us in the struggle, but four of us do almost everything. What do I contribute? Fill in gaps, cover areas that perhaps the others can't, propose social action, such as giving workshops to the residents of Caltongo, such as the one we did on first aid, because one day I saw a child in very poor shape and the ambulances were taking forever to arrive, and I thought that could be helpful.

The most difficult thing in this struggle is confronting the close-mindedness of government officials, knowing that with them you're going to be going against the current. But well, they are public servants. The hardest part is people's apathy. For me it has been very hard because they do not participate, they do not make commitments, they say yes and the first day 80 come, then 10, and after that just four or five people. For me the most important thing is that the people participate, our participation as citizens. It is important that citizens get involved, that they take interest; the struggle is not just for oneself, but for the benefit of all, because we are not after power, no money is being handled, no money is involved, we're not going to vote for anything, and then you land a position. No, it is a totally horizontal commitment, for us, for our children.



Credit: Mónica González.

We asked Citlali whether the fact that water services were not extended to an irregular zone controlled by political gangs represented a triumph for them, as women of Caltongo.

“In a process of transparency and non-corruption it is a triumph because we stopped them from using the resources for their own political gain. Nonetheless, we don’t believe that it is a triumph in general because there is [still] a real social need for water supply and drainage. Yet we would like to think that it is somehow positive that, starting with our struggle, people in that zone more clearly understand that they have rights and that they can demand respect for these rights in different ways, not just being subject to political manipulation by others, but by opening the doors so that the government can show its deeds to the citizens, report, respond, carry out its obligation to serve persons, not to be served by them.”

In the slow periods of the struggle around Avenida Nuevo León, the women of Caltongo adopted a more ambitious target: winning legal recognition for the neighborhood as an indigenous community (*pueblo originario*)—in light of its roots as a Náhuatl indigenous space—so it can govern itself autonomously. Yet their homes, families, work, and the need to recover took more and more of their time and energy. In the search to strike a balance as between caring for the community and caring for the home, taking care of themselves, the women of Caltongo rethought these ambitions.

Citlali explains that now the objective is to share the experience they learned in the struggle to make a government that answers to the community, so that other

communities can organize to solve problems, such as cleaning up the canals or defending their territories. A few Saturdays ago,<sup>20</sup> for example, residents of various neighborhoods of Xochimilco and other districts, members of the Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI), met at Citlali’s *chinampa* to share experiences. Otomí people came who are fighting against the invasion of their forest to build a highway, Náhuatl women from Tláhuac came who are beginning to defend their territory from urban sprawl, and people came from other neighborhoods of Xochimilco to help clean up the canals. All of them brought some food to share on the table: corn on the cob, nopal cactus, coffee, tortillas, fresh cheese, some grains, all produced with their own hands.

In addition, the women contribute to an active community life through public workshops, which are offered in the same plaza where the assemblies had been held at 5 p.m. on Thursdays. These include workshops on First Aid, medicinal plants, cartography for mapping the neighborhoods, access to information, and transparency.

“We’d like to help strengthen other struggles, share what we learned,” says Citlali. “The idea is to gradually make regional links, keep alive the plaza as a political space, use it to strengthen the community. And then, when the time comes to seek representation—to seek an autonomous government—have the strength to do it.”<sup>21</sup>

Adriana explains it in the following terms: “Now the struggle is social, working with the community—to secure improvements, yes, but also so people begin to become involved. We are not going to give up this space in the street.”

# Endnotes

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1. For more on the expropriation of lands in this area, see <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2001/03/10/033n1cap.html>.
2. In 1917, as a result of the Mexican Revolution, the *ejido* regime was established. The ejido is a community-based social land tenure system made up of *ejidatarios* (owners of the land) who manage *tierras ejidales*, (ejido lands), which were granted by the federal government. Up until 1992, ejido lands could not be sold unless they were expropriated or switched to another category of land tenure.
3. Social Welfare Index of Mexico City, was produced by the Universidad Iberoamericana in 2017. <https://ibero.mx/prensa/milpa-alta-y-xochimilco-delegaciones-con-peor-bienestar-social>. This measure includes quantitative and qualitative indicators such as income, employment, education, access to services, surroundings, home, sense of happiness and satisfaction with life.
4. See <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/412/>.
5. See <https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/metropoli/Xochimilco-en-riesgo-de-perder-la-Declaratoria-de-Patrimonio-Cultural-de-la-Humanidad-191025.html>.
6. The Constitution of Mexico establishes three levels of government: federal, state, and municipal. The *delegaciones*, which are currently called *Alcaldías*, correspond to the third level of government in Mexico City. The delegación/alcaldía of Xochimilco is also referred to as the “local government” in this essay.
7. In late 2017, the year the work began, a survey in the newspaper El Universal evaluated him as the delegate with the least support by the population, with a 77 percent disapproval rating. (<https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/metropoli/cdmx/xochimilco-total-descontento-con-avelino-mendez>).
8. For a video related to this point, see <https://www.facebook.com/organizadocaltongo/videos/1735468900077666/>
9. Name of a street.
10. This expression is used when someone shows up so often that you see them in your dreams.
11. In Mexico “*quehacer*” refers to domestic work; so “*sinquéhacer*” suggests they have no such duties to perform.
12. For a video related to this event, see moment 5:32 “Residents at the meeting with delegate” here: <https://www.facebook.com/organizadocaltongo/videos/1740339199590636/>.
13. See <https://www.facebook.com/organizadocaltongo>.
14. Tortillas are the basis of the diet in most of Mexico. The expression “they were coming out like tortillas” refers to the fact that in Mexico today tortillas are made in special stores (*tortillerías*).
15. For more on this, please see this video: <https://www.facebook.com/organizadocaltongo/videos/1800213936936495/>.

16. This expression refers to a brand of chocolate milk which, according to its advertising, offers to make children grow strong and healthy very quickly.
17. We omitted the street names out of concern for the security of Martha Patricia Gómez.
18. These lands were occupied illegally in the past, and do not have documentation showing title. According to Mexican legislation, land that is irregular cannot have utilities installed such as drinking water, drainage, and electricity.
19. The “*uso de suelo*” (“land-use permit”) is an authorization granted by the local government to build on or use a given plot of land.
20. A reminder to the reader: this publication originally appeared in Spanish in August of 2019.
21. To learn about Caltongo Organized’s other work, see <https://www.facebook.com/organizadocaltongo/videos/1901235883500966/>.



## Accountability Research Center Publications

### Learning Exchange Reports

- Brenda Rodríguez Herrera, Rebeca Salazar Ramírez, and Mariana González Moyo. 2018. "First Meeting of Auxiliary Watershed organizations: Good Practices, Limitations, Lessons, and Prospects. Rapporteur's Report." *Learning Exchange Report 4*.
- Marta Schaaf, Caitlin Warthin, Amy Manning, and Stephanie Topp. 2018. "Report on the Think-in on Community Health Worker Voice, Power, and Citizens' Right to Health." *Learning Exchange Report 3*.
- Joy Aceron, Angela Bailey, Shaazka Beyerle and Jonathan Fox. 2017. "Citizen Action Against Corruption." *Learning Exchange Report 2*.
- Victoria Boydell, Jonathan Fox and Sarah Shaw. 2017. "Transparency and Accountability Strategies & Reproductive Health Delivery Systems." *Learning Exchange Report 1*.



## Accountability Research Center Publications

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