

# Ethnicity as a Prerequisite for Inclusion in Conditional Transfer Programmes: The Opportunities Programme in Mexico

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**Public policies aimed** at Mexico's indigenous population traditionally viewed the communities themselves as their primary beneficiaries. Breaking with this convention, the anti-poverty programme known as *Oportunidades*, with its specific focus on supporting not communities but in fact discrete family units experiencing acute poverty, disregarded the specificities of the indigenous population and treated indigenous people as any other impoverished segment of Mexican society. *Oportunidades* fully embodied an increasing tendency by the government to overlook critical aspects of ethnicity in favour of broader categories such as marginalization, poverty and capabilities. 'Indigenous' ceased to be considered a category in its own right, or as a special factor with direct relations to poverty, and consequently the programmes designed to combat poverty have largely eliminated this term from their working vocabularies, even going so far as to cite appeals to 'equity' (according to which the use of ethnic criteria implied a veiled form of discrimination).

As a result, by denying the uniqueness of the social, political and economic conditions faced by indigenous peoples, the policies for eradicating poverty were homogenized; brought into line with the policies applied to the rest of the marginalized population in general. By the same token, the community components were no longer considered to be a strategic cultural input for use in the pursuit of ethnic development strategies.

A 2008 qualitative evaluation of *Oportunidades* undertaken by a group of anthropologists, says Sariego, underscores some especially troubling problems with this new 'family instead of community' approach. With its focus on 118 municipalities located in 11 indigenous regions throughout Mexico, the study demonstrated, alarmingly, that the new targeting criteria in fact resulted in a number of biases in the selection of communities and families living in precarious conditions (De La Rocha, 2009). Specifically, it was found that the indigenous families living in indigenous geographically dispersed regions and communities with low populations, lacking in education and health services, have a lower probability of being selected as beneficiaries of the Programme. Furthermore, there is evidence that in states with a lower proportion of indigenous peoples, the indigenous families and regions receive a lower per capita transfer when compared to indigenous families and regions located in states with a higher proportion of indigenous populations. This indicates discrimination against the indigenous populations in states where they are dispersed and not numerous, even if they live in areas with a very low human development index.

Taken as a whole, this situation, says Sariego, has led to a particular phenomenon within indigenous regions of Mexico that can be

referred to as a "second tier" of poverty. Composed of those regions, and families that inhabit them, that do not have access to the Programme, this 'second tier' signals a widening gap even between the 'poor' and the 'poorest of the poor', whereby the most needy individuals from the target population are in fact increasingly excluded.

In order to remedy these disparities, and in view of the clear historical correlation between poverty and the ethnic condition in Mexico, Sariego (2012) advises that the *Oportunidades* Programme return to recognizing and addressing those complex realities within indigenous communities which extend far beyond that of the family unit. Specifically, he proposes the inclusion of two criteria in addition to the current targeting procedures of the *Oportunidades* Programme, the first being of a geographical nature and the second of a community nature.

With regard to the first procedure, it is important, says Sariego, to take into account the human development indices of each one of the 25 indigenous regions that other federal agencies have identified in Mexico, based on cultural, historical and linguistic criteria. Doing so allows for the application of a "positive discrimination" criterion that favours those ethnic regions that have historically faced greater deprivation, and in which discrepancies in the targeting system of the *Oportunidades* Programme are the most flagrant.

With regard to the second procedure, Sariego suggests that the implementation of the Programme could benefit from the organizational strength and social capital that many indigenous communities maintain through various forms of extended cooperation, leadership and internal government.

The combination of these two correctives to the targeting system will allow the *Oportunidades* Programme to reconcile the family-based and community-based criteria that have until now been at loggerheads in terms of logistical operations.

## References:

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