

PUBLISHING ENROLLMENT LISTS OF WELFARE BENEFICIARIES

Alberto Serdán

On May 11, 2006, a citizen requested a copy of the enrollment list in Sinaloa for the social program Oportunidades.¹ The list includes the location of beneficiaries, how long they have received benefits for and their amount. The leaders of the Oportunidades program responded negatively to this request, arguing that such a level of detail would imply revealing personal data. The Federal Institute for Access to Public Information (IFAI in Spanish) decided on August 9 of the same year, that the information should be published in the exact format that it was requested.

The tension lying behind this case is as follows: in revealing the beneficiaries' names, there is a risk that they will be 'stigmatized' within their communities as poor (a type of discrimination that has been well documented in social science); on the other hand, revealing the names will allow the beneficiaries to exercise control over public programs (in so far as it will allow them to know if they are enrolled and will facilitate the ability of those who have not received their benefits—despite having the right to do so—to complain). The principle of maximum disclosure favors the latter, although the dilemma persists.

A similar situation occurred in India in the '90s. The non-governmental organization MKSS, which promotes the right to information, proved the importance of revealing the names of public programs' beneficiaries in communities. Corruption levels in the management of the programs fell, their efficiency improved and citizen participation in decision-making was favored. This all, in turn, improved the balance in the relationship between government and citizenry.



¹ Editor's note: Oportunidades is a conditional-cash transfer program and Mexico's largest anti-poverty strategy.