

# Empowerment of Women through Political Participation: Oportunidades' performance in an indigenous community of Oaxaca

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## Abstract

This paper reports results on the progress of a government program designed to alleviate poverty in an indigenous community of Oaxaca, Mexico. Named *Desarrollo Humano Oportunidades*, it was designed as a pilot for the entire country. Based on qualitative research results, the paper reports how the program has met challenges and complexities at the local level. These issues may also be present when the program is expanded into other areas. One example can be seen in the secondary objective “empowerment of women”, which has proven a challenge due to the inexperience of many of the women in this community in dealing with political issues and situations. First, the paper offers a brief description of *Oportunidades*' operation. Second, it explains the corporate government system (*Usos y Costumbres*) of an Oaxacan indigenous community and the local actors involved in *Oportunidades*. Then, it considers the impacts of policy in terms of the relationship between *Oportunidades*' actors and the *Usos y Costumbres* government officials. Finally, it offers some general guidelines to improve the operation of the program in indigenous communities.

## Resumen

El siguiente artículo analiza la operación del programa de Desarrollo Humano Oportunidades para el combate a la pobreza en una comunidad indígena y que fue basado en investigación cualitativa. El artículo ilustra cómo este programa, que fue designado para funcionar de una manera estándar en todo el país, presenta retos y complejidades a nivel local por ejemplo se discute el objetivo secundario de Oportunidades sobre el empoderamiento femenino y la falta de participación política de las mujeres en las comunidades indígenas. Primero se ofrece una breve descripción de la operación del programa. Después se explica la manera en el que el gobierno de los Usos y Costumbres y los actores están involucrados en el programa Oportunidades; por ultimo se consideran los impactos de las relaciones entre los actores de Oportunidades y los funcionarios del gobierno de los Usos y Costumbres, así como se dan algunas recomendaciones para el mejoramiento del programa dentro de las comunidades indígenas.

## Key words/Palabras Clave:

*Usos y costumbres*, poverty alleviation, *Oportunidades*, indigenous communities of Mexico. Usos y costumbres, combate a la pobreza, Oportunidades, comunidades indígenas de México

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## Introduction

Poverty is one of the main problems that plagues Mexico. The government has made significant efforts to reduce it through social programs. Perhaps the most significant is the Program of Human Development *Oportunidades*, which focuses on mitigating the rural/semi rural poverty of peasant women.

In Mexico, being a peasant maintains a close relationship with being indigenous; although not all peasants in the country belong to an ethnic group, the majority of indigenous people work in agriculture<sup>1</sup>.

Oaxaca (see the Annex 1 and 2) is the Mexican state that contains the majority of the country's indigenous population. Despite strong federal investment in social programs there, it is also one of the most poverty-stricken regions in Mexico<sup>2</sup>.

The main difference between the indigenous communities and the *mestizo* settlements are the customs, traditions, language and the corporate government of *Usos y Costumbres*. This is the conduit through which indigenous people organize political and religious life inside their communities. It is important to understand this form of indigenous organization, in order to also understand life in the community and to apply social policy, such as *Oportunidades*. This understanding allows the observer to avoid the possibility of conflict between the perceptions of the predominantly-mestizo policymakers and the reality of life in the indigenous communities. Avoiding such conflicts might facilitate the effectiveness of a program that has a standard design in a different and specific context like the indigenous communities?

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<sup>1</sup> Sixty seven percent of the indigenous population works in agricultural activities, from the rest of the Mexican population only 22% works on it. (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The poorest places in Mexico (called *microrregiones*) are those where the indigenous people used to live. Oaxaca is composed by 570 towns, from which 475 are classified like *microrregiones*. (Unidad Administrativa de Microrregiones 2007)

*Oportunidades* focuses on the empowerment of women, yet in indigenous communities the role of women in society is very limited. An example of this is in the sphere of political. In the corporate government of Usos y Costumbres women do not participate in the collective decision making process. It is important, therefore, that policymakers consider what impact this might have on the the performance of the program that is based on political action.

This paper was based on the results of an ethnography field research in a community zapoteca Villa Diaz Ordaz, Oaxaca, (See the Annex 3). It includes 13 interviews with persons involved in the operation of the program at the end of the 2006.

### **Brief description of *Oportunidades*' operation**

In 2000, around 50 million of Mexico's 100 million citizens were in poverty<sup>3</sup>. According to an opinion poll done by the Ministry of Social Development (now SEDESOL) given to three thousand homes in poverty, 35% of the interviewees affirmed that being poor means "having nothing to eat" and 34% answered "not having material resources for surviving" (Székely, 2003). Nevertheless, Sen (1999) affirms that not only are scarcity of food and material resources for living measurements of poverty; restrictions of individual and collective freedoms may be both a cause and consequence of poverty. Also, he defines poverty as the deprivation of necessary elements for the human life within a society, for example preventing people from political participation in the decision-making process (see also *Comité Técnico para la medición de la pobreza* 2002).

In 2006, *Oportunidades*, the most important poverty reduction program in Mexico, had a budget of 35 billion pesos. It operated in 86,091 settlements (villages, towns, cities) and assisted 5 million families, approximately 25 million Mexicans. The

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<sup>3</sup> "López-Calva y Székely (2001) affirm that 23,3% of the Mexican population lives in extreme poverty and Hernández Laos y Velázquez (2002) that 30,1% of the population are in extreme poverty and 50,1% in moderate poverty". (*Comité Técnico para la Medición de la Pobreza [CTMP]*, 2002:53)

expenditure of the program in 2005 totaled approximately 24 billion pesos (De la Torre, 2005:16)<sup>4</sup>

The operational cost of the program is minimal: the budget that *Oportunidades* had in 2004 was 22,406 million Mexican pesos, of which 93,8% were dedicated to poverty-stricken homes, and only 6,19% to the operative cost (De la Torre 2005). Evaluations have supported program efficiency. These evaluations, displaying how resources are spent, have been conducted by external organizations and given to SEDESOL. The evaluation contrasts a population sample that receives the benefits against those that do not, and a population sample before and after they have received the resources.

The program gives conditional cash transfers (approximately 250 Mexican pesos, 17 Euros each month) to the women or mother of the poorest families and has 3 focuses: nutrition, health and education<sup>5</sup>.

Education: the program assigns conditional cash transfers to mothers with at least one child attending primary or secondary school. The transfer is solely contingent on attending school; good grades aren't mandatory. A child that attends high school receives the cash transfers directly into a bank account. The amount of the scholarships varies; it increases depending on the grade level, and considers gender. In 2003, 64% of children and adolescents in rural areas completed at least five grades, progressed in their studies and spent more time doing school homework (De la Torre, 2005: 11).

Health: The program tries to improve the health of the participants and to prevent diseases through consultations or routine examinations and lectures on nutrition, hygiene, preventive and reproductive health. The primary target is women and children age 5 or younger providing them with information and assistance in such areas as immunization

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<sup>4</sup> Approximately, in 2006 the current exchange between Mexican Pesos and Dollar was 11 pesos per 1 dollar (approximately 15 pesos for a Euro).

<sup>5</sup> Because these are dimensions of the human well-being and the absence or the bad conditions in these are consequences of poverty (See Skoufias, 2005)

and early detection of cancers of the reproductive system. Other family members receive treatment for obesity, tuberculosis, diabetes and hypertension. During 2003, participating children under 6 years old had 20% less sick days, and people aged from 16 to 45 years old used more centers of health and contraceptive methods. They also acquired knowledge about family planning, reproductive health, vaccination and self health. The young people who participated in the program consumed less tobacco and alcohol (De la Torre 2005: 11).

Nutrition: The families receive the conditional cash transfer in order to buy food. In addition, the program provides nutritional supplements to breast-feeding children and pregnant women; it monitors the children's weight and height in order to prevent anemia or undernourishment. Children aged 2 to 6 that received the assistance increased their height by 0,67 centimeters and had fewer incidences of anemia (De la Torre 2005).

The program also gives cash transfers to people aged 70 years old older and pensions and a subsidy of 50 pesos (3 Euros approximately) for payment of electricity and gas.

The beneficiaries of the program increased familial expenditure in education and clothes for children, invested more in domestic equipment and acquired animals for agricultural work, started entrepreneurial activities, made home improvements and spent less money on alcohol and tobacco consumption (De la Torre 2005).

### **The corporate government system (*Usos y Costumbres*) of an Oaxacan indigenous community**

The *Usos y Costumbres* corporate government is the civic, social, political and religious organization that today remains in many indigenous communities in some places of Mexico. Only a few of the country's states, however, such as Oaxaca, have been recognized by the federal government (due to a fear of a popular uprising similar to Chiapas in 1994).

Clarke (2000) defines *Usos y Costumbres* as: “the indigenous, collective, cultural and material expression, which imposes to share the language, earth, masculine assembly, “cargo” (post), festivity and *Tequio* (voluntary community work). This indigenous characteristic is based and expressed on the communitarian level, not delimited by a language or an ethnic group”.

The *Usos y Costumbres* bases their organization (political and religious) on a series of hierarchic posts that the inhabitants of the indigenous communities perform without receiving remuneration. Rather, they obtain prestige and social recognition of the whole community with this (Valdivia, 1994:101). The different posts are communitarian work that all physical and mentally able married men are required to perform, so that they can be considered citizens and have the right to vote in the assemblies and be elected for a post in the municipality. The posts can vary in their functions, for example a religious post, like the *Mayordomo* (butler) that are in charge of covering the cost of the festivity of the patron Saint of the town, or civil and political posts like *Topiles* (police), Mayors and council men. The municipal workers, like Mayors, are chosen through an assembly, without the process of ballot boxes or political campaigns: the system of parties does not exist there. The assemblies for choosing the governors, is similar to a primitive democracy and considers the original idea of the republic where the citizens participate actively in the government. In the Mexico’s Colonial period this corporate government was named “*República de Indios*” (The Republic of the Natives)<sup>6</sup>.

In theory, the citizens have transparency in the information and corruption is non-existent. Nevertheless, before the left wing had won the elections in Oaxaca, the great part of the mayors elected by *Usos y Costumbres* was ratified by the one party dominant-rule PRI (The Institutional Revolution Party). Also, as Recondo (2006) sustains the organization in the *Usos y Costumbres* was hardly utilized by the PRI to win the elections

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<sup>6</sup> The “*Republic of Natives*” was a special form of government imposed to the natives in the Colonial period of Mexico. According to the size of the town and the number of inhabitants, at the top was the governor, one or more mayors and the councilmen. A Republic of Natives included also some little towns that depended of a “head town” where the governor was. Today many towns in Oaxaca maintain this form of organization. (Recondo 2006)

in the entire state. Sometimes only municipal authorities (not the citizens) were charged to fill all the ballots during the elections or the authorities instructed the people to vote only for the PRI's candidate.

The *Usos y Costumbres* is applied to women, migrants, university graduates, non-Catholics, and residents of communities located outside the municipality. Mayoral candidates must be people with trajectory of community work. It doesn't matter if the person has a very basic instruction: all that matters is his performance in his previous post. The Mayor doesn't receive remuneration.

In the same way when one citizen commits an offence, the punishment is making community work. With this, the process of justice is not as complex as the bureaucratic procedures of the *mestizos* settlements. Only the crimes are judged in the State Court in the city of Oaxaca<sup>7</sup>. The women participation in the assemblies is discussed by Rivera-Lona and Tinoco-Ojanguren (2003). They affirm that women only can stay in the assemblies if they are judged for committing an offence, and many times the offence is related with the roles of women in society (sexuality, fertility and marriage and couple relationships).

### **The system of *Mayordomías***

Some scholars argue that the system of *Mayordomías* has its origin in Pre-Hispanic celebrations where craftsmen or other people participated in the celebration of a deity (Chance and Taylor 1985). Others argue that this kind of organization was imposed by the Spanish conquerors to evangelize, to organize the communities, to collect tributes, etc (Valdivia 1999: 76-77).

During the Colonial period, there were brotherhoods that were a kind of cooperative where the entire town donated money towards the cost of the celebration of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ley de los derechos de los pueblos y comunidades indígenas del estado de Oaxaca. Periódico Oficial. Artículo 3, fracción VIII. Oaxaca, México, (1998).*

the Saints, but due to bad management, the brotherhoods were eliminated and replaced by personal sponsorship of a *Mayordomo*, the man who had the responsibility to cover all the costs of the festivity.

The Catholic religion plays an important role in the life of the indigenous communities of Oaxaca (although Protestantism has expanded considerably). The work of the *Mayordomo* consists of taking care of the main Saint that is in the altar of the town church. He cleans the altar, changes the flowers and coordinates with the others *Mayordomos*<sup>8</sup> in order to organize and to pay for the Mass (religious service) and band that plays music during the festivity, buys fireworks and sponsors the festivity (food and drinks for the whole town). The service *Mayordomía*, can be voluntary or named by the Church Committee (layman people, like the *Mayordomo*). The *Mayordomo* can accept the post according to the resources he possesses, but it is an opportunity to climb the rungs of the social hierarchy, which helps him obtain the respect and recognition of the entire town. The church committee also has a hierarchic organization: at the top is the president, who is the responsible for gaining the permission and sponsorship from the municipal authority to perform the celebration.

### **The *Guelaguetza***

The *Usos y Costumbres* can be a very primitive democracy. It is based on the idea of a Republic where the citizen must serve the community and refund with work everything that the community has given to him. The *Guelaguetza*, is a kind of “social capital” and creates a virtuous circle based on the mutual support: the entire town collaborates and serves each other. This starts from the familial nucleus and extends its productivity, which is necessary and fundamental for the subsistence of the communities, due to the scarce resources of peasants (Clarke 2000).

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<sup>8</sup> The village of Diaz Ordaz has 75, each one in charge of a Saint in the main church or the chapel located to a blocks away on the same street.



## **Impacts of the policy (the relationship between *Oportunidades*' actors and the *Usos y Costumbres* government officials)**

One of the main purposes of this study was to investigate the impact and performance of *Oportunidades* in the corporate indigenous government. First of all, it is important to explain the operation of the program based on the role that the people who participate in it play.

### **Actors**

#### **Centers of Attention and Registry**

A state level office has the responsibility for incorporating more families into the program through the conduction of surveys, scheduling and planning activities, certifying beneficiaries of the program, and coordinating activities with other institutions (Ministry of Education and the Social Security) and banks that give resources to the people. The center works with the town Mayors, but does not participate directly in the program, only the “municipal link” (Councilman of Health) that takes care of the clinic’s needs.

The Councilman is chosen, by *Usos y Costumbres*, according to his performance in his previous post. The Councilman has recognition and prestige inside the community and he can recruit and invite people to the program. He doesn’t receive any remuneration for his work but he is an official that works exclusively for the program.

#### **Committee of Communitarian Promotion**

In the *Usos y Costumbres* system, the women cannot participate in the community decision making process (within the assembly) because it is exclusively for men. The *Oportunidades* program has an assembly for the decision making, where the representation is only feminine; although it is a space for the women, is not necessarily of the same importance as the male-only communitarian assembly. All women who are beneficiaries of the *Oportunidades* meet in a general assembly where the governmental

officials of SEDESOL give information about the program, they vote to choose the “committee of communitarian promotion” (a group of women that are commonly known as “promoters”). For example, from the 220 women who receive *Oportunidades* in Diaz Ordaz, 6 are chosen by the voting process. The presence of the official of the SEDESOL in the assembly is imperative. The promoters have different posts such as “control and monitoring”, “education”, “health” and “nutrition”. The post can vary in its duration, but it does not exceed 3 years. The main function that they realize is verifying that the beneficiary receives money and fulfills the responsibilities of the program and they don’t receive salary for this work (García Torres, M., 2006, December 28<sup>th</sup>).

### **Rural hospitals**

The nurses of the rural hospitals organize talks for beneficiaries of the program. In Diaz Ordaz they create 24 groups of beneficiaries with approximately 10 people each. The talks that they give to the people are about nutrition and preventing diseases (Maldonado, L., 2006, December 18<sup>th</sup>).

### **Schools and teachers**

The municipality of Diaz Ordaz has one kindergarten and two primary schools, but the children receive the scholarship when they are in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. I decided to make the interviews in only one school: the primary school Gregorio Quintero Torres. It has 154 students in total, of which only 28 receive the *Oportunidades* scholarship. The work that the teachers do in this program consists of filling in a document called “E1” so that the student can receive the money and also guarantee that the student goes to the school. The people that work in the rural hospitals and in the school are not part of the government of *Usos y Costumbres* because many of them are not residents of the community.

### **Impacts of the program**

According to the empirical evidence, the program *Oportunidades* mainly impacts the corporate government through one official: the councilman (see in the Annex 4). He is the agent that links the municipality government and the people of the town with the program at the state level. The program directly impacts the families (where the women actively take part in *Usos y Costumbres* when the *Guelaguetza* is realized).

*Oportunidades*, has a social and political impact on the indigenous community but does not affect their religion, because it is a federal program that does not discriminate based on religion. However, only Catholics can participate in *Usos y Costumbres* and become *Mayordomo* or members of the church committee (which is a prerequisite to become a Mayor or councilmen).

On the one hand, it would be interesting if the *Oportunidades* officials approached the church committee, because this committee is also an authority in the town that is as important as all the officials in the municipality. If a relationship between the church committee and the program could be established, the committee could act as a support or an intermediary to the people. But, by the other hand, it could be dangerous because it could increase the discrimination of the people that are not Catholics and do not participate in the government.

The program *Oportunidades* doesn't help the people climb up the social hierarchy of *Usos y Costumbres*. In order to be Mayor, a person needs to be *Mayordomo* first, but if the person wants to be *Mayordomo*, he needs to have many resources for paying for the festivity of the Saint<sup>9</sup>. From this point of view, if the person receives a cash transfer from *Oportunidades* because he and his family are in poverty, he won't have the resources to cover the festivity and one day become a Mayor. *Oportunidades* does not impede the social mobility, it only tries to reduce poverty.

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<sup>9</sup> "The designed people for being Mayor, need to have a certain amount of money in order it can support economically their family while they are in the post" (Recondo 2006)

Likewise, the program doesn't take advantage of "the *Guelaguetza*", which could be incorporated into the program's operation. The people meet in order to support each other and the focus on the goal of obtaining the "common good". This allows them to focus on efforts in order to obtain common goals for the organization that already exist in the indigenous communities.

The *Usos y Costumbres* refrains from negative interference in the program, and isn't difficult to operate in an indigenous context. According to an official from the Center of Help and Registration for the Tlacolula region (where Diaz Ordaz is settled), there is total accessibility and "open doors" in the communities; the problem arises when the local authorities want to solely make the selection of the beneficiaries or manage the program in order to obtain a political benefit, similar to other programs in previous years when the PRI was ruling in the State government (Mayor, P., 2006, December 22<sup>nd</sup>).

In the beginning, there was a cultural resistance in the indigenous communities, because the men wanted to receive the money, similar to other programs that support peasantry like PROCAMPO<sup>10</sup>. More recently indigenous communities have accepted the gender-based approach of the program, but in the government of *Usos y Costumbres*, feminine participation in the decision making and the political life of the community is forbidden: they cannot be citizens because they cannot participate in the communitarian works (*Tequio*). In spite of the attempts of governmental programs that target women, indigenous women are marginalized in Mexico due to 3 conditions: gender, ethnicity and poverty (Fernández Ham, P, 2006).

Owolabi (2003) recommends that the Government must promote education and poverty alleviation based on genre so that women can participate in posts in the corporate government of *Usos y Costumbres*<sup>11</sup>. According to Owolabi's arguments and the data that

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<sup>10</sup> PROCAMPO is a transfer cash program for helping the Mexican agriculture producers of the market loses that result when foreign governments give subsidies to their national producers. The only requisite is to have a land and be registered in the program (*Apoyo y Servicios a la Comercialización Agropecuaria (ASERCA)*, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> "The expansion of women's suffrage in Oaxaca's indigenous communities has occurred as a result of four factors: education, government intervention, migration and the anti-caciquil struggle. The link

shows the program evaluations, it would seem that the main success of *Oportunidades* is that women can make decisions and have an assembly that counterbalances the one that men have. Although this decision refers only to health, education and home management, it is still a great advance. Nevertheless, the reality is different.

First of all, when the members of municipality and women were interviewed about feminine participation in the assemblies, the answers were completely contradictory. The Councilman of Health as well as the Mayor affirmed that women participate in the political life of the community and vote in the assemblies. People from the community said that the only women who have this privilege are the widowed, divorced and single mothers; but in the assemblies women cannot give their opinion. The Mayor assured that the women can occupy posts in the government of *Usos y Costumbres*, for example be in charge of the communitarian store or work in the rural hospital. He called it “small post and services.” They could also go and ask for the opinion of the Councilman if they needed to fix small problems like “fixing a door.” (Martínez, T. 2006, December 20<sup>th</sup>).

A female interviewed that was in charge of a community store assured that she never participated in the assemblies because it was restricted for her. She said that only men make decisions in the *Usos y Costumbres* society (Quino García, E. 2006, December 18<sup>th</sup>).

In the opinion of many women in the community, the *Oportunidades* program doesn't allow them to freely make decisions in the indigenous communities. When the women were asked why they don't participate in the community work (*Tequios*), they answered that those works were designed only for men as well as the assemblies.

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*between education and women's suffrage is self-evident. Women who are educated tend to participate more in local politics. Government intervention is also significant although, until now, the state government has not enacted legislation to ensure that women can vote in U/C elections. Instead, programmes such as PROGRESA (a gender-based poverty-alleviation initiative) and CONASUPO (community stores that provide consumer goods at subsidized prices) have been vital, as communities have created new committees with exclusively female representation. Thus, women have gained an institutional link to the community assembly through the expansion of the cargo system. Third, migration has forced women into social functions that were once reserved for men” (Owolabi, 2003).*

The *Oportunidades* assemblies, which are always coordinated by the SEDESOL officials, only give information about the program to the women. Therefore, the women only have a little power regarding decisions and giving opinions, and they always need to consult with the Councilman of Health regarding those.

*Oportunidades*' committees and the post of "promoters" do not offer greater positions to women, socially, politically, or in the government of *Usos y Costumbres*, because even in their own home the women don't have freedom of election.

Although *Oportunidades* doesn't have problems working parallel to the government of *Usos y Costumbres*, it also doesn't change the practices that restrain the development of women (for example their minimal participation in political affairs and decision making in the community). Even though the program was not designed to accomplish this goal in the indigenous context it is necessary to make some adjustment in order to obtain more female participation. The program was not designed to increase women's political participation, only to empower thought transfers cash, despite the absence of civic participation is also a cause of poverty.

Two female interviewees who are single mothers working in order to support their household are examples of women being decision makers, in contrast to married women. In theory the program contributes to the empowerment of women in their home, but in reality, the women still continue making decisions together with their husbands. Giving additional support to the single mothers and other females who head their households would be a great success. For example, according to the INEGI (2005), 75,5% of 822 288 homes in Oaxaca were headed by men and 24,5% by women. This average could seem small, but is more than the national average (23.1%), and more than the State of Nuevo Leon (17,1%) (the most prosperous state of Mexico after Mexico city)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> In Díaz Ordaz 16,1% of the total of the homes were headed by women and 83,9% by men. (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, 2005).

Single mothers need more support from the *Oportunidades* program, because they work and receive less salary than men. For example, the following comparison: Nuevo León is one of Mexico's most prosperous states, the women labor force is 36,80% of total women in PEA (Economically Active Population), the number is not as large as Oaxaca, which has Mexico's third largest number (40,28%) of women in the PEA. Nuevo León is third ranked nationally when it comes to states that have smaller income inequity; this doesn't give us information about the comparison between gender and wages, but could show the general gap in salaries inside the country. Oaxaca is one of the main regions that present a substantial gap in salaries (Campos, Naranjo and Saucedo, 2007: 351 y 359).

One of the successes of this program is encouraging the continuation of girls' studies. For example, reports of the National Institute of Women, indicate that in Diaz Ordaz, the attendance of girls of secondary school is only 59,5% in comparison with 75,4% for boys (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres 2005). The program tries to prevent girls from abandoning education and becoming mothers at an early age. If they leave their studies, they would continue the cycle of poverty because they wouldn't have education, and would not be as well prepared for the labor market and they will receive smaller salaries compared to educated girls (Orozco, De Alba and Cordourier 2004: 7).

When I asked some women what they would prefer: to have more money, to have more studies (educational level) or to have a post in the community, all the answers indicated the necessity of knowledge, studying, training and qualification.

The secondary objective of *Oportunidades* is empowering women. The program apparently does not achieve its gender approach objective in an indigenous community, in this case a cash transference does not change the cultural ideology or give the ability of decision making, because the money amount is little and the women are subject to the rules of their home firstly and then of the community second.

It is a notable accomplishment if the government is able to create gender focused programs because women in Mexico are a vulnerable population; nevertheless the indigenous women are too marginalized, first because the ethnicity that bounds them into poverty, and also because gender that keeps them separated from the communitarian life decision making process in the system of *Usos and Costumbres*. Sen (1999) affirms that without the freedom of election and civic participation in the political life, people will remain in poverty. But the political organization and the restriction of women participation only reflects the problem of the women in this society that starts when the roles are imposed since they were children.

When the times pass, the social conditions will change and will give the woman a better position in the society, because there is also a general tendency of the increasing of female heads of families in the indigenous communities because many men are immigrating to the United States. There is hope that things will change in the towns of Oaxaca, where in 2000 there were only 3 female mayors in contrast to 568 male mayors (Aguirre, 2008).

Studies and evaluations done by SEDESOL (See De la Torre 2005) indicate when cash transfers are given to the women; they will give it to cover the needs of their children, such as food and clothing. But this doesn't present a true sense of empowerment. It is better to educate women to have their own initiatives, such as entrepreneurial goals. One of the other questions in the interview that the women were asked was if there was a feminine initiative to work together to make a project that benefits the community but the answer of the women was there wasn't.



## **General guidelines to improve the operation of the program in indigenous communities**

### **Important considerations and recommendations**

#### **Destination of the resources**

All the interviewees assured that they dedicated the resources to providing food and clothes for their children, but many people in the town said that the beneficiaries of the program used the resources to purchase alcohol for the husbands in households. For interviewees, the resource helped them; even though it was just a small amount of money. Their husbands brought larger amounts of monetary resources to the home.

In spite of its negatives and positives, this program needs continuity, increased funding, and greater numbers of participants.

#### **Talks, training and education**

Because there is a lack of access to information or education in indigenous communities, the program's educational lectures take on a much greater importance, becoming a form of training for the daily lives of the people; to many women these talks were very helpful and applicable to their daily life and the management of their home. This type of training becomes a practical way to give education to people with limited resources that live in very remote locations.

There are some doubts about the quality of the health services that are offered in rural and remote locations. Some interviewees said that the clinic sometimes did not have medicine for some illnesses, forcing them to purchase it elsewhere<sup>13</sup>. The rural hospital only takes care of simple diseases: a surgery or a specialization needs to be treated in Tlacolula or Oaxaca city.

According to the rural hospital's personnel it was very difficult for people to fulfill the conditions of the cash transfer, for example, attending medical appointments.

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<sup>13</sup> *The same was founded by Escobar and González (2003) in the qualitative evaluation of the Program.*

Also, it was complicated for the nurses to give talks to illiterate audiences (Maldonado, L., 2006 December 18<sup>th</sup>). In addition, there's doubt about the quality of the education services that are offered in those communities. It is common to have a secondary school teaching by television, and also is very common that the teachers go on strike every year. In 2006, the teachers strike was prolonged for an entire scholar year. In the state of Oaxaca, the average of schooling is 6.4 years (that is to say, the primary level finished), but the national average is 8.1 (second level of secondary school), and for example, states like Nuevo Leon the average surpass the national mean: 9.5 years (first year of high school). (INEGI, 2005).

The aim of the program is to retain the students in the school longer; it only monitors the attendance but not the productivity of the students and qualification. Although the children receive the money to go to the school, they continue missing classes. Parker (2003) assures that *Oportunidades* doesn't have a significant impact on the enrollment increasing in primary school of indigenous communities; the increment is only in secondary or high school by gender. The 16% of the boys and girls continued with their education due to the program.

According to Escobar and Gonzalez (2002) in several communities of Michoacán, Jalisco, Sonora, San Luis Potosí and Veracruz, the program did not diminish the infantile work in those communities.

### **Integration of all the actors**

Many nurses and teachers feel that they are not taken in consideration by the program although they work for the common aim: allowing people to receive the resources. It could be caused by a lack of coordination among all the actors: municipality, rural hospital workers, teachers, officials of *Oportunidades* and the beneficiaries.

For example, the people of SEDESOL do not invite teachers or the rural hospital workers to the assemblies program; this results in many differences and confusion in the

information that each one provides to the beneficiaries. This is an important point; the SEDESOL or the institutions that make the evaluation of the program could organize focus groups with teachers and medical personnel, instead of only asking the beneficiaries. The analysis of the data it could serve to improve the performance of the program.

In addition, according to the interviewees, the main complaint is the assignment of the cash transfers, because they feel that there are people who receive it but don't need it, and vice-versa. This creates frictions and conflicts in a marginalized community where the great majority of people need resources but not all receive them. When the beneficiaries were asked about how they received money, most did not have a clear answer, others answered that the officials of *Oportunidades* visited them and asked them questions about their living situation and observed the state of their home, and other beneficiaries went to the state offices of SEDESOL to register for assistance.

The fault in the resource allocation does not occur because an inadequate assignment methodology, it is due to information and misinformation obtained in the interview. The presence of inadequate and inaccurate information is often a product of distrust.

### **To give confidence**

A great distrust of Mexican government institutions exists, perhaps not only within indigenous communities, and this is most likely due to misinformation. A female interviewee commented that nobody wanted to give information about their living situation or to participate to receive the cash transfer the first time that SEDESOL officials arrived to the village because they were scared that if they received the money from the government, it would want in the parcels or land that they owned. (Cortés and García., 2006, December 19<sup>th</sup>).

## **Perform of duties vs clientelism**

The program deals with the problem that many people do not perform their own duties like send the children to school or go to rural hospitals (according to the opinions of teachers and personnel of health). But, on the other hand, there are many people that feel the obligation to give back the aid that they receive by doing community work; which is very common to observe in the indigenous communities of Oaxaca (because the *Guelaguetza*). For example, the “basic cleaning” program. This program exists in each rural clinic and consists of cleaning the streets of the towns to prevent illness. Although this program is not part of *Oportunidades*, the people who are in it participate (Maldonado, 2006, December 18<sup>th</sup>).

Nevertheless, there are complaints from the personnel of health clinics and the teachers about politicians that take advantage of the beneficiaries, such as bring them to their meetings and saying that if they refuse to go they will be removed from the program (Martínez, A.J., 2006, December 20<sup>th</sup>).

## **Conclusions**

In Mexico poverty is neither homogenous, nor exclusive; the poorest people of the country are the indigenous, and the poorest of the poor are the indigenous women. The study of indigenous issues is complex. It is important when applying public policies for poverty alleviation to take into consideration the customs and the form of government of the groups in order to know which of this organization that already exist could help us to make a better performance of this kind of programs.

If we answer the initial question: Could a program that has a standard design work well in a different and specific context like the indigenous communities? The answer is yes. *Oportunidades* can perform well in indigenous communities, the empirical evidence shows that the program works and there is any negative interference between the indigenous organization and the program. The problems that the program presents are

always caused by external things (complains in assignation of resources, the quality of the health services and education, etc) and are founded also in the evaluations made to the rest of the country.

Targeting women doesn't succeed at all either in the indigenous communities nor the *mestizo* settlements<sup>14</sup>: it gives money to the women, but it does not give freedom to them for decision making (neither in the home nor in the community); and it also does not completely end poverty, it only provides for immediate needs.

The indigenous communities are adapted to *Oportunidades*, but not vice versa, because it would be very difficult and it would generate more administrative expenses to make a distinction between “the indigenous poverty” and the other poor populations, and to create a special program for each type of poverty.

Being poor from an indigenous perspective could be different of being poor from the *mestizo* perspective, if we suppose that poverty is also a “cultural” matter (like there is in many cultures of the world). In Mexico, poverty doesn't distinguish the ethnicity of the people: half of the total country population is in poverty (from which 10% is indigenous). The aim of the ethnographies done for this research wasn't to ask people in the indigenous community what does it means be poor for them.

The program works in order to remove the people from extreme poverty, the problem is that the resources are limited; in a country with more than 100 million inhabitants, the aid is only given to those living in extreme poverty (a quarter of the population, the half of the poor). The efforts of the federal government are insufficient, therefore the people living in poverty prefers to immigrate to the United States than to receive governmental aid. In the state of Oaxaca, 0,3% of the population has been moving abroad, mostly to the United States.

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<sup>14</sup> “The evidences in the increasing of the self-management income that comes from *Oportunidades* are not enough to conclude that women are being empowered” (Escobar y González 2003:56)

In 2005, Oaxaca's families received over 1 million dollars from their relatives who worked abroad; the people in Oaxaca only received 1 million Mexican pesos from *Oportunidades*. According to the evaluations (De la Torre 2005, Bautista 2004, Hernández and Del Razo 2004) the program improves the quality of life of the beneficiaries for a short time period. Nevertheless, there are other alternatives for helping people in the long term.

In the public poll made by SEDESOL in August 2003, (Székely) 72% Mexicans think stopping poverty expansion is a national emergency because poverty in Mexico has generated economic and political instability. In Oaxaca, one of the states with the most economic gaps has problems with guerrilla and in 2006 there was a teacher's strike where many people supported the teachers' revolt against the government. The recognition of the *Usos y Costumbres* that occurred in Oaxaca due to fear of EZLN (Owolabi 2003) did not serve to obtain a social peace in the state. Giving people autonomy so that they can organize politically is the right thing to do; and it is necessary for attaining social peace in the southern states of Mexico in regards to civil rights and granting a freedom of organization in the decision making process.

To be poor is more than not having enough food, access to health services and education, dress, footwear, homes or money to pay for services or transport: it also includes the lack of *freedom*. In the system of *Usos y Costumbres* the people that cannot pay for the fiesta of Saint (that is to say, being a *Mayordomo*), hardly will be able to accede to the position of Mayor in its community or to have a politic post, since each position is linked with another. The poverty does not let them climb up the social hierarchy of the indigenous towns and the women cannot be a part of the government.

Also, to analyze only the functioning of this program and this kind of corporate government is not exhaustive to make conclusions about the situation of the women in the indigenous community. The corporate government of *Usos y Costumbres* only

reflects one side of the entire problem that face the women in the communities<sup>15</sup> and that starts with the roles imposed by society in the familiar nucleus since they are children.

When women obtain more voice in the process of decision making in their towns they change the agenda of development in order to give priority to the basic needs (De la Paz and Salles 2006:71). Also King, Klasen and Porter (2008) affirm that there are 4 options to empower women: increase and improve girls schooling, provide support for women reproductive role, reduce women's financial vulnerability through microfinance and strengthen women's political voice through affirmative action. The first 2 are provided by *Oportunidades*, the second and the third are options that the program needs to incorporate in order to be more complete. The option of Microfinance is the tasted trend to poverty alleviation and only requires an increment in the budget of *Oportunidades* and changes in the rules of operation. But for "strengthen women's political voice through affirmative action" is a more complicated thing above all in the indigenous communities and the respect of *Usos y costumbres* and self-government-

Kin, Klasen and Porter give the example of the Panchayat and the constitutional amendments in India, where women can have sits in the assemblies in the towns, and can participate in the decision taking process resulting in the welfare of the entire community.

*Oportunidades* could change and incorporate new objectives in order to influence for increasing the political participation of women without use it to political interest or increase the clientelism? Could the *Usos y Costumbres* incorporate the women in the decision taking process without losing or affecting the tradition, For example, that the "municipal link" between the program and the Municipal authorities were a woman: the councilwoman of health? How can we change the established structures of organization? There are open questions for solving.

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<sup>15</sup> There are other things where the indigenous women have disadvantage and they need to fight to get their rights, for example: "economic autonomy (defined as the right of indigenous women to have equal access and control over means of production), political autonomy (their basic political rights), physical autonomy (to have control over their own bodies and to live without violence), and socio-cultural autonomy (defined as the right to maintain specific identities as indigenous people)" (Hernández 2007:12)

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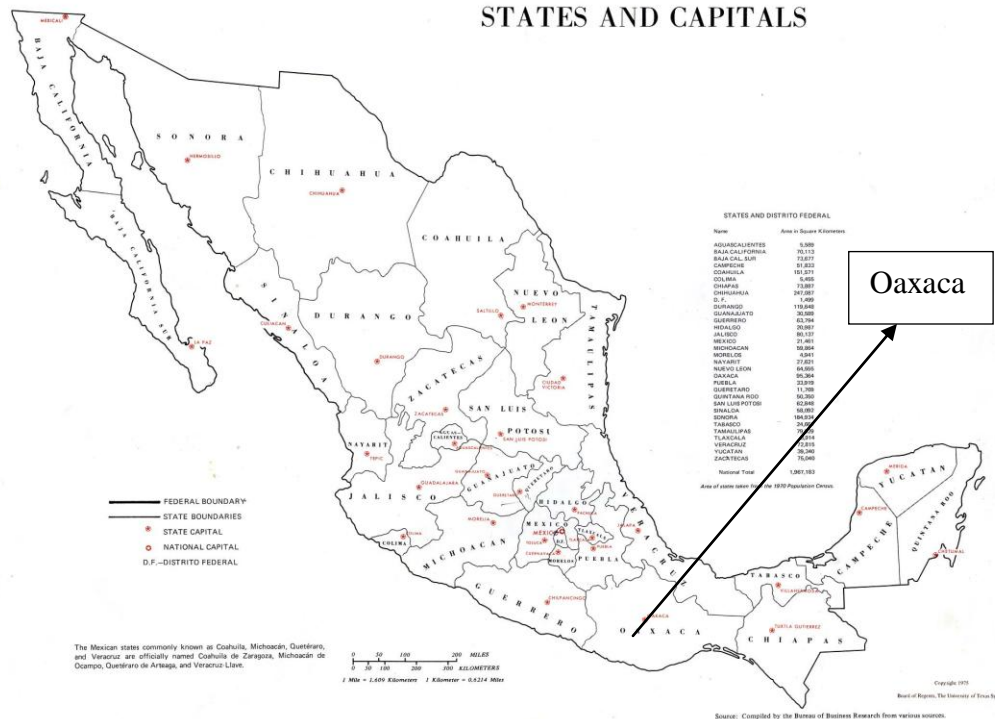
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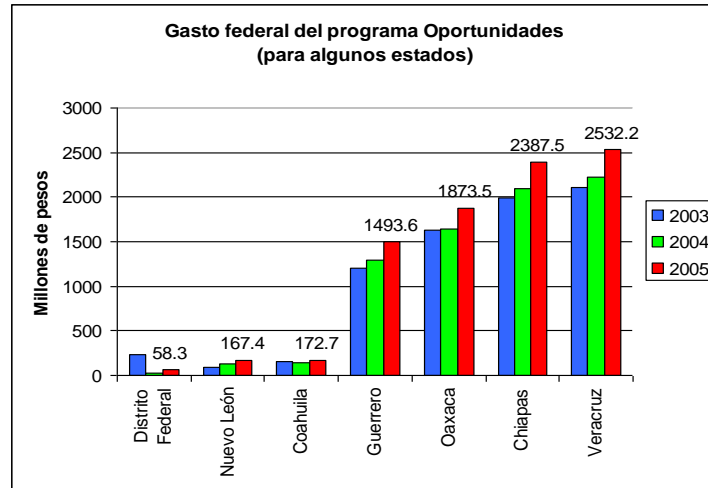
# Annexes

## 1. Map of Mexico



**2. A comparison between some Mexican States: Oportunidades expenditure and the Human Development Index.**

***Oportunidades* Federal Expenditure 2003-2005 for some Mexican states**



Source: De la Torre 2005: 18-19

**Human Development Index (HDI)**

Mexican State	HDI	Health	Education	Income
DF	0.8830	0.8476	0.8997	0.9018
Nuevo León	0.8451	0.8427	0.8577	0.8349
Coahuila	0.8284	0.8403	0.8582	0.7866
Guerrero	0.7296	0.8031	0.7473	0.6384
Oaxaca	0.7194	0.8026	0.7491	0.5976
Chiapas	0.7076	0.7990	0.7372	0.5868

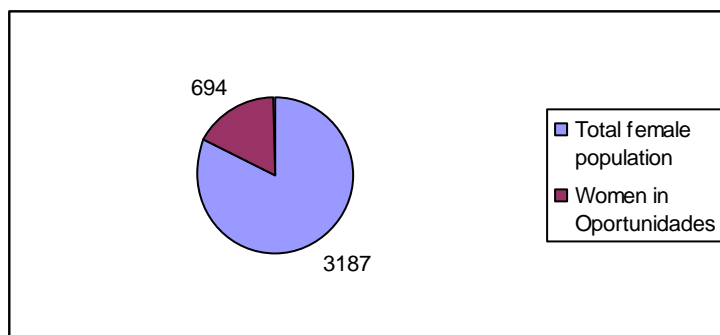
Source: Programa de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (PNUD) (2004).

### 3. Some statistics about Villa Diaz Ordaz

<b>Area</b>	209.23 km <sup>2</sup>
<b>Population</b>	5,859 inhabitants
<b>Indigenous population</b>	82.33% of the total population
<b>Language</b>	Zapoteco and Spanish
<b>Working population</b>	1,815 persons (891 work in agriculture, 429 in manufacturing, 238 in construction)
<b>Salary</b>	The wage of the 89.22% of the population in Diaz Ordaz is between 0.39 cents of Euro and 0.79 cents of Euro per hour.
<b>Housing characteristics</b>	7.35% of the houses without drainage; 2.16% without electrification; 3.54% without water; 57.74 % overcrowding.
<b>National and international migration</b>	0.55% of the population
<b>Literacy</b>	82.82% (49.36% didn't finish the primary education)

Sources: INEGI 2000 and INAFED 2002.

### Distribution of *Oportunidades* in Díaz Ordaz



Source: SEDESOL (2006). *Padrón de familias beneficiarias del programa Oportunidades para el Municipio de Villa Diaz Ordaz Oaxaca.*

#### 4. Diagram of the relationship between Oportunidades and the Usos y Costumbres

