

PUBLIC ACCESS TO MEXICO’S EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

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Mexico’s recent experience with evaluations of social programs has gained worldwide recognition, based on the prominent assessments of the impacts of Mexico’s flagship social program, Progresa (now Oportunidades). The Fox Administration built on this momentum by requiring that all federal programs subject to rules of operation be evaluated by external institutions. This mandate was first written into the Federal Budget Law in 2001, becoming effective in 2002. Additionally, the 2004 Social Development Law mandated the creation of a new National Evaluation Council, housed within the Social Development Ministry, charged with overseeing the program evaluation process.

There are over 140 federal programs subject to rules of operation, and most involve direct contact with a specified target population. Even though programs within the same Ministry are often grouped together in one evaluation, an average of 80-100+ evaluations are produced each year.

External program evaluations represent a potentially powerful tool for increasing transparency in government operations. By subjecting these programs to an external evaluation process, new assessments of a program’s impact and operational efficiency are presumably more objective, drawing on information not readily available to the public. Their results potentially offer important inputs into public debate and policy-making.

Currently, the primary audience for these official evaluations are policymakers in the executive and legislative branches of government, though the degree to which their findings actually inform the policy process is not clear (with the notable exception of Oportunidades, where evaluations played a key role in increased funding and coverage).

Public Disclosure of External Evaluations through the Internet

To facilitate public access to the results of mandatory external program evaluations, the 2004 Budget Law began requiring that all such evaluations be published on each

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program’s respective website. The Ministry of Public Administration is currently tasked with monitoring compliance with this mandate, but they do not have a system in place to ensure that the evaluations are publicly available on the internet.¹ Because of the lack of consistent monitoring, the authors and a research support team systematically reviewed all of the websites of the various Ministries and decentralized agencies that administer programs subject to rules of operation, in order to assess the degree of government compliance with the public disclosure requirement. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Overall Compliance with Public Disclosure Requirements

	2004	2005
Total number of program evaluations required (according to the Ministry of Public Administration) ²	89	98
Total number available online	37	52
Percent available online	41.6%	53.1%

Compliance with the public disclosure mandate improved between 2004 and 2005. Perhaps the most important advance is that, while in 2004 there were 6 agencies that did not have any of their external evaluations available online, the research for 2005 shows that now all but one agency has published at least some of their evaluations on their websites, if only for previous years.^{3 4} However, the fact that only slightly more than half of the 2005 evaluations are available online indicates that this requirement has not yet become a high priority for many agencies.

A small number of Ministries and decentralized agencies stand out for having 100% of their required evaluations available online. In certain cases, such as Oportunidades and the Temporary Employment program (PET in Spanish), agencies have developed special sections on their websites devoted exclusively to the publication of their external evaluations. In each of these cases, a button has been placed on their homepage that leads the user directly to their evaluations. Other agencies, such as the Social Development Ministry and the Agriculture Ministry’s Rural Alliance program also have pages devoted to their evaluations. However, in these cases, the evaluations are quite difficult to find

¹ Information obtained in interviews with public officials at the Ministry of Public Administration, October 2005
² Based on the number of programs listed on an official Ministry of Public Administration document called, “Control de Evaluaciones Externas” for 2004 and 2005, Unidad de Control y Evaluación de la Gestión Pública, Dirección General Adjunta de Evaluación, Secretaría de Función Pública. It is important to note that the programs listed in the Ministry of Public Administration’s listing do not coincide completely with the list of programs subject to rules of operation published in the Budget Laws of 2004 and 2005.
³ Based on findings presented in, Jonathan Fox and Libby Haight, “Acceso público a las evaluaciones externas de los programas federales,” Working Paper, 15 October, 2005.
⁴ The only exception is the National Council for Science and Technology (Conacyt in Spanish).

within each site or on the internet more generally. Some examples of compliance and non-compliance with the public disclosure mandate are highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2
Examples of Compliance and Non-Compliance with the Public Disclosure Requirement

Agency	Total available online 2004	Total available online 2005	Evaluations available for previous years	Accessibility within website
Compliance:				
Economy Ministry*	9 of 9 (100%)	8 of 8 (100%)	Yes	Intermediate
Social Development Ministry*	13 of 20 (65%)	16 of 16 (100%)	Yes	Difficult
National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Communities	0 of 1 (0%)	6 of 6 (100%)	No	Difficult
Ministry of the Interior	0 of 2 (0%)	2 of 2 (100%)	No	Intermediate
Non-compliance:				
National Council for Science and Technology	0 of 1 (0%)	0 of 2 (0%)	No	n/a
Agrarian Reform Ministry	0 of 3 (0%)	0 of 6 (0%)	Yes	Intermediate
Ministry of Labor	0 of 2 (0%)	1 of 4 (25%)	No	Intermediate
Agriculture Ministry*	2 of 16 (12.5%)	3 of 13 (23.1%)	Yes	Difficult
Public Education Ministry*	7 of 18 (38.9%)	8 of 23 (34.8%)	Yes	Difficult

* Includes decentralized agencies

Evaluations as Transparency Tools

Accessibility is not the only factor that determines evaluations' potential relevance to the policy process. Evaluations must also be reliable, which requires a certain distance from interested parties—hence the international consensus on the importance of external evaluations. In Mexico, however, in practice, these new external evaluations are not so external, insofar as they are commissioned and paid for by the agencies themselves, out of their own budgets. Additionally, program staff are often directly involved in the development of the indicators that will be used to evaluate the program, which tend to omit important aspects of program operations that may be most important to beneficiaries. According to interviews with evaluators, agencies will not only directly influence the

“terms of reference” on which the evaluation will be based, but they also have gone so far as to pre-determine which communities evaluators must visit for field interviews. As a result, some evaluators feel obliged to produce results and recommendations that comply with the desired results expressed by government agencies, especially if they wish to renew their contracts in the future. In other words, the “business” of external evaluations depends, to a certain extent, on maintaining a positive relationship with the agency or program being evaluated. The vast majority of academic institutions and specialist organizations that regularly evaluate government programs are highly reputable, however the law of “she who pays, makes the rules” applies.

In addition to the importance of the degree of public access and reliability of Mexico’s external evaluations, questions regarding the “consumption” of their results are also key, such as: who receives them, how are their results assimilated, and how often are they utilized by key actors with the capacity to influence public debate? Currently, external program evaluations do not appear to be tools often used by civil society in their work. They also do not receive much attention either by the press or academics (with the notable exception of those academics who work as external evaluators). Even staff within the evaluated programs do not appear to pay much attention to the results. The considerably low usage of evaluations can be contributed to two major factors: the relatively little publicity and public dissemination of results, and the technical complexity with which the results are presented, making them difficult to interpret if one is not an expert in econometrics or other advanced program evaluation techniques. The evaluations themselves tend to be long and complex documents, where the most relevant results are often embedded deep inside the body of the text. Even the “executive summaries” tend to be quite extensive, which do not provide an accessible presentation of major findings for non-experts.

Conclusions

Most of these issues are on the agenda of the recently created National Evaluation Council. However, the degree to which the Council will fulfill their mandate to “evaluate the evaluators” remains to be seen. Though some critics expressed concern about the appointment of several former evaluators to the Council and potential conflicts of interest, their first publication proved to be far more critical than many expected. A study that produced new estimates on poverty levels showed that rural poverty had actually increased during the last year of the Fox Administration.⁵

⁵ Available at the National Evaluation Council’s website, at: www.coneval.gob.mx, in the section called, “Comunicados”, at: <http://www.coneval.gob.mx/comunicados.html>. The study used information from the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information (INEGI) and their Survey of Household Income-Spending.

Though the Social Development Law limits the National Evaluation Council's mandate to cover only those programs considered to fall under the rubric of "social development policy", the 2007 Budget Law explicitly states that the Council, together with the Treasury and Public Administration Ministries, must produce evaluation guidelines for all programs subject to rules of operation. This implies that their mandate reaches beyond only those programs housed in the Social Development Ministry. Additionally, the passage of the new Federal Budget and Fiscal Responsibility Law (March, 2006) places a renewed importance on integrating the external program evaluation process by mandating that the Treasury and Public Administration Ministries implement a national "Performance Evaluation System" by December, 2008.

While early 2007 has shown important advances toward changing the program evaluation process in Mexico, a centralized monitoring system designed to ensure "quality control" over all federal agencies in regards to external evaluations has yet to take form.⁶ Additionally, the fact that the programs themselves pay their evaluators, and directly influence the objectives and methodologies to be used, risks damaging the credibility of the results produced and the enormous effort they imply. In principle, a centralized monitoring system, could also solve the problem of public access to the evaluations and other relevant information, by posting all evaluations and related documents on their website. Currently, the law does not oblige agencies to publish their evaluations in easily accessible locations on-line their websites. Each agency decides where to house them, in the case that they are made available, which severely complicates access given that one often has to search the entire website to find them. There is no consistent logic across agencies as to where the evaluations are housed on their websites, and most agencies do not publish them either under their transparency portal or in sections entitled, "accountability". Additionally, in order to obtain information about contracts for hiring evaluators, or the cost of each evaluation, one must submit information requests to each agency separately. By centralizing also the publicity of the information generated through the evaluations process, the National Evaluation Council can greatly increase the probability of greater public access and usage of external evaluations.

Evaluations that are only accessed by policymakers provide a very limited kind of transparency—inwards and upwards. For evaluations to fulfill their potential contribution to accountability, they must be transparent outwards and downwards as well, including the general public.

⁶ In March of 2007, the National Evaluation Council presented a "pre-proposal" called, "Evaluation guidelines that should be considered by the Federal Public Administration for the elaboration of external evaluations, for strategic objectives, for the matrix of indicators, and for monitoring systems," which explicitly addresses this issue.