



How to Overcome Communication and Cultural Barriers to Improve Service Provision to Indigenous Populations

Overview

How could Mexico implement its flagship conditional cash transfer program—Oportunidades, now Prospera¹—more effectively to help indigenous populations break the transmission of intergenerational poverty? To better serve indigenous populations, Oportunidades needed to overcome the cultural and communication barriers between the program implementers and its indigenous beneficiaries. Improving communication was key to increasing the success of the program's own initiatives, especially since indigenous beneficiaries had higher dropout rates than did their nonindigenous peers. These dropouts were costly for the program and endangered its long-term impact. In response, and as part of a World Bank operation, Oportunidades created an Indigenous Peoples Plan (IPP) that identified actions to be undertaken to ensure better services and support to indigenous populations. Among the IPP interventions, the Bilingual Promoters Project pilot hired bilingual frontline personnel to communicate with beneficiaries in their own languages. In addition, administrative rules were adjusted; a training program and certification system for bilingual social workers was introduced; and a self-sustaining evaluation system was established. As a result, indigenous people participated more fully in the program, the populations received messages in culturally appropriate ways, and the number of staff interacting with indigenous people in their native languages increased from 110 in 2010 to 562 in 2015.

Key contextual conditions: In an effort to improve the living conditions of the poor, Mexico's federal government launched a pioneering conditional cash transfer program in 1997. The program's goal in the long term is to contribute to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty by targeting the poorest citizens. The program has had important modifications over time and has changed its name to Prospera Program of Social Inclusion. Although the program does not have a particular focus on indigenous populations, by 2014, out of the 6.1 million families covered by the program, 24.9 percent were considered indigenous. Indigenous populations do not necessarily speak Spanish as a first language, something that hinders the delivery of public services and can deepen social exclusion. Evaluations of the impact of the program have suggested that communication and cultural barriers prevent indigenous beneficiaries from taking full advantage of social services and, as a result, of program benefits.



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PROJECT DATA

PARTNER ORGANIZATION:

World Bank

ORGANIZATION TYPE:

Multilateral

DELIVERY CHALLENGES:

Identity, culture, and norms; Social, environment, and geographical context; Citizen participation and community engagement

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE:

Inclusion of marginalized populations

SECTOR:

Social protection

COUNTRY:

Mexico

REGION:

North America

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¹ The case study refers to the conditional cash transfer program primarily as Oportunidades, but important changes have occurred, and since 2014 the program has been known as Prospera. There have been substantial changes to the conditional cash transfer over the years that are beyond the scope of this case study. However, among the key changes, Prospera intends to create sustainable poverty reduction by connecting the extreme poor to a range of other social programs, including income-generation activities and social inclusion, while still providing conditional cash transfers to eligible populations.

Key stakeholders: The indigenous communities participating in Oportunidades, the Secretary of Social Development (SEDESOL), the National Coordination of Oportunidades (now Prospera) the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), the National Council for Standardization and Certification of Occupational Competencies (CONOCER), Center of Investigation and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), and the World Bank.

Lessons Learned

- Hiring bilingual indigenous people as frontline operators can have an effect on participation and can build trust between the communities and the program.
- When delivering social services to indigenous populations, a program should establish a flexible model, since one size does not necessarily fit all.
- Culturally and linguistically appropriate messaging for diverse populations can be more effective in changing behavior than can generalized communications.
- Qualitative evaluations can be helpful in providing evidence to enable program adaptation and course correction.
- Drawing on the experience of existing models for reaching indigenous populations can help a program avoid mistakes and build on the success of the past.

Development Challenge

- Break the transmission of intergenerational poverty and foster the inclusion of marginalized populations.

Delivery Challenges

- Addressing communication and cultural barriers for service provision.
- Reaching beneficiaries that live in remote areas.
- Adjusting operational rules and training procedures.
- Recruiting and training bilingual staff.



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