

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN THE OPORTUNIDADES PROGRAM

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Introduction

The Oportunidades Program is the centerpiece of Mexico's current welfare system, and the most important part of its overall anti-poverty strategy; it is also one of the most carefully monitored and evaluated social programs in the country.¹ The following is an outline of the progress, limits, outlooks and recommendations regarding transparency and access to information in the Oportunidades Program.

As with other state programs and agencies, citizens' information needs in relation to Oportunidades are diverse. For the purposes of practical analysis, this study focused on three areas of need for transparency and access to information: 1) those of program beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries; 2) those of researchers analyzing the program; and 3) those of the general public, which has a right to know how tax revenue is being used.

This analysis drew on four sources of primary data: 1) the program's operating procedures over time; 2) a survey of beneficiaries in four states—the State of Mexico, Nayarit, Tlaxcala and Veracruz (which was carried out as part of the study called, “Monitoring Social Programs in the Context of Electoral Campaigns,”); 3) researchers' field experiences during that study; and 4) various means of distributing information about the program: such as external evaluations, the internet, and official public relations material.²

¹ According to the 2006 Federal Budget, the budget for Oportunidades alone is equivalent to 1.3 times that of the entire Ministry of Social Development (Sedesol).

² This was an exploratory study with eight in-depth interviews, 5 triads and 1 focus group that was used to develop a survey instrument applied to 1,200 Oportunidades beneficiaries. This sample represents a universe of a million homes receiving program benefits in those four states. See Gloria Labastida, (ed.), “Encuesta,” in Fundar, *Monitoreo de Programas Sociales en Contextos Electorales* (México: Fundar, 2006) Available at: <http://www.fundar.org.mx/programassociales/2Encuesta.pdf> (Viewed July 2006). Interview transcripts are also available at: <http://www.fundar.org.mx/programassociales/anexos.htm> (Viewed July, 2006).

Progress and Limitations

In terms of beneficiaries' needs, those in charge of the program have increased their efforts to inform people about how Oportunidades works—through community meetings and the publication and explanation of rules and procedures.³ They have also created new communication tools, such as the development and distribution of printed and audiovisual materials directed at beneficiaries, health professionals, teachers, municipal representatives, and community level advocacy committees. There has also been an increase in institutional capacity to receive complaints and suggestions directly from program beneficiaries.

However, according to the survey, there are still gaps in the information Oportunidades participants are given. Specifically, some people are unclear on the mechanisms employed to determine enrollment and dis-enrollment from the program, as well as about fines and sanctions.⁴ For example, one out of every ten people interviewed stated that to keep their Oportunidades benefits they had to perform community service, which should not be the case, according to the program's rules; and 3.3 percent of those interviewed had been charged illegal fees. Another eight percent said their bi-monthly payments reflected unjustified reductions. Finally, community oversight mechanisms are structurally limited, confined to tiny windows (physical, through telephone or internet) in which people may register complaints, and beneficiaries have not appropriated or taken advantage of these tools.

In regards to researchers' needs, the study also identified improvement in access to budgetary information as well as beneficiary enrollment data. Such access is stipulated in the rules of operation for the program, and is provided through the program's website.⁵ This opening is especially noticeable on the part of program administrators. Moreover, various researchers have commented that Oportunidades is the most studied anti-poverty program of the Fox presidency.

However, in order for researchers to evaluate more precisely how the program is working, the information that is available would have to be organized differently. For instance, beneficiary data is not broken down by geographic distribution, or separated according

³ Sections 6.11, 6.12 and Clause 11 in, "Reglas de Operación del Programa de Desarrollo Humano Oportunidades," *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, February 1, 2006. See also PROGRESA, *Lineamientos Generales del Programa de Educación, Salud y Alimentación 1998* (Mexico: Sedesol, 1998) p. 58.

⁴ Labastida, "Encuesta," (2006) pp. 28-31.

⁵ Clause 10, Reglas de Operación 2006, Programa Oportunidades, available at: http://www.oportunidades.gob.mx/informacion_general/main.html and <http://www.oportunidades.gob.mx/htmls/publicaciones.html>. (Viewed July, 2006).

to budget and enrollment cycles. Thus, although the information exists, there have been several occasions in which program administrators or the IFAI have had to intervene to ensure researchers receive it.⁶ The electronic formats used to present the data to the public proved particularly difficult to manage when attempting to draw comparisons across geographic zones and time periods.⁷

From the public's point of view, the existence of Oportunidades and its results have been publicized all over the mass media, in forums, seminars and meetings, billed as the "star" program in Mexico's anti-poverty strategy. Few programs have ever enjoyed so much notoriety. The publication and continual improvement of the Rules of Operation have been an important point of reference in the public's understanding of how the program works. Additionally, the Oportunidades website has a wealth of well-organized information, which complies reasonably well with the requirements of the Federal Law for Transparency and Access to Information.⁸

On the other hand, the survey results showed that the "non-beneficiary" public does not know about enrollment mechanisms, or eligibility criteria. There is also information that only administrators and experts know about and is not accessible to the general public—particularly anything that has to do with program expansion and the reasons behind it. More seriously, when the results of external evaluations are unsatisfactory, the Social Development Ministry hides them—a distinct contrast with the open attitude demonstrated by the Executive Office of the Oportunidades Program.⁹ Finally, the external evaluations are not always written using accessible language, thus complicating the general public's ability to form an opinion on the management of Oportunidades and its results.

⁶ In three IFAI resolutions (0022/05, 0846/04 and 0908/04), the Institute ruled on behalf of researchers who registered a formal complaint when Oportunidades failed to provide disaggregated information on beneficiaries and budgets at local and municipal levels. In fact, the information that was used to conduct the study, "Monitoreo de programas sociales en contextos electorales," was obtained only after signing a letter of confidentiality with Sedesol and making direct arrangements with officials in Oportunidades and Sedesol.

⁷ The program typically uses PDF or "read-only" formats.

⁸ See <http://www.oportunidades.gob.mx/transparencia/main.htm>. (Viewed July, 2006).

⁹ Such was the case of "Monitoreo de programas sociales en contextos electorales." See the columns "Templo Mayor," in *Reforma*, April 7, 2006; "Olvida Sedesol alerta en tema electoral," *Reforma*, April 24, 2006; and "Denuncian que Sedesol ocultó uso político de sus programas," *El Universal*, April 24, 2006 (the same article was published under the title "Acusan a la Sedesol de atrasar la publicación de un estudio," in *El Diario de Yucatán*). Also see: Oportunidades Program, "Oportunidades asume las recomendaciones para reforzar su blindaje electoral," Press Release, DDACD/006/27, April 27, 2006.

Recommendations

Recommendations to make information more transparent for researchers:

- **The program's organization of information should be improved, in relation to budgets as well as beneficiary enrollment.** Specifically, in regards to information about the total amounts of monetary aid issued by the program, these should be broken down by their component parts: food, scholarships, school supplies, pensions for the elderly and any others that might be included in successive administrations.
- **All beneficiary information should be aggregated at the family level as well as presented as the total sum of individuals, and cross-referenced by each of the components.** Moreover, total data should be disaggregated and organized at national, state, municipal and local levels; and, if possible, by Basic Geostatistic Areas. All information should be concentrated and presented in time frames that would allow annual, bi-annual and bi-monthly comparisons. Finally, absolutely all information should be available in electronic formats that can be managed as databases and not "read-only" or PDF files.

Recommendations to make information for the general public more transparent:

- **Multi-annual projections (which could be 3 or 5 years into the future) need to be developed at the most disaggregate level possible—on the budget, time frames, and eligibility of new beneficiaries.** This would allow for more certainty and help head off arbitrary actions.
- **Publicity around external evaluations should be improved, regardless of whether the results are flattering to the program.** Efforts to communicate these results to the public should be broad, accurate and accessible; the approach should be geared to a general audience that does not have a background in political science or research methods, but needs to form an opinion about how the program is running.

Recommendations for transparency towards beneficiaries:

- **Strategies to communicate with beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries on how the program operates should be improved.** In particular, the program should provide clearer communication on eligibility criteria: on how people get into the program, and how they are suspended from it or dis-enrolled from it.

- The idea that participation and transparency in these programs is a right that can be demanded needs to be communicated to people involved in them, and the provisions in the Oportunidades legislation for shared responsibility should be expanded. This would encourage beneficiaries to appropriate and control the program, and would reduce improper usage of it, as people gained a more precise and transparent understanding of how it is supposed to work.
- Another factor that would bolster certainty among beneficiaries and help avoid suspicion of local corruption would be greater regularity in the program. Early and late payments or other unpredictable programming lead to a sense of manipulation.

Perspectives

Due to the sheer size of the program, its resources, and importance in the fight against poverty, as well as the expectations it has generated, it is likely that needs and demands for information about Oportunidades will continue to grow—among politicians, researchers and members of the general public. No doubt this pressure, combined with the commitment of Oportunidades administrators, will continue to open spaces, and that with time the information generated by the program will be better, deeper and more accurate.

However, there are particular challenges embedded in the relationship between the program and beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries. Unlike the general public discussed above, the survey suggested that the population of beneficiaries may not have sufficient incentive to demand more transparency in the program. In other words, it is possible that the public assistance characteristics of the program have produced a passive attitude among beneficiaries, who simply wait to see whether they will be chosen and/or instructed regarding the operation of the program; they do not expect to have any control in this process. This limits their participation and their presence in the design, operation and control of the program in general, even though they are part of the public that should have input on a program that is financed with tax revenue, and despite the fact that the point of the program is to improve their quality of life.¹⁰

¹⁰ Labastida, "Encuesta," (2006), p. 93.