The Right to Information for Marginalized Groups
The Experience of Proyecto Comunidades in Mexico 2005-2007

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. BACKGROUND</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMUNIDADES PROJECT:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVALUATION AS PART OF THE PROCESS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. THE ORGANIZATIONS’ WORK IN THE STATES</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. EDUCATING FROM A RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. PROJECT CLOSURE AND THE INTERRUPTION OF THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(RTI) AWARENESS CAMPAIGN IN DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. LESSONS AND CHALLENGES</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2005, Mexico’s Federal Freedom of Information Institute (Instituto Federal de Acceso a la Información Pública, IFAI) requested a grant from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to develop the Proyecto Comunidades (the Communities Project). It sought to give marginalized communities an understanding of the right to information as a way to empower their residents vis-à-vis the authorities. The project’s activities ran from the last quarter of that year through the end of 2007, and twenty civil society organizations and marginalized communities in nine Mexican states participated. The main result of the project was the identification of effective strategies for raising public awareness about the right to information in communities that were clearly isolated from the government decisionmaking that affects them.

In Mexico, a small group that, in reality, already has the power to access public information currently enjoys the right to information (RTI). The average person rarely exercises this right, and people whom progress has left behind almost never use it. We are convinced that it is possible to raise public awareness about RTI among the country’s most disadvantaged citizens. Indeed, this is absolutely necessary in order to improve the conditions in which those people live and their ability to defend themselves independently against government officials. This report describes the experience of the Comunidades Project as a successful case of social advocacy. We have written it principally for those people who are interested in understanding and applying effective mechanisms for the adoption of this basic right and for social empowerment.

The Comunidades Project involved several IFAI administrative units, along with specialists in grassroots work with organizations and social capacity building. A commission coordinated the project, and the institute’s governing board was involved in decisionmaking and monitoring the project during its implementation. One of the project’s features, which set it apart from any other substantive IFAI activity, was its ongoing assessment by external evaluators—distinguished researchers from UNAM’s School of Political and Social Sciences.

Among other things, this independent evaluation allowed us to correct the project’s course as we proceeded with its implementation. It also highlighted various lessons learned from the experience. For example, we know that marginalized communities can be empowered to employ the right to information.
However, as a right that is difficult to assimilate and effectively exercise, it falls outside traditional forms of mass—and costly—promotion. In particular, for beneficiaries to adopt the RTI, there needs to be an environment of trust, a pedagogy that is suitable for their conditions, and a monitoring during the process. According to the evaluators, the participation of civil society organizations that understood their strategic role in the effort helps account for the favorable results of the project activities to promote the adoption of the RTI. Those organizations managed to build, or take advantage of, trust within their communities in order to stimulate and maintain the communities’ involvement throughout the project.

The participating organizations connected the exercise of the RTI to addressing a community’s particular problems, and they adapted learning dynamics to the beneficiaries’ profiles and the communities’ infrastructure. In other words, they customized their work for each community and gave it a practical purpose. Among other things, they conducted specific exercises to teach people how to submit requests for public information, and they managed to connect the right to information at the federal level with the right to information at local levels (primarily municipal). Based on this experience, we can state that the right to public information acquires meaning and utility when people understand it as a useful tool for preserving other basic rights and for addressing specific needs. With that focus, it is possible to increase communities’ ability to get involved in the public arena and to improve their own environment. That imbues this fundamental right with intrinsic value.

In summary, carrying out the Comunidades Project allowed us to identify appropriate strategies and methodologies for encouraging the adoption of the RTI in marginalized communities. This has at least one consequence that is worth greater consideration: the living conditions of people who are distanced from government officials and their policies can be improved, their poverty can be overcome, and the ability to get involved in their own environment can be developed, all based on obtaining information and then taking the consequent actions.

Unfortunately, because of bureaucratic politics, in January 2008, most of the IFAI’s commissioners decided not to continue the Comunidades Project, even though this posed the risk of wasting the lessons learned during two and half years of work. This decision was also made in the absence of any viable institutional alternatives to fulfill the legal mandate to promote the RTI in marginalized communities. However, for other agencies committed to effectively raising awareness about this right, the project’s lessons remained valid: it is
possible to broaden the use of the RTI in marginalized communities, if the public institutions charged with this responsibility involve intermediary agencies that are able to build trust and talk persuasively to residents of these places. This document is testimony to that fact.
INTRODUCTION

The Comunidades Project, true to its name, was a collective effort for citizen empowerment via the right to information (RTI). The relevance of the project’s results was reflected in the generous sharing of knowledge and experience by the project’s participants. The Comunidades Project demonstrated that the right to information strengthens citizens and contributes to consolidating democracy, insofar as RTI returns to the people their power in the public arena. One of the project’s principal virtues was finding mechanisms to raise awareness among the most disadvantaged citizens about a right that would enable them to improve their living conditions by reducing asymmetries between government officials and the governed, through the use of knowledge about public information. There is nothing like ignorance to bring about abuse and oppression. The RTI can resolve this by endowing citizens with knowledge about government officials and their actions that affect local communities.

The document in your hands is directed principally to those people who do not grasp the utility of the right to information for improving the lives of individuals and, above all, the life of a community. We believe that the experiences and testimonies compiled in these pages can contribute ideas that civil organizations, community leaders, and even public officials can use to become familiar with and exercise a right that can have an effect on the quality of life of individuals and groups.

A particularly valuable feature of the Comunidades Project was its ability to integrate the knowledge bases, infrastructures, and the experiences of a variety of organizations: an international foundation, a government agency, civil society organizations, and members of marginalized communities. We hope that by identifying the principal factors that made this collaborative process possible, other organizations, leaders, and officials will find clues to facilitate the coordination of their actions with the help of the RTI.

One of the objectives of this report is to recognize the organizations’ and the communities’ enormous effort to find a way to make the RTI meaningful and to explain how and under what circumstances they achieved this.

1The ‘Comunidades’ or ‘communities’ referred to in this project are the clients with which the participating organizations typically work, and they comprise a variety of groups: squatters, artisans, ejidatarios, peasant laborerscampesinos, indigenous people, women, youth, and children. The term ‘comunidades’ refers to the set of people with whom the participating organizations maintained an ongoing, close dialogue related to their shared purpose and that, for the most part, are excluded from formal decisionmaking agencies in the public arena.
We have organized the content in seven chapters and an appendix. The first explains, in broad-brush strokes, the context in which the Comunidades Project began. The second describes the project’s principal characteristics and the role that evaluation played in its design. In the third, we summarize the organizations’ work in six states: Puebla, Jalisco, Nuevo Leon, Veracruz, the Federal District, and Mexico State. The fourth chapter emphasizes noteworthy aspects of the methodology used by the organizations in their fieldwork, and the fifth discusses the principal findings of the external evaluation by researchers from the School of Political and Social Sciences at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de (National Autonomous University, UNAM). The sixth chapter is dedicated to briefly describing the media coverage and the project’s influence on public opinion, and it offers some elements that explain its demise, with the closure of its activities.

In the final chapter, the reader will find recommendations and specific steps that we can use to move forward in raising awareness about marginal populations’ right to information.

In order to include the viewpoints of the organizations that made the Comunidades Project possible, the appendix contains the reflections of a subset of participants who agreed to prepare a testimonial about the experiences of their organizations.

Mexico City, February 2009
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Civil society organizations made the Comunidades Project a reality. Above all, it was a collective effort. We also wish to thank those who contributed to the project’s success from other arenas and in various ways.

We especially thank C.R. Hibbs and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for the trust they placed in the team to carry out this pioneering project. In addition to an always kind yet critical oversight that alerted us to the risks and weaknesses, which are difficult to see from the inside, the Foundation unfailingly dealt with us in a courteous, pleasant, committed, and solidary manner throughout the project’s development, which was essential in particularly difficult moments.

We thank the officials of the IFAI who generously agreed to be part of the Executive Committee that closely monitored the project. We are grateful for the time they dedicated to the project, for their review of its progress, and for their valuable contribution to maintaining its rigor and direction. Although this list of IFAI colleagues is inevitably incomplete, nevertheless, the names of José Luis Marzal Ruiz, Joaquín Solís Arias, Alfonso Hernández Valdés, Manuel Matus Velasco, Ricardo Becerra Laguna, Jimena Dada, and Sergio López Menéndez are among those people who, in one way or another, left their imprint on the project.

Similarly, we thank the members of the Comunidades Project Advisory Council for their valuable contributions: Helena Hofbauer, Jonathan Fox, Sergio Águayo, Roberto Newell, and José Octavio López Presa. They made it possible to count on views of experts of the highest professional stature in evaluating the significance and impact of the work from an outside perspective.

We especially thank Elvia Arzate, Marlene Romo, Susana Garaiz, and Facundo González for their collaboration. They efficiently yet warmly left their special mark on the daily dialogue with the civil society organizations, overcoming with professionalism the large and small obstacles that we confronted during the twenty-eight memorable months that we worked together.

We also wish to thank Guillermo Noriega, Juan E. Pardinas, and Alfonso Osegueda for their careful reading of the first draft and their invaluable recommendations that substantially improved the final document.
1. BACKGROUND

In order to provide the context that led to the initiation of the Comunidades Project, this section discusses the role of the civil society sector in promoting the Federal Transparency and Access to Public Government Information Act (Ley Federal de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información Pública Gubernamental, from here forward the Transparency Act).

The guarantee of the right to information in Mexico was the culmination of a long struggle by civil society, and it represents a major advance in the construction of our democracy. Several sectors were protagonists in the process, but in the vanguard was the so-called Oaxaca Group (Grupo Oaxaca), a civil-society movement that crystallized shortly after the 2000 federal elections as a key engine behind the right-to-information movement. The Oaxaca Group, so baptized by a journalist from the New York Times, urged journalists, civil society organizations, scholars, and lawyers to attend a meeting held in Oaxaca City in May 2001. There they discussed the challenges facing freedom of information in Mexico. In the framework of that meeting and in the following months, the members of the Oaxaca Group prepared a draft legislative bill, which they made public in October of that year. At the same time, they passionately lobbied congressional deputies and government officials.

“The most effective way to guarantee that the institutions respond more efficiently to the problems of poverty, the environment, and discrimination and, in general, to our society’s broad political, economic, and social concerns consists of promoting open government information and transparency in public administration. Putting these mechanisms into action allows society to reveal and review any abuse, illicit activity, or favoritism in which government officials are involved, so that public opinion can take appropriate action.”

-IFAI, Second Work Report to the Mexican Congress, 2005

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3 Referring to the Oaxaca Group, Juan Francisco Escobedo has said, “This group managed to put the issue of the right to information on the public agenda in terms of the right to access government information. It has displayed a surprising ability to negotiate in the public arena and with the state’s branches of power. It even was able to persuade the PAN opposition party in the Chamber of Deputies to support the draft bill for a federal access to information law that a technical commission within that same partisan group had formulated. The document reached the status of a draft bill on December 6, 2001, when it was presented before the Chamber of Deputies in plenary session, with the signature and support of the other political parties—PRI, PRD, PVEM, PT, and Convergencia Democrática. This political negotiation driven by civil society constitutes an unprecedented event in the history of the authoritarian political regime” (Juan Francisco Escobedo, “Movilización de opinión pública en México: El caso del Grupo Oaxaca y de la Ley Federal de Acceso a la Información Pública,” Derecho comparado de la información pública 2 [July-December 2003], p. 71).
According to Kate Doyle, director of the Mexico Project of the National Security Archive at George Washington University, the pressure from civil society caused a sea change in how the concepts and contents of the draft bill developed inside the government. Various ambiguities, omissions, or legal gaps in the original were remedied thanks to the consensus that emerged after months of debate and pressure from members of the media, scholars, and representatives of opposition parties. Doyle concluded that the civil society’s reaction influenced the changes, with the outcome a much better legislative bill. She also noted that it retained a large part of the Oaxaca Group draft, and it thus incorporated the concerns of civil society.

As a result, in mid-2002, the Mexican Congress unanimously passed the Transparency Act. As mandated in that law, the Federal Freedom of Information Institute (IFAI) began its work at the beginning of 2003. It was established as a decentralized public agency, with its own legal status and assets, as well as operational, budgetary, and decisionmaking autonomy. The Transparency Act charged the IFAI with guaranteeing that federal government information would be made public and that people would have access to it in a simple, rapid, and truthful manner. We can say that the IFAI is a quasi-jurisdictional organization that, in practice, functions as an administrative tribunal. It is the highest authority in matters of transparency and access to information, protection of personal information, and the organization of archives (in coordination with the General Archive of the Nation) for Mexico’s entire federal public administration. Currently, this consists of more than 240 public agencies that represent a major part of the federal budget and comprise close to 2.8 million public servants.

In order to facilitate the exercise of the right to information and to raise awareness among people about the necessary means to guarantee the principle of universal access to information, the IFAI implemented the Information Request System (Sistema de Solicitudes de Información, SISI), today called INFOMEX (www.infomex.org.mx). Any person anywhere in the world, regardless of their nationality, sex, age, or social condition, can use the Internet to access INFOMEX to request information from the Mexican federal government. We can see the usefulness of this mechanism in the fact that from June 2003 to December 2008, people submitted 372,142 requests to various federal-government offices. During that period, IFAI received 19,155 complaints.

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*This has “caused a radical turn-about in the conceptualization and drafting of the law inside the government” (Kate Doyle, “Mexico Passes New Freedom of Information Law,” National Security Archive [May 2, 2002], available athttp://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB68/index3. html [last accessed on April 19, 2009]).*
At the initiation of the Comunidades Project in August 2005, the IFAI seemed to be a standard-bearer for Mexican democratic institutions.\textsuperscript{5} Having been in existence for a little less than two years, its achievements included a broad dialogue with several sectors of civil society, principally centers of higher education, civil organizations, business organizations, and even unions. In fulfillment of its legal mandate, the IFAI developed specific programs to serve citizens through its Social Service Centers (Centers de Atención a la Sociedad) and its TELIFAI service.\textsuperscript{6} Carried out in the framework of specific collaborative agreements, the IFAI’s promotion and partnership programs, directed at academic institutions and civil organizations, were run principally through workshops, conferences, forums, and other public events.\textsuperscript{7} Civil society had played a fundamental role in establishing this new institution, and the IFAI thus had a small bureaucratic structure\textsuperscript{8} that was supported by the use of the Internet. It was obliged to seek alliances with a variety of social actors in order to multiply this knowledge, encourage public debate by publishing essays and think pieces, and draw the attention of broader sectors through events that would facilitate the involvement of other organizations and agencies subject to fulfilling the mandate of the Transparency Law, and generate media interest.

The ability to provide a computer-based tool like the SISI, the only one of its kind in the world at that time, encouraged people to exercise the right to information, particularly those who could interact with government officials and be involved in the public arena. Indeed, one of the aspects that garnered the greatest recognition from international observers is the level of technological sophistication entailed in implementing Mexico’s Transparency Act. This electronic tool has been the principal resource for opening the access to information, because the requester has confidence that the request is made under essentially anonymous conditions. This is a principal reason that leads experts to believe that Mexico’s Transparency Act is a model to follow in other regions of the world.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{5} See, for example, Jonathan Fox, “Mexico’s Right-to-Know Reforms: Testing the Transition,” Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies (Fall 2008): 32-35.
\textsuperscript{6} Ley Federal de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información Pública Gubernamental, article 33: the IFAI is “charged with promoting and raising awareness about the exercise of the right to information”; article 37, section VI: it should “guide and advise private parties about requests for access to information”; and section XIII: it should “raise awareness among public servants and private parties about the benefits of the public management of information.”
\textsuperscript{7} “The IFAI established collaborative partnerships and trained members of at least 264 civil society organizations, 11 unions, 60 companies or business organizations, 2 national-level political groups, and a consultancy,” Informe de Labores, Mexico City: IFAI, 2006, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{8} The Federal Electoral Institute, as a comparative example, has bureaucracies in 32 states and in 300 federal electoral districts.
\textsuperscript{9} Mexico’s FOI electronic platform was selected as one of the “Twenty Best Programs” in the 2007 IBM Innovations Award in Transforming Government, administered by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation of the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
According to the IFAI’s fifth Informe Laboral (Task Report), from the moment of implementation of this resource in June 2003 until the end of 2007, the characteristics of information requesters’ profiles have remained consistently similar. They are primarily men (64 percent) between 20 and 34 years of age (53 percent). They come from the educational sector (32.5 percent), the business sector (17.7 percent), the government (11.6 percent), and the media (9 percent). In broad-brush strokes, this profile continues to predominate into 2009. However, it is important to emphasize that the demand for public information is concentrated in one-third of all SISI users (129,000 people). Moreover, estimates indicate that 7,000 of those 129,000 users have submitted more than half of the requests. If we examine the figures a little more closely, the concentration in the demand for information becomes even clearer: 270 users have submitted more than 20 percent of all requests, and a mere 36 users have submitted fully 10 percent of the total.

Regarding the geographic distribution of the requesters, more than 40 percent are in the Federal District, followed by Mexico State (12.5 percent) and Jalisco (3.8 percent). Throughout the rest of the country, the number of requests submitted is much lower.\(^{10}\)

During the first two years, strategies for promoting the RTI were undertaken by the General Office for Social Services and Institutional Relations (Dirección General de Atención a la Sociedad y Relaciones Institucionales), the IFAI unit responsible for these activities. These strategies had their greatest impact among the educated, who were already empowered to acquire public information, familiar with government activities, and had the ability to be involved in the public arena, as the second Informe Laboral noted. These characteristics were shared by most of the public and private agencies committed to raising public awareness about the RTI and its corresponding legal framework at the federal, state, and municipal levels.

The public transparency agencies at the three levels of government focused their attention on the same educated middle sectors while also developing strategies for a massive public-awareness campaign concerning the RTI. However, they did so without linking it to issues that were significant for most of the population. For their part, the organizations that were active on these issues were specialized, and so their knowledge base became segmented. This had an advantage in that it made for an increasingly strategic use of the law, but at the same time, it separated these groups of experts from the average person.

\(^{10}\) “From June 12, 2003, to December 31, 2007, a total of 266,892 requests for information were filed, of which 45.7% came from the Federal District; 12.5% from Mexico State, and 3.8% from Jalisco. . . In the other Mexican states, the data indicate that the population participated in even lower numbers. However, comparing annual data, one can see that requests from the Federal District and Mexico State declined, and requests from elsewhere in the country grew moderately.” IFAI, Quinto Informe de Labores al H. Congreso de la Unión, Mexico City, 2007, p. 14.
The IFAI’s need to position itself institutionally in the media and to make itself known among various segments of the population meant that it invested its limited available resources in public-awareness campaigns that were directed at people and groups that had higher-than-average educational levels, an understanding of new information technologies, and a capacity for dialogue with government officials. Thus, these groups, which were better able to understand and use the RTI, confirmed that the IFAI was a known and credible institutional partner that would eventually reach out to other sectors of the public. Although this criteria was understandable when the IFAI was first established as an institution, this state agency should not have continued in the same manner, since the institute’s legal mandate is to orient private parties and to promote the exercise of the RTI among all the country’s residents according to their real needs.

At the beginning, no institutional activities served poor or marginalized communities, so these places did not have the minimum amount of training or technological and material resources needed to exercise the rights embodied in the Transparency Act and its state-level counterparts. This is the context that framed the design of the Comunidades Project, the general characteristics of which will be explained in the next chapter.
2. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMUNIDADES PROJECT: EVALUATION AS PART OF THE PROCESS

In June 2005, the IFAI requested US$750,000 from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to fund a pilot program whose overall objective was: to identify mechanisms for adoption of the right to access federal public information, with special emphasis on disempowered social groups that do not have any say in the allocation of resources and the definition of governmental policies, with the goal of strengthening these groups’ abilities so that they may improve their living conditions.

Entitled the Comunidades Project, its specific objectives were to:

1. Promote the development of strategies to effectively approach marginalized communities in order to interest them in their right to have access to government information.
2. Promote the creation of methodologies to encourage the adoption of the RTI in marginalized communities.
3. Systematize methods and strategies developed by the Social Advocates of the Right to Access Information (Promotoras Sociales del Derecho de Acceso a la Información, PROSDAI). The objective was to find the most effective methods and strategies for encouraging the adoption of the right to information in communities whose social, cultural, and economic characteristics are similar to those of the communities involved in the project.

The challenge was to find the most effective strategies for promoting the adoption of this right in poor communities. The goal was to identify best practices so that future public policies could be constructed that would permit the model’s replication in other regions of the country.

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11 This was part of a larger grant made to the IFAI–COMUNIDADES–CETA Project, which had two activity areas: the creation of the International Center for Transparency Studies (Centro Internacional de Estudios de Transparencia, CETA) and the Comunidades Project. This report only discusses the second area (see www.ifai.org.mx/ceta)

12 Third and fourth clauses of the second section of the Guidelines, p. 3. Available at www.ifai.org.mx/ceta.

13 During the development of the Comunidades Project, the participating civil society organizations were administratively called “social advocates for the right to information,” so all institutional documents identify them by the acronym PROSDAI.
The Comunidades project embraced an effort at adoption of the RTI and empowerment based on it, including at least two elements:

- giving people who live in marginalized conditions the basic knowledge needed to exercise their right to information; and
- enabling them to use that knowledge as a tool to improve their living conditions.

We proposed to implement the project in six states: the Federal District, Jalisco, Mexico State, Nuevo Leon, Puebla, and Veracruz.

The proposal presented to the Hewlett Foundation at the beginning of 2005 noted the need for an external, independent evaluation, conducted with great methodological and analytical rigor, to assess from the outset the effects of the Comunidades Project on both the participating organizations and the public with which they had worked.\(^\text{14}\) The proposal argued that it was of fundamental importance to have a highly professional, external evaluation that would note problems during the development of the project. At the same time, because the goal of this institutional effort was to lay the groundwork for policy recommendations for raising public awareness about RTI in marginalized communities, the evaluation should offer an objective assessment of the project’s limitations and scope.

It is noteworthy that the Comunidades Project has been the only substantive institutional program in the IFAI that has been subjected to a thoroughly professional and independent external evaluation. The advisory board for the evaluation was selected by public tender, in which the winners were Arturo Sánchez, Fabiola Zermeño, and Moisés Domínguez, researchers from the School of Political and Social Sciences at UNAM. The institute published the evaluators’ results as soon as they were received, without rebuttal, objection, or requests for changes.

The evaluators’ research took place between October 2006 and December 2007. Its objective was to identify to what degree the organizations’ strategies and methodologies were effective in adapting the RTI to the needs of the citizens with whom they were working; which strategies had been the most efficient in enabling the communities to consult publicly available information and for

encouraging them to use of the access procedures; whether the exercise of the RTI could be sustained in the short and medium term; and whether there was a sense of social utility in exercising this right.

This research occurred in parallel with the development of the activities, and the progress of the research was reported in seven lengthy public documents, called Entregables (Interim Reports). The first two cover in detail the conceptual framework, methodology, and indicators used; the third, fourth, and fifth Interim reports discuss the results of partial advances. The sixth is a comprehensive report. Finally, the seventh document systematizes the strategies and methodologies the organizations used. It also offers recommendations for achieving effective results in raising awareness about the RTI among these types of social groups and for creating a series of activities that support the project’s institutionalization in the IFAI. The researchers’ analysis was based on information in the files of eighteen organizations, and the team conducted field research with thirteen of them. The principal results of this study will be presented below.

The evaluation began by reviewing the strategies and methodologies employed at the various levels of training, the corresponding didactic treatment, the work in the communities, the exercise and adoption of the RTI (including such elements as its permanence and sustainability in the short and medium terms and whether a perception of social utility influenced its adoption), and the organizations’ coaching to help the group identify its community’s problems. Among the components, we observed were each organization’s profile and objectives, as well as the economic, social, political, and cultural factors that positively or negatively influenced the exercise of the RTI. Evaluation tools were centered on a semi-structured interview with the organizations’ members, and surveys, consisting of mostly closed questions, administered to the members of the communities and the control groups.

Initially, the research results revealed some discrepancies in the definition of the term “marginalized communities” and “adoption.” Thus, the members of the project’s executive committee in the IFAI (about which we will talk more later on) prepared a document to refine both concepts. The committee also recommended that all the organizations use a single format for reports, with the objective of having quantitative indicators to evaluate.

16 UNAM’s evaluation did not include the two organizations in the pilot phase.
The evaluation team’s close mentoring, as well as the possibility of having a simultaneous and ongoing critical perspective, substantially helped improve the project’s implementation and increased its impact in the field. The researchers had all the necessary information to attend both the IFAI’s training workshops for organizations and the workshops that those organizations held in the communities. This aided the researchers in learning about how the activities were unfolding. The evaluators also participated in three events in which the organizations shared their experiences (which we will discuss later on). During these events, the evaluators also reported on the progress of their study and had the opportunity to share their observations directly with the organizations.

**Organization of the Project within the IFAI**

In August 2005, the IFAI governing board\(^\text{17}\) approved the proposal for the internal organization and the task force that would be responsible for running the Comunidades project. General coordination would be the responsibility of a commissioner, who would report regularly to the governing board about the project’s development.\(^\text{18}\) An executive committee formed within the IFAI, presided over by a general coordinator and consisting of an executive secretary and the directors of the following units: Monitoring and Coordination with the Federal Public Administration, Studies and Research, Administration, and Social Services and Institutional Relations. This committee prepared guidelines for the project’s operating rules and provided oversight to ensure that the project respected the applicable provisions in the Federal Public Administration. This multi-member entity also approved the organizations and working plans that the Operations Office proposed. By establishing a communications bridge between the grassroots work and the institutional structure, the Operations Office supported the development of each of the approved projects and monitored activities in the field.\(^\text{19}\)

The appointment of a member of the governing board as the project’s general coordinator was important in ensuring involvement and coordination at the highest level of the IFAI. The general coordinator was involved in designing the project and negotiating with The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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\(^\text{17}\)The governing board is the IFAI’s top authority, and it is a multiple-member body consisting of five commissioners.

\(^\text{18}\)The commissioner who was the general coordinator reported to the governing board about the Communities Project’s progress on more than thirty occasions. Thus, the governing board was familiar with the project’s development and could approve it step by step.

\(^\text{19}\)All the information relative to reports, agreements, contracts, and memos from the Communities Project is available on the Internet at http://www.ifai.org.mx/ProyectoComunidades.
concerning project funding. The coordinator ensured that throughout the project’s execution, the various units within the IFAI would enrich the work from their specific action areas. The Social Services unit ran training workshops and advised the organizations about how to input their requests for information and follow up on them. The Social Communication unit produced print and audiovisual material, as well as broadcasting relevant cases on its radio program La caja de cristal (The Crystal Box). The Studies and Research unit and the Monitoring and Coordination unit mentored and shared their knowledge in an ongoing manner during the Executive Committee meetings. The Administration unit made sure that the project respected the applicable regulations. It also gave indispensable logistical support to successfully run the three meetings involving the participating organizations. The Legal Office prepared and supervised the agreements made between the organizations and the IFAI. However, beyond this entire institutional infrastructure, which gave solidity and seriousness to the Comunidades Project’s efforts, the IFAI contributed institutional, moral, and political support, which on many occasions smoothed the way for the communities to exercise their right to information. Whenever legally possible, in response to requests and complaints associated with the Comunidades Project, it also issued resolutions in favor of public openness and access to information. The weight of IFAI’s institutional support was very important for the success of the project.20

Lessons from the Pilot Phase

Prior to the start of the Comunidades Project, no cases of a similar nature were known in other countries, much less in Mexico. For that reason, participants agreed to operate a pilot phase between August and December 2005, with the objective of “assessing the conditions for the project’s execution and operation in the field, in order to define the courses of action to take and to establish the mechanisms for running the project on the basis of greater experience and knowledge.”

This made it possible to correct the course of the project and to improve its development in the next phase. Among the principal lessons, the following stand out:

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20 As a reflection of that interest, on April 25, 2007, the Institute’s governing board agreed that the commissioners would meet monthly to discuss the project, with the objective of guaranteeing it the maximum institutional support possible.
a) The Role of Trust
The organizations participating in the pilot phase—APIS Foundation for Fairness (APIS, Fundación para la Equidad, A. C.) in the Federal District and the Morelos Academy of Human Rights (Academia Morelense de Derechos Humanos, A.C.) in Morelos—believed that an essential ingredient for obtaining good results was trust.1 This had two components: the trust community members placed in the organizations that were promoting the exercise of the right to information, and the trust that the IFAI and the organizations placed in each other. In the first instance, the results of the pilot phase showed that participating organizations, in addition to having action strategies directed at specific groups in poor communities, needed to have roots and solid networks within those communities. Only with such experience could the organizations get these communities interested in the issues of concern to the project.

b) Profile of the Organizations

The participants needed to:

• be recognized as a community organization and be accepted by local leaders and their local officials;
• be politically independent and have credibility with regard to their ability to meet community needs;
• know both the community’s problems and its social and political actors;
• have a capacity to take action and negotiate agreements that would benefit the community in a context that is marked by an authoritarian political culture; and
• have the knowledge and ability to express the community’s need for information using the terminology required by the government (in order to prepare requests for information) and translate government discourse into plain language (in order to explain to the community members the content of the answers to those requests).

1 “Trust” is a complex, relational, and multilayered concept, as various authors have noted. Here we rely on the definition contributed by Felipe Hevia: “Trust and mistrust are defined as concepts with a shared meaning—social constructs—utilized by social actors to characterize a certain type of action and social relationship; relationships that imply some type of significant risk for the participants. These characterizations are realized and brought up to date in each interaction, and they are dependent on the context for the agents in the relationship. That is, they are social relationships among actors that imply some kind of risk in a particular context that is defined as trustworthy or not.” (“¿Cómo construir confianza? Hacia una definición relacional de la confianza social,” Transparencia, rendición de cuentas y construcción de confianza en la sociedad y el Estado mexicanos, p. 25).
We needed organizations that were capable of forming alliances, developing groups, and collaborating, which can be relatively easy to find in major urban centers but constitutes a very complex challenge in communities that are marginalized from public policy decisionmaking.22

c) Prior Knowledge of the Right to Information
The activities of APIS Foundation for Fairness and the Morelos Academy of Human Rights showed that it was not essential for the organizations to have knowledge about or prior experience with RTI-related issues and the Transparency Act. The APIS Foundation had no familiarity with the issue, and the Academy had exercised this right at the state level, yet there were no significant differences in the results achieved with their respective audiences.

d) On Procedures to Access Information
• This involved a medium-term process that requires initial forethought, strategizing, and follow-up. Moreover, some requests do not obtain the sought-for information. Thus, on occasion, the process can be prolonged, for example, when it is necessary to file a complaint with the IFAI or file an appeal with a judge concerning this basic right.

• Occasionally, a specific technical capacity is needed to interpret and analyze the obtained information in a way that would be useful to the requesters.

e) Connecting the RTI to the Community’s Problems
Marginalized communities take an interest in the RTI to the degree that the intermediary organization manages to connect the population’s needs and real problems to the use of the RTI as a tool to obtain relevant data from government institutions (that is, knowing what to ask, whom to ask, and how to use the information obtained).

22 “Normally, it is believed that the greatest possibility for collaboration between civil society organizations (CSOs) and the government occurs at the local level, as long as the size of the government agency is such that it is possible to have a direct dialogue with the officials. Without denying that this all may be true and being completely in agreement that one of the fundamental objectives of the state reforms ought to be to ‘bring decisionmaking closer to the citizenry,’ that good intentions do not eliminate problems that this entails, among which we can identify: the weaker tendency toward democratization in local institutions, the lower technical preparation in their governments, the lower allocation of resources, etc.” Manuel Canto, “Desarrollo social: descentralización y participación,” in Cristina Penzo D’Albenzio and Isabel Font Playán (eds.), Políticas sociales y nuevos actores, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Azcapotzalco, 2001, p. 45.
These lessons showed that to achieve the project’s objectives, it was highly advantageous to work with organizations that were willing to advise marginalized communities in the medium term. It was clear that the technical aspects of the procedure for accessing information had to be handled by the organizations, while the communities developed their own strategies to allow them to use the available informatics tools.

“During the workshops, we found that many participants did not know how the government operates or its various levels: that is, the scope of powers of the federal, state, and municipal governments. As a result, these people are not sure about what information they should ask for or what type of documents the government prepares. We realized that municipal leaders requested information related to specific needs. Despite being advocates of social demands in their communities, many leaders were unaware of how their local governments operate and, above all, the process for preparing, approving, and executing the public budget . . . In the workshops, we observed that the participants only interacted with the federal level on specific occasions. Their concerns were with state-level issues. This means that the training ought to clarify the role of the federal government at the local level and explain how it is often possible to get information about the state government through requests to federal agencies.”

-Morelos Academy of Human Rights, Final Report, December 2005

Finally, it was concluded that the three months originally foreseen for the organizations to conclude their respective projected work plans was insufficient for achieving the anticipated results. Thus, it was necessary to broaden the duration of operation in the communities, by double at the very least.

All these elements were taken into consideration in January 2006, when the Comunidades Project’s next stage began. In the next chapter, we summarize the principal activities of the organizations in each one of the states during the following twenty-four months.
3. THE ORGANIZATIONS’ WORK IN THE STATES

The Comunidades Project led to the collaboration of a government agency (the IFAI), twenty civil society organizations, and marginalized communities in nine Mexican states. This chapter offers a general overview of how each of these organizations participated in the project throughout 2006 and 2007, once the pilot phase concluded.

Civil Society Organizations

For the Comunidades Project to achieve its objectives, we believed from the outset that it was essential to involve civil society organizations that had strategies, methodologies, and collaborative networks in the communities. This was necessary because only such organizations would be able to contribute the knowledge and experience needed to encourage the exercise of the right to information in an audience that is marginalized from public-policy decisionmaking.

Currently, the relationship between government and organizations in Mexico translates into a variety of arenas for collaboration, mediated in most cases by the transfer of public resources and technical assistance. However, the formalization of this connection, which implies a recognition of the organizations as valid partners, did not occur until February 2004 when the Diario Oficial de la Federación (the government’s daily register) published the Federal Law to Promote Activities of Civil Society Organizations (Ley Federal de Fomento a las Actividades Realizadas por Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil). This law recognizes the importance of these types of organizations and their contribution to national development, and it regulates the flow of resources to them by establishing various requirements that they must fulfill in order to receive public

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23 Two organizations participated in the pilot phase, and eighteen participated in the next phase of the Comunidades Project, which was already taken into account in the external evaluation.

24 "The average amount fluctuates between 200,000 and 500,000 pesos. Lower levels are awarded by the SEMARNAT, which grants 84,000 pesos for projects to train women and/or indigenous people, and by the CDI, which grants a maximum of 150,000 pesos, with the average being 50,000 pesos. For higher amounts, there is the APBP, which can grant up to 500,000 pesos through a request for proposals; SEDESOL, which grants a maximum of 1.5 million pesos in some forms of its ‘Productive Options’; the ‘Social Capital Investment Program’ and the SAGARPA have a maximum of 2 million pesos; and the Economics Ministry, depending on the request for proposals, awards up to 12 million pesos. PEMEX supplies resources in cash and in kind, based on the characteristics that will be described below. In addition to cash, under these programs, these agencies also provide support for training, advising, and services. Most have some means of offering technical assistance, although this does not always exist in a planned and explicit fashion. In addition, the APBP and the INDESOL finance group training and individual degree programs training of whole teams," supporting, respectively, an estimated total of 360 and 600 civil society organizations. Mónica Tapia Álvarez and Gisela Robles Aguilar, Retos Institucionales del Marco Legal y Financiamiento a las Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil, Mexico City, Alternativas y Capacidades, A. C., 2006, pp. 47-52.
funds. One of these is having a Civil Organizations National Registry Unique Code (Clave Única del Registro Nacional de Organizaciones Civiles, CLUNI).

Before the law was passed, the IFAI had established collaborative ties with various civil organizations but had not provided any funding: it signed agreements,\textsuperscript{25} carried out public events,\textsuperscript{26} ran workshops, and published materials.\textsuperscript{27} Because the grant funds from the Hewlett Foundation had to comply with all applicable legal and administrative provisions for federal public resources in order to be transferred to the organizations, the Comunidades Project had to ensure that they complied with the new regulations. This was the only case that presented a specific challenge: unlike other issues, such as human rights and election monitoring, it was not clear if there were organizations working in poor communities on the issues of transparency and access to public information that also met the profile required by the law. The few organizations dedicated to these issues—such as Freedom of Information in Mexico (Libertad de Información en México); FUNDAR, Center for Analysis and Research (FUNDAR Centro de Análisis e Investigación, A.C.); Mexico Initiative Coalition for Access (Coalición Iniciativa de Acceso México); Gender Equality (Equidad de Género); and other environmental organizations, like the Ecological Collective of Jalisco (Colectivo Ecologista de Jalisco)—were pioneers on these issues but could be considered “second tier.” That is, they focused their activity on analysis, research, lobbying, and consultancy, but they only occasionally did grassroots work in the marginalized communities. Moreover, the organizations that carried out activities in places classified as marginalized or highly marginalized have a profile that is more closely connected to production projects, for example, agrarian associations or associations of campesinos, teachers, or even indigenous people. Moreover, they were not always free of ties to political parties and local political interests, and only some of them fulfilled the requirements for receiving public funds as established in the law.\textsuperscript{28} During the development of

\textsuperscript{25} DECA Equipo Pueblo, A. C., Iniciativa de Acceso México (which comprises four organizations, Cultura Ecológica, A. C., Presencia Ciudadana Mexicana, A. C., Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental, A. C., and Comunicación y Educación Ambiental, S. C.), among others.

\textsuperscript{26} For example, the First National Transparency Week, held in the middle of 2004.

\textsuperscript{27} For example, El Derecho de Acceso a la Información en México, un diagnóstico de la sociedad (Mexico City: IFAI, 2004).

\textsuperscript{28} “Some programs, such as ‘Social Coinvestment’ and the APBP, meet the legal definition of a civil society organization, with similar statutory clauses to those that the Registry requires. However, other federal programs, whose requests for proposals are directed to organizations serving third parties, such as self-benefit or mutual benefit institutions, among them ‘Productive Options,’ ‘PROSAP,’ ‘Fondos Regionales,’ ‘FOMMUR’, ‘PRONAFIM’ y ‘FONAES,’ have problems in consistently applying the Civil Society Organizations Law, and, above all the requirements of the CLUNI.” M. Tapia and A. Robles, op. cit., p. 56.
the Comunidades Project, these characteristics were a key challenge in meeting our objectives while strictly complying with the law. As long as the current law remains in force, such considerations ought to be taken into account when designing similar projects in Mexico.

It is worth emphasizing that in both Mexico and most of Latin America, administrative obstacles are a variable in government–civil society relationships mediated by the channeling of resources. For this reason, we will only highlight as one of the lessons from the Comunidades Project that excessive administrative requirements inhibit participation by organizations that are truly close to marginalized populations. The requirements reduce the time and attention that can be given to substantive activities, and they limit the flow of funding for fieldwork. By creating excessively rigid parameters for the administration and use of scarce available financing, they also substantially raise the costs for these sorts of efforts. From a broad universe of grassroots organizations that would have otherwise been able to take advantage of a project like Comunidades, only a small number were able to meet the requirements established in the applicable legal framework (table 1). If an attempt is made to raise awareness about the right to information in marginalized communities, it is essential to apply flexible criteria, transform the relationship between the responsible institutions and the organizations in the field, and create opportunities for the joint construction of alternatives. In this way, trust can be built between the agencies and organizations that must now work together as partners.
Table 1
DISTRIBUTION OF ORGANIZATIONS BY STATE
2005 - 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Participating Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FEDERAL DISTRICT</td>
<td>APIS, FUNDACIÓN PARA LA EQUIDAD, A. C. CAUCE CIUDADANO, A. C. CAUCE SINERGIA CÍVICA, A. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EDUCACIÓN CON EL NIÑO CALLEJERO, I. A. P. INICIATIVA CIUDADANA PARA LA INCLUSIÓN, S. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEXICO STATE</td>
<td>CENTRAL DE SERVICIOS PARA EL DESARROLLO DEL ESTADO DE MÉXICO, A. C. GUARDIANES DE LOS VOLCANES, A. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GRUPO AMBIENTALISTA SIERRA DE GUADALUPE, A. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JALISCO</td>
<td>ACCEDE, DESARROLLO LOCAL, A. C. COLECTIVO ECOLOGISTA DE JALISCO, A. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INSTITUTO MEXICANO PARA EL DESARROLLO COMUNITARIO, A. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MORELOS</td>
<td>ACADEMIA MORELENSE DE DERECHOS HUMANOS, A. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUEVO LEON</td>
<td>ALTERNATIVAS PACÍFICAS, A. C. CIUDADANOS EN APOYO A LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS, A. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUEBLA</td>
<td>ALTERNATIVAS Y PROCESOS DE PARTICIPACIÓN SOCIAL, A. C. (also working in Oaxaca)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CENTRÁL DE SERVICIOS PARA EL DESARROLLO DE PUEBLA, A. C. (also working in Hidalgo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SERVICIOS DE PROMOCIÓN INTEGRAL COMUNITARIA JUVENIL, A. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VERACRUZ</td>
<td>CENTRO DE SERVICIOS MUNICIPALES HERIBERTO JARA, A. C. POBLADORES, A. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEXICO STATE, JALISCO, PUEBLA, AND VERACRUZ.</td>
<td>RED DE RADIOS COMUNITARIAS, A. C.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout its twenty-eight months of activity, the project worked with a variety of organizations, but they all shared a certain characteristic: the experience of working with a marginalized population. The issues and publics were also quite varied. For example, in Puebla, the work was with Mixtec, Nahua, and Popoloca indigenous peoples, small agricultural producers, community leaders, rural students, groups of pottery artisans, and municipal presidents (mayors) and officials. In Jalisco, the organizations worked with poor communities in the Llano region, educated middle-class people, retirees, and campesino community leaders in the Sierra del Tigre. In Veracruz, organizations worked with indigenous Nahuatl speakers and low-income and undereducated women in Jalapa and Minatitlán. In the Federal District, one organization worked with
homeless children and youth living on the street, and the other three worked with educated youth. In Mexico State, the communities were made up of associations of rural producers, principally Mazahua women, and community leaders and representatives from the region near Popocatépetl.

In this regard, the UNAM advisors who evaluated the Comunidades Project concluded that:

In general, the profile of the eighteen analyzed organizations is congruent with the project’s objectives, so that it was appropriate to train them as Social Advocates of the Right to Access Information (PROSDAI). Particularly noteworthy is their experience and ability to:

- Develop methodologies for community action from a rights perspective.
- Prepare teaching materials and training models.
- Encourage actions for social development in marginalized communities.
- Work with projects whose objective is to increase involvement in government public policy.

To a lesser degree, they encouraged activities concerning the RTI, particularly in the municipal and state government spheres.

The Work in the States

In January 2006, activities began in Puebla. The goal was to avoid simultaneously committing to a presence and activities in the six states that had originally been planned, since that would make it impossible for the operations and logistics coordination team, and even for IFAI personnel, to monitor the organizations’ activities in the field in a timely manner. At that point, it was clear that the type of RTI campaigns that were needed to raise awareness in this sector of the population would entail mentoring, contact, and all the tasks related to direct fieldwork.

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29 “The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) internationalized the concept during the 1980s. The main intent was to differentiate between ‘children on the street,’ the majority, who only use the street in order to work, and the term ‘children of the street,’ which refers to those who have an almost nonexistent connection to their nuclear family and who have decided to remain in the streets.” Juan Martín Pérez García, “La infancia callejera: Apuntes para reflexionar el fenómeno,” Revista Española de Educación Comparada 8 (2003), p. 14.

30 Information from the presentation to the Third Meeting of Organizations Committed to the Empowerment of Society in Matters of the Right to Information, held in Mexico City at the IFAI, November 8, 2007. See http://www.derechoasaber.org.mx/comunidades/eventos.html.
Puebla
Three organizations participated in this state: Social Participation Alternatives and Processes (Alternativas y Procesos de Participación Social), Puebla Development Services Center (Central de Servicios para el Desarrollo de Puebla, DEPAC), and Comprehensive Community Youth Services (Servicios de Promoción Integral Comunitaria Juvenil, SEPIJC). Among their shared characteristics, one in particular stands out: the hosting of workshops for Nahuatl, Popoloca, and Mixtec speakers. These organizations developed strategies to involve other political and social actors in the activities of these indigenous groups. Involved individuals included community leaders, students, community and municipal officials, managers of the Training Centers for Learning (Centros de Capacitación para el Aprendizaje, run by Monterrey’s Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores), federal employees in health clinics, and members of producers’ organizations. These three organizations’ work with monolingual groups or ones with little knowledge of Spanish ensured that this social sector would learn about the RTI. This would have been very difficult to achieve if the IFAI public-awareness campaign had been the only tool employed.

“We requested that the Secretary of Communications and Transportation provide us with information on a highway project they had built from Acatepec to Texcoco. We wanted to know what the original section had been, because the people tell us the project was to run as far as a certain town. It reached half way there, but the funding ran out. Then, they say, well, we want to know what happened. Are you going to continue or not? We asked the Secretary of Communications and Transportation, and he told us that they approved the project, but they returned it to the CDI because that was the implementing institution, and the CDI turned it over to the municipality, so go ask the municipality. So, we are going to file a complaint with the IFAI . . .”

-Social Participation Alternatives and Processes, First Meeting of Organizations, November 2006

Social Participation Alternatives and Processes worked with Mixtecs in the southern part of the state of Puebla (the mixteca poblana region), where the population is highly marginalized and indigenous. It worked with the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas) and the National Water
Commission (Comisión Nacional del Agua) to address the problem of water shortages. Alternatives formed a council for the region’s watershed basin that could get involved in decisionmaking about government actions in the region. Its work plan was based on an evaluation that the community prepared with the organization’s help. This made it possible to broaden the contents of the initial training provided by the IFAI, focusing on the topics identified as priorities in the community evaluation. Similarly, the organization held internal workshops before going into the communities so that all of its members had a shared platform of knowledge regarding the Transparency Act, the use of the SISI, and laws on water, which was one of the community’s most urgent issues.

Although the strategy employed was adequate for teaching the citizens about the content and scope of the Transparency Act and the importance of the RTI for regional water conservation, the six months foreseen for the development of the project were insufficient to assist with the communities’ requests for information and to follow up in a timely manner. It took time to learn to ask for information in a precise manner, and frequently, the information obtained in return led to new requests. If the procedure ended in the filing of a complaint to the IFAI, it was necessary to have additional time in order to mentor the communities.

The Puebla Development Services Center (DEPAC) was accustomed to working with small agricultural producers, community leaders, and municipal officials.

“The people in the area of Cuyoaco, Puebla, complain because rainfall has declined over the past four years. They blame a broccoli producer who shoots rockets into water-laden clouds in order to disperse them so that excessive rainfall won’t ruin his crop. Two requests for information were submitted to the National Water Commission and to the Institute on Water Research. In both cases, they denied that this technique was being tested, however the people had already begun to block highways. The information helped to clear up doubts, because, first, it came from federal sources and, second, these were institutions mandated to work on the issue.”

-Puebla Development Services Center, Final Report, November 2006

It employed two types of strategies to enable its communities to use SISI: it got the support of municipal officials in order to have Internet access during its workshops; and in towns without that resource, it designed a SISI simulator,
which made it possible to show the participants the procedures for using this tool. In communities with a lower educational level and those without Internet access, the DEPAC personnel had to continue their support role for a much longer time, and their mentoring and translation extended long beyond the work period stipulated in the IFAI agreement.

With DEPAC’s support, community leaders and campesinos learned the criteria for the federal government’s allocations for subsidy programs, and they obtained an official explanation about the use of rockets as a government-recognized technique to manipulate rainfall.

A distinctive characteristic of the Comprehensive Community Youth Services was its work with students taking televised secondary school and pre-university studies in communities that were much poorer and more rural than were previous groups with which the organization had worked. It has experience working with Nahuatl and Popoloca speakers, women pottery artisans, beneficiaries of the Opportunities Program,\(^{31}\) and personnel from a federal health clinic. With the idea of taking advantage of the school infrastructure and empowering the students as advocates of the RTI, the organization focused its work principally on the use of SISI. The work with students raised awareness about the right to information among less-educated groups and indigenous-language speakers in the communities. It gave them the ability to consult publicly available records or to request information. However, this did not imply that there was follow-up on the requests or that they were entirely completed during the access-procedure cycle. The valuable part of this experience was precisely that it showed that training is no guarantee that the right to information will be exercised. To achieve that requires the advocates’ will and commitment to complete each stage of the process by connecting the use of the RTI tool to the identification and analysis of problems that community members face.

Comprehensive Community Youth Services made some very important contributions to the project, such as focusing its activities on the Community Learning Centers\(^{32}\) that are located in the region’s poorest communities. It serviced

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\(^{31}\) The Opportunities Human Development Program (Programa de Desarrollo Humano Oportunidades) is a federal government program to combat poverty, in which public institutions of the three levels of government participate.

\(^{32}\) The Community Learning Centers are a network promoted by the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM), which tries to give access to education to marginalized communities using the Internet. See [http://www.cca.org.mx/portalcca/info_gral/homedoc.htm](http://www.cca.org.mx/portalcca/info_gral/homedoc.htm).
and repaired computers in those centers in the hope that, in exchange, the organization would be able to hold workshops there and consult the SISI. It also raised public awareness about the right to information through its weekly radio program.

**Jalisco**

In Jalisco, two of the three organizations worked with the rural populations that were highly marginalized, while the Jalisco Environmental Collective (Colectivo Ecologista de Jalisco) served, above all, urban areas and the middle class, including some retired professionals. A shared trait across the three was the attention to matters connected to environmental protection. One issue was related to paying for environmental services in the municipality of Juanacatlán. The Environmental Collective was in charge of that project, and it mentored the community, which was made up primarily of ejidatarios (owners of communally held farms). Through the organization’s work, they learned that their area was within a geographical area defined by the National Forest Commission, which meant that they could participate in a program called Pay for Environmental Services. Thus, the area’s ejidatarios, who owned approximately 1,000 hectares, could get involved, and this made them reconsider the sale of their lands for agricultural or urban use. This stimulated a partnership that would facilitate the conservation of their natural resources.

>“In the municipality of Juanacatlán, we asked about the budgetary allocation for issues like health, environment, and education, and they answered that it was 5 million pesos. We compared that information with publicly available information about the budget assigned for personal services in the National Water Commission, and we saw that it was 140 million pesos. The people of Juanacatlán said, “How can it be that they give us a pittance for education, training, environment, and fire brigades, yet, for personal services, that is, service contracts for honoraria, cellular phones, telephones, and so forth, there’s a huge amount of money?” That was when people said, “Oh yes, transparency is important, and we have to be on top of the institutions.”

-Jalisco Environmental Collective,
*First Meeting of Participating Organizations, November 2006*
Before participating in the Comunidades Project, the Jalisco Environmental Collective had had several experiences in exercising the right to information. For example, one of its first activities after establishing as an organization, was to encourage as part of the NAFTA framework the construction of a database to enable a comparison of data from the three signatory countries in matters of air, water, and soil contaminants and substances. In 2004 the Collective evaluated access to information, participation, and justice in environmental matters in Jalisco, which formed part of a broader study about Latin America run by an international coalition, The Access Initiative. In the case of Mexico, it supported this initiative using the Federal Transparency Act, as well as a similar law for the state of Jalisco.

In another region of the state, the Mexican Community Development Institute (Instituto Mexicano de Desarrollo Comunitario, IMDEC) used an earlier evaluation of community issues in order to file a SISI request for information on the concessions that had been granted for forest exploitation in four municipalities in the Sierra del Tigre. When the office answered that there were no “sawmills” but rather “timber storage and processing centers,” the organization resubmitted its request for information using that label. Even though it took more time, IMDEC obtained so many important documents that they were obliged to create a database of the responses in order to analyze them with community leaders. As a result, the marginalized communities learned the number of hectares that were authorized for logging, the quantity of cubic meters that they would be able to extract, and who, in fact, was actually exploiting the forest. Based on that information, the community leaders organized meetings among everyone who was involved in order to agree on actions for the conservation of these resources.

“In a response to a request for information, it was clear that the municipalities and states have their own programs for women, and that it was necessary to turn to the Jalisco Women’s Institute. The group went to that institute with a copy of the response from SISI as a reference. An official of the municipal-services team gave them information about the procedure for establishing a Municipal Women’s Institute in Tuxpan. This was a key action that would enable the municipality to get programs and resources from state and federal agencies, as well as from other institutions with which they are now negotiating an allocation of funding for women.”

-IMDEC, Final Report, April 2007

For its part, Citizen Action for Education, Democracy and Development–Local Development (Acción Ciudadana para la Educación, la Democracia y el Desarrollo, Desarrollo Local, ACCEDE–DL) linked its project to a regional development plan that it created for four municipalities in the Llano region of Jalisco. The requests for information corresponded to three action areas that the communities
themselves had identified: the environment, culture, and productive projects. ACCEDE’s work strategy in the region consisted of preparing Municipal Citizen Agendas, which were used to collect and prioritize needs that the communities had identified. These were then presented to municipal officials, and an agreement was reached about the pertinent actions to take.

ACCEDE’s work strategy was designed based on a survey taken among its community groups. It showed that residents of these population centers had little knowledge of computers, and computer infrastructure was scarce. This initial evaluation let the organization more effectively plan the content of its workshops, since it focused on helping the communities obtain information for constructing a Regional Development Plan and a Citizen Agenda. To do this, the ACCEDE representatives took charge of submitting the requests on the SISI system, and they then analyzed the answers with the communities. It is worth mentioning that the organization and the communities used a great deal of information available on the Internet portals of various government agencies to strengthen the design of the productive projects that were part of the Regional Development Plan. In particular, it let them look up certain government offices’ public services (such as free technical training) and the operating rules for federal subsidy programs.

Veracruz

Two organizations worked in Veracruz: Heriberto Jara Municipal Services Center, CESEM (Centro de Servicios Municipales Heriberto Jara, A. C.) and Settlers (Pobladores, A. C.). The first worked with grassroots community organizations in municipalities in the Sierra de Zongolica. Some of these communities were semi-urban, and others were highly marginalized and mainly rural, with a high percentage of Nahuatl speakers. In order to raise awareness about people’s right to information in that latter sector, CESEM produced several public service announcements in Nahuatl that were broadcast on the Voice of the Sierra de

“The information obtained from SEDESOL corroborates that the municipal government has serious administrative problems in making information publically available to ORFIS. In this case, the information that is provided is that there is no documented information on the topic. Following social pressure (information requests) the municipal government was put in the position of having to complete the Moxala – Ahuatepec road, although it still failed to provide information on the cost of the project. Building the road has allowed the community to organize itself to form an automobile transportation co-op that is currently already in operation.”

Zongolica radio station. This advertising linked the right to information with other rights that had been selected in response to issues of community interest, such as women’s right to a life free of violence.

One of this organization’s most important experiences in the framework of the Comunidades Project was the opening of information related to the use of Budgetary Line 33 resources in two municipalities in Veracruz, Amatlán de los Reyes and Rafael Delgado. Called “Federal Contributions for States and Municipalities,” the federal government’s Budgetary Line 33 funnels federal resources to the states, the Federal District, and all of Mexico’s municipalities. The purpose of the funding is to strengthen the capacity of local governments in matters of health, basic infrastructure, financial stability, public safety, food and social assistance programs, and educational infrastructure.

Opening Budgetary Line 33 to public scrutiny was possible because CESEM had mentored the Association of Women and Men Working in Social Spaces (Agrupación de Mujeres y Hombres Trabajando en Espacios Sociales, AMHATES) from Amatlán de los Reyes. CESEM prepared AMHATES so that it could follow up on two SISI requests and file petitions for review when it received unsatisfactory answers from the Ministry of Social Development. IFAI’s rulings in favor of the AMHATES contained extremely valuable information about how to request information relating to Budgetary Line 33 in any municipality in the country. In other words, this example could be easily reproduced in other regions in order to make this information more transparent.

CESEM’s activity in Veracruz as part of the Comunidades Project also succeeded in getting the High Auditing Office of the State of Veracruz (Órgano Superior de Fiscalización del Estado de Veracruz, ORFIS) to put information on its Internet site about the planning and use of resources from Budgetary Lines 28 and 33 for certain municipalities in the state. Up until then, this information had been available only to specialists.

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33 The Voz de la Sierra de Zongolica (Voice of the Zongolica Sierra) is part of the System of Indigenous Cultural Radio Broadcasters in the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, and a large part of its programming airs in Nahuatl.

34 The announcement and other materials produced by the participating organizations can be found at www.derechoasaber.org.mx/comunidades.

35 According to the most recent amendment published in Mexico’s daily gazette on December 27, 2006, the Budgetary Line consists of eight funds: Allocations for K-12 and teacher education; health services, social infrastructure, strengthening of the municipalities and the territorial areas of the Federal District, multiple contributions (social assistance, basic educational infrastructure, and higher education infrastructure), or technical and technological education and adult education, public safety in the states and the Federal District, and for the strengthening of the states.
Settlers, an organization that primarily serves, and is run by, women, developed a project centered on monitoring the Habitat Program in two neighborhoods, one in Jalapa and the other in Minatitlán. The organization’s interest in this arose because its mission involves housing and improvement of housing infrastructure in the communities. The first stage of its strategy entailed an in-depth look at the Habitat Program’s operations, and explaining them to the women of the community. Based on this, they developed several requests for information, which a woman who owned an Internet café and who had attended the workshops entered into the SISI system. Thus, women participants who did not know how to read or write or those who did not understand new information technologies could have that shortcoming offset by the knowledge possessed by other women. This cooperation let them identify various anomalies in the implementation of the Habitat Program. For example, on the website, one public building unit is listed as having been built, but when a corresponding request was submitted, the Public Information Liaison Unit answered that the municipality had canceled the project.

During its participation in the Comunidades Project, the women of the Settlers organization learned to look up information on websites of public institutions. In so doing, they found out how the municipalities were planning to spend their public budgets. This knowledge piqued their interest in participating in the citizen organizations that get involved in the planning and use of those funds. The women learned that by understanding how the municipal budget is planned, citizens are in a position to monitor that the resources are used for their intended purposes. This lesson was incorporated into the organization’s daily activities. The case of Settlers is one of the most significant examples of communities’ ability to create collective processes for the adoption of the right to information, the use of technology, and procedures for obtaining government information. As they advanced in their exercise of this right, the need arose for specialized legal counsel in order to monitor the complaints. This support was generously supplied by the FUNDAR.

**Federal District**

The development of the Comunidades Project in the Federal District encountered challenges very distinct from those that arose in the other states. The first was the concentrated population. According to the National Institute for Geography and Informatics (INEGI), a little more than 8 million people reside there, and when one adds the transient population, the figure reaches 19 million people in the Greater Mexico City Metropolitan Area, “one of the three largest human
concentrations in the world.” Of the people employed in the Federal District, 58 percent earn less than three times the minimum daily wage (US$15). That figure is even more astonishing when examining the situation for people between fifteen and twenty-nine years of age, since almost half have a junior high or high school education but are unemployed (48.8 percent).

In the country’s capital, five organizations participated: APIS, Foundation for Fairness (APIS, Fundación para la Equidad); INICIA, Communication and Services (INICIA, Comunicación y Servicios); Education for Street Children (Educación para el Niño Callejero, EDNICA); Citizen Channel (Cauce Ciudadano, A.C.), and Civic Synergy Channel (Cauce Sinergia Cívica, A.C.). With the exception of APIS, all directed their activities to children and youth, and the last three worked in Mexico City’s poorest areas.

INICIA’s project was aimed at young people in formal work or school settings. It tried to train them so that they would be in a better position to monitor public policy directed to the youth sector. To achieve this, a large number of SISI requests were submitted, thus letting university students learn the procedures for obtaining public information. However, this was not built around a work plan that included a future use for the information obtained. The purpose of raising awareness about the right to information was fulfilled, but there was no collective impact on the groups served.

EDNICA, in contrast, works with street kids. Its strategy was to have the communities it served identify topics of concern before they learned how to prepare requests for information. EDNICA held very interesting workshops for child laborers and mothers whose children were at risk of becoming street children. The work plan’s design included three components: children living on the streets, social constructs of childhood, and the right to access information. The objective was to strengthen the processes of citizenship for female heads of households and for child laborers in two Mexico City communities where EDNICA had prior experience through its community centers. During the course of several workshops, the children became interested in learning what resources were assigned to schools and whether that information could be used to make recommendations and offer opinions on how it ought to be spent. They also were interested in learning about the criteria that had been used by the

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37 Ibid., p. 24.
38 In this section, we do not consider APIS’s participation because we discussed it in an earlier section, along with the activities of the Academia Morelense de Derechos Humanos.
government when it allocated water to a major commercial center (Gran Sur), which threatened to leave schools in a nearby neighborhood without water. EDNICA developed a methodology that linked the right to information to the knowledge and exercise of children’s and young people’s rights. It used teaching materials created by other institutions, such as the Federal District Electoral Institute, the Federal District Commission for Human Rights, and international organizations. EDNICA’s strategy included information sessions and the sharing of personal experiences, as well as home visits to talk about human rights, women’s rights, and children’s rights. These issues were approached using games. Among other activities, the organization conducted an evaluation, using neighborhood maps on which the participants located the community’s primary shared problems. The team drew a connection between these problems, the associated human rights, and the officials responsible for addressing these problems. In subsequent workshops, the team explained the right to information, the Federal Transparency Act, the SISI system, and the IFAI’s mode of operation, while at the same time connecting these topics with the problems that had been identified. Based on the information obtained, decisions were made about short- and medium-term joint activities.

One of the principal virtues of EDNICA’s work was that it encouraged children to participate as full subjects, with rights in the here and now. This contributes to transforming the traditional social constructs of childhood, which is often viewed as only as a potentiality for the future.

“Including a target population of child laborers and those who are at risk living in the streets promoted a change in existing social constructs of childhood. One of the principal challenges facing EDNICA was achieving an effective exercise of Children’s Rights and recognition of this group as a social actor. As long as children continue to be labeled as persons incapable of acting under their own initiative, the property of their families, and unable to organize, they are denied a significant part of their status as human beings, their opinions are made invisible, and their needs are only addressed in the future. Thus, by including children in this project, it was possible to influence how families, communities, and government officials view childhood.”

-EDNICA, Final Report, 2006

39 Notably, in this neighborhood, when a school water supply is cut, classes are suspended and the facilities are closed. The children either go home or they end up wandering the streets.
For its part, Citizen Channel (Cauce Ciudadano, A. C.) usually works with marginalized urban youth that have been victims or perpetrators of street violence (chavos banda or gang members). Citizen Channel invited these young people to participate in training and development through “Life Skills,” a program to familiarize them with their rights and obligations as social subjects and to empower them as advocates of those rights among their peers. The goal was for advocates to raise public awareness about the RTI among youth in urban, marginalized secondary schools in the Gustavo A. Madero Delegación (District). The hope was that they would develop strategies to monitor federal programs—in particular, those of the Mexican Institute for Youth (Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud) and the Safe Schools Program (Programa Escuela Segura), both involving several federal agencies, including the Ministry of Public Education and the Ministry of Public Safety.

The objective of its work plan was to strengthen creative and critical thinking in young people using radio and video as means of expression to encourage the exercise of the right to information. The organization, as well as the youth, found the right to be a useful tool for developing social actions that allow young people to construct a critical citizenship and have an impact on public policies. This means they become social actors, transcending their role as passive spectators of their environment. This was how Citizen Channel managed to motivate a group of youth advocates to submit requests and, in some cases, petitions for review before the IFAI. At the same time, the young people wrote radio scripts to promote the right to information. The topics covered in the programs are noteworthy: in only a few seconds, a script titled “Escuelas Patito” (Fly-by-Night Schools) tells the tale of a young man who went job hunting and found out that his diploma was fraudulent because the Ministry of Public Education did not recognize the secondary school he had attended. The clip recommended using the RTI to verify the official recognition of courses of study that are about to be undertaken or that are already completed.

Another relevant case is minors who have been jailed for some crime but who at the end of their incarceration still do not know what charges were brought against them. Citizen Channel offers them support for using SISI to obtain a copy of their case file. However, these instances were not included in the reports because the organization decided to preserve the complete confidentiality of those cases.

Civic Synergy Channel undertook its activities in one of the most conflict-ridden areas of Mexico City: the Delegación Iztapalapa. In this area, all the capital’s
problems merge together with high intensity: lack of water, overcrowding, drug trafficking, and violence.

“Iztapalapa goes back and forth between being divine and the opposite. Each time we celebrate the Stations of the Cross, the television stations pardon us, but once the Stations of the Cross are over, we are stigmatized once again: Iztaparrata, Iztapalacra . . . although when we again walk the Stations of the Cross, we return to being divine . . . ”

-Civic Synergy Channel, Second Meeting, April 2007

In a seemingly hostile environment, Civic Synergy Channel worked with leaders of social, youth, and adult organizations in an effort that was part of a broader strategy directed at strengthening the involvement of local groups in the public arena through mentoring. An outstanding strategy was used to develop resident-developed community evaluations in the effort to seek support from local and federal governments for projects that would address their most urgent needs, such as a program for Rehabilitation of Public Spaces and a Program for Nursery Schools and Day Care, both run by the Ministry of Social Development.

Nuevo Leon

According to figures from the Mexican Center for Philanthropy, Nuevo Leon has the third-highest number of civil organizations of any state. Perhaps because most of these groups are service-oriented, it was difficult to find ones that were willing to make a commitment to the Comunidades Project. After almost four months of searching, only two organizations accepted the invitation: Peaceful Alternatives (Alternativas Pacíficas), which works with women facing domestic

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41 Daniel Salazar Núñez, president of the Comprehensive Water Management Commission, claimed that of the 3,400,000 pesos budgeted for potable water and drainage infrastructure in the Federal District, priority will be given to the eastern area (Iztapalapa) in order to supply this vital resource to more than 500,000 inhabitants, who for years have depended on trucked-in water (Diario de México, July 12, 2008).
42 With 1,820,888 inhabitants, Iztapalapa is the Federal District’s most populated neighborhood (Conteo de Población y Vivienda 2005).
43 “Over the past 14 months, the police in the capital have arrested 6,520 juveniles as presumed perpetrators of crimes, of which 38 percent had robbed pedestrians in Iztapalapa. During this period, the 5,967 arrested males represented 91 percent of all the arrested juveniles involved in any crime. In addition, 553 females were arrested. The crimes for which most of the adolescents were charged include robbery of pedestrians (247 cases), robbery of personal goods (619), robbery of businesses (475), robbery of spare auto parts (430), possession of marijuana (339), robbery of cell phones (258), car theft (177), and possession of synthetic drugs, pills, or cocaine (158). In the first two months of this year, according to the report, 883 juveniles were arrested of which 807 are male, 24 are between 10 and 12 years of age, 225 are between 13 and 15, and 558 are between 16 and 17. From January to February 2008, 76 women juveniles were arrested, of which 5 were between 10 and 12 years of age; 31 were between 13 and 15, and 40 were between 16 and 17” (La Jornada, Monday, March 17, 2008).
violence, and Citizens for Human Rights (Ciudadanos en Apoyo a los Derechos Humanos, CADHAC).

Peaceful Alternatives offers consulting and psychological and legal support services to women affected by domestic violence. It is a pioneering group in this field, not only in Nuevo Leon, but at the national level as well. Its experiences prepared it to participate very closely in the design and execution of public policies related to gender issues. Based on that experience, it agreed to collaborate on the Comunidades Project. Its principal success was to request information relating to the federal budget allocated for programs to prevent gender violence and for services for victims of abuse in Nuevo Leon, which enabled it to learn how much was allocated and to monitor its use in that state.

Unlike APIS (which worked with self-help groups in the Federal District), the women working with Peaceful Alternatives were in very special situations: away from their homes, using alternative identities, and often without any contact with anyone outside of the shelter. This situation made it difficult to bring them into regular training processes. Consequently, the timing of introducing women to the topic of the right to information depended on their availability. Peaceful Alternative’s principal objective was to raise awareness about the right to information, rather than to actually exercise it during the workshops. It was clear that working with a group of people who share the same issues is not enough to foster a collective use of the RTI or even its gradual acceptance, which would eventually lead to involvement in public policy. This was the aim of Peaceful Alternatives, but the community problematic created unfavorable conditions for achieving it.

Citizens for Human Rights worked principally with federal prisoners in state penitentiaries. This community is one of the most vulnerable in terms of human rights because, in general, both society and officials believe that these people lack rights. Research in 2005 showed that 46 percent of federal prisoners in the penitentiaries in Nuevo Leon did not have information about their incarceration. The study found that the Decentralized Administrative Agency for Prevention and Social Rehabilitation, part of the Ministry of Public Safety (SSP), neglects its responsibility to respond to requests that the inmates make through the institutionally established conduits. The concession of certain benefits, such as parole, is delayed or even denied without justification.

In this context, Citizens for Human Rights first proposed to emphasize prisoners’ status as individuals with rights. To do that, they held thirteen workshops on access to information in which approximately two hundred federal prisoners
participated. In these sessions, the inmates prepared requests for access to personal data, in which they demanded that the Decentralized Administrative Agency for Prevention give them all the documentation related to the parole to which they were entitled, based on the amount of time that they had already served and their good behavior. This exercise revealed that the agency, part of the federal Ministry of Public Safety, is extremely opaque. The Ministry rejected most of the personal data requests, with the argument that there already existed other channels for this purpose. With the support of lawyers from Citizens for Human Rights, the prisoners filed 94 petitions for review before the IFAI. It handed down a decision in their favor and forced the SSP to deliver the requesters’ personal information to the requesters.

The use of the RTI and the IFAI’s involvement unclogged the backlog from the responsible authorities’ lack of attention and indifference, with the result that 36 percent of the prisoners supported by Citizens for Human Rights won the parole to which they were entitled.

Other organizations participating in the Comunidades Project found that requests for access to personal data were not the substantive part of their work, either because of the quantity of requests or because of the impact of the responses on the served community. However, in the case of the Citizens for Human Rights, these requests were fundamental because they revealed how the access-to-information procedure operates in the legal framework, and it paved the way for an effort that would recognize people’s right to have access to documents on which their lives depend and which are controlled by government offices.

“The undersecretary indicated that with regard to its work with prisoners, Citizens for Human Rights ought to enter into an agreement with the technical council. The organization ran a workshop that broadly explained what the project consisted of and how it would benefit the penitentiary community. However, problems began when the inmates were assembled, since the undersecretary did not tell the penitentiaries that personnel from Citizens for Human Rights were going to be visiting, nor did he send the lists of inmates that should be invited to the workshop. So, just a few minutes before the classes started, the inmates were assembled and the lists were prepared. In the first workshop that we gave in the Cadereyta Social Rehabilitation Center, there were no fewer than fifteen guards present, and additionally, they taped us from the moment we entered the penitentiary until the conclusion of the workshop.”


In its final report, the Citizens for Humans Rights described the difficulties that they encountered in bringing the RTI to the inmate community. Although this
organization had many years of experience working with the state’s penitentiaries, during this project, it had to meet four times with the undersecretary for Penitentiary Administration for Nuevo Leon. During one meeting, personnel from the Comunidades Project Coordination Office were present, and the undersecretary told them his agency would facilitate the activities of the Citizens for Human Rights by installing computer terminals with Internet access in the penitentiaries, a promise that was never fulfilled.

**Mexico State**

In Mexico State, three organizations participated: Development Services for Mexico State (Servicios para el Desarrollo del Estado de México, SEDEMEX), Guardians of the Volcanoes (Guardianes de los Volcanes), and the Sierra de Guadalupe Environmental Group (Grupo Ambientalista Sierra de Guadalupe). SEDEMEX is a part of the Mexican Foundation for Rural Development (Fundación Mexicana para el Desarrollo Rural), one of the oldest and most recognized networks, and it is sponsored by some of Mexico’s major corporations. Its Mexico State branch serves highly marginalized populations, mostly women of Mazahua origin in farmers associations.

The Guardians of the Volcanoes is an organization led by and primarily consisting of university professors. It works with a mixed, semi-urban, and highly participative clientele. One of its best decisions was, at the project’s outset, to invite the participation of officials from the three levels of government, academics, community leaders, and citizens interested in protecting natural resources in the region around the volcano—above all, water and forests. The Guardians’ experience in designing and implementing municipal and state public policies made this possible.

The youngest of the three participating organizations was the Sierra de Guadalupe Environmental Group, comprising young people interested in taking action to solve grave water-shortage problems and deforestation in an area between the boundaries of Mexico State and the Federal District.

SEDEMEX asked various federal agencies for information about resources allocated to the municipalities in Mexico State, including the amounts, program names, and targeted beneficiaries. This information revealed that of the total funds that could have been allocated to the state, only a part was actually

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41 In June 2008 Iztapalapa began a program began called “2008 Arms for Food Swap,” as part of the Comprehensive Safe Schools, Safe Streets Program (Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal, June 16, 2008, p. 169).
received, and these were unevenly distributed among the municipalities. The reasons why some received more than others included the involvement of the municipal president in funds management within the context of a defined strategy; the level of organization of residents who had the ability to administer the funds; and the quality of the projects. The importance of this analysis is that all the municipalities in the country could use it to access information about the funds that have been allocated to them in the federal budget.

“The issue was asking the agencies about the amount of funding for investment in rural production in Mexico State’s municipalities. The analysis showed that there were municipalities that get far more funds than others. This is the result of two conditions germane to the project: (1) the favored municipalities have a very tight base of social organization, and (2) these municipal presidents promoted rural management. In this sense, SEDEMEX has redefined its strategy to encourage just those characteristics in the municipalities that we serve, with the goal of having them secure more funds for their residents.”

-SEDEMEX, Final Report, June 2007

Among SEDEMEX’s results from its program activities, one must be highlighted: the design and implementation of a new work plan that responds to the needs of poor rural communities to access new information technologies. This project, titled Centers for Information and Satellite Communication for the Development of Poor Rural Communities in San José del Rincón, submitted a proposal and won financing from INDESOL through a social coinvestment program. The centers were intended to give poor communities infrastructure and ongoing training about how to access public information through the Internet and over the telephone. SEDEMEX thus gave its project continuity, broadened the scope of its efforts to include other towns and municipalities in the state, and strengthened its results in the medium term.

With a different type of audience and a distinct methodology, the Guardians of the Volcanoes program was linked to the Regional Land-Use Plan, which functioned as a reference point for submitting and following up on the requests for information. For its community-training strategy, an agreement with the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, Unidad Académica y Profesional de Amecameca (Autonomous University of Mexico State, Academic and Professional
The Right to Information for Marginalized Groups: The Experience of Proyecto Comunidades in Mexico

Unit of Amecameca) was of core importance. It made available two computer labs containing forty computers with Internet access. The support of the organization’s personnel facilitated learning about and using the SISI to submit and follow up on requests for information. The Guardians’ work focused on setting up twenty-two monitoring stations aimed at slowing the construction of real estate developments that violate legal provisions in environmental matters, protecting the region’s water supply, and regularizing water concessions.

As part of the Regional Environmental Regulations, the community environmental monitoring system is a mechanism for citizen participation. It had been set up only a few weeks before the Guardians joined the Comunidades Project. The citizens who would run the monitoring stations were trained in various topics considered indispensable for the development of a collective defense strategy.

Workshops were held every two weeks in the university facilities. In addition to providing advice and infrastructure for submitting requests for information in the SISI and with an electronic tool recently inaugurated by the state’s transparency agency, the Guardians invited the participation of state and federal public officials, above all environmental decision-makers. In this way, they could explain their roles and orient the citizens so that they could carry out the planned activities at the monitoring stations. This strategy was very important, because it created bridges of understanding between the citizen organizations and government officials, as well as with experts and community leaders.

“We noticed that the defense of natural resources implies the defense of agricultural lands, the defense of a way of life, the defense of regional culture, and the well-being of everyone who around us.”

-Guardians of the Volcanoes

Final Report 2007
The Guardians developed cases that required experts who could counsel them on how to file a lawsuit. FUNDAR began supporting them in this effort in December 2007. By creating a link to that organization, it was possible to bring these legal proceedings to their conclusion. The organization also encouraged the participation of citizens on the Council of the Chalco Xochimilco Aquifer Sub-basin. This group is involved in regularizing water concessions, which in this zone are highly anomalous. It also monitors the region’s wells and rivers.

During the Guardians’ first workshops, the organization presented the citizens with some cases of water-concession irregularities in several municipalities in the Chalco-Amecameca region. For example, due to the overexploitation of the region’s water resources, granting water concession titles for unauthorized uses is prohibited, but a real estate development called “GEO Houses” owned 29 percent of the water concessions intended for agricultural use (which is much cheaper than residential water rights). It also came out that this real estate developer was connected to J.P. Morgan Bank in New York through a water concession for 1.7 million m³ per year. That was later sold, which is very odd in a region with a grave water shortage such as the Chalco-Amecameca Sub-basin.

Of the three Mexico State organizations, the Sierra de Guadalupe Environmental Group was the youngest, having operated for fewer than three years. Consequently, its results were more modest, largely due to the weakness of its relationships with organized groups in the communities that it sought to serve. Most of its activities were directed to an open population, and to a lesser degree, to high school and university students. The first strategy failed, because it was difficult to track the information needs of people who were isolated from

“We saw that the Public Water Rights Registry listed a stock brokerage in New York, J.P. Morgan, as holding the rights to wells, and yet no one had investigated this. We publicized this in the media, and there was an outcry, which resulted in the Basin Council saying all the wells in the region had to be regularized, and that is what we are doing.”

- Guardians of the Volcanoes
Second Meeting, April 2007

45 Ciudadanos en Apoyo a los Derechos Humanos, Diagnóstico de la situación de Derechos Humanos en el sistema penitenciario de Nuevo León, 2005.
each other. The lack of an ongoing connection between the public being served and the organization made it difficult to follow up on requests for information and on how people made use of the information they obtained. In the second case, the students learned about the right to information, but they were not interested in getting involved in a broader process. This experience showed that organizations with fewer roots and experiences in community work confront greater challenges for developing strategies that could have an obvious impact on the population.

**Community Radio Network (La Red de Radios Comunitarias, A.C.) in Puebla, Jalisco, Veracruz, and Mexico State**

This organization embodies a wealth of several decades of work with community radio in Mexico. It maintains a close, daily connection with the most urgent needs of the country’s poorest regions, and in many cases, it is the only means for transmitting messages and encouraging actions involving the residents of a community. This organization came on board during in the final stage of the Comunidades Project, and its project was part of a broader effort that included the joint collaboration of Article 19, the Mexican magazine Etcétera, FUNDAR, and community radios in eight states in Mexico.

The Community Radio Network’s strategy sought to connect the right to information with journalistic practices on the radio. The network accomplished this by training radio-station staff rather than community members. In that context, radio station staff took charge of analyzing the community needs, connecting them to the right to information, and making them a part of the radio stations’ agendas. Like other organizations, most of the topics of community interest focused on the requirements for obtaining federal subsidy program benefits, although there also were cases in which requests were filed for information from the municipal government (budgets, and funds used and available). These topics were broadcast and commented on during the radio programs, and they were even announced on signs outside the radio station. Particularly noteworthy was the campaign carried out in Xaltepec, Puebla, to promote the care and protection of archaeological sites. This involved broadcasting publicly available information, along with responses to SISI information requests.

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46 Article 19 is an organization founded in 1987 with headquarters in London and offices in several countries, including Mexico. It directs its activities toward promoting and defending freedom of speech and information throughout the world, and it began its activities in Mexico in 2000. See www.article19.org.
Interactions among the Organizations

To conclude this section on the organizations’ activities in the context of the Comunidades Project, it is important to mention the significance of the events between November 2006 and November 2007, when participants had an opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences.

In various meetings, forums, and seminars discussing the topic of Mexican civil society organizations, participants emphasized the need to reinforce connections among organizations with diverse purposes. The possibilities range from creating a platform for joint action on specific topics in order to have stronger influence in the public arena, all the way to broadening the opportunities for obtaining funding—above all in the case of small or recently created organizations. In the case of the Comunidades Projects, the coordination process was aimed at facilitating an exchange of experiences and knowledge that would capitalize on what each organization had learned while participating in the project. Another advantage was obtaining expert advice for specific aspects of exercising the right to information—for example, creating bridges between environmental organizations and organizations working in community development that sought to help groups to address a specific problem related to issues of environmental protection or defense.

The interactions of the organizations participating in the Comunidades Project reinforced the ability of each to influence the local arena by offering local actors spaces for a dialogue within a federal institution and by convening the media to broadcast their achievements. That is, it also entailed a strategy of making the organizations and their work visible in the community. This effort aligns local activity and the national perspective in order to empower the work of participants in this type of initiative based on an exchange of knowledge and mutual support. By having the participating organizations interact, we sought to create the appropriate conditions for the defense and strengthening of the right to information at the three levels of government.

“The combination of knowledge bases is precisely one of the characteristics of networks. For example, in the questions on operating rules for Budgetary Line 33, the communities needed a specialized expert to offer arguments, evidence, and pleadings (...) a huge number of things that an expert has to provide. That is why networks are useful; we are only one part of the resources.”

-CESEM, Second Meeting, April 2007
In November 2006 and April 2007, participating organizations attended two meetings aimed at encouraging the sharing of experiences and a collective reflection around the objectives, scope, and results of the Comunidades Project. Given that the activities of the organizations had concluded in December 2007, in our third meeting, we sought to connect the experiences of the participating organizations with other organizations and experiences in order to open communication channels that would facilitate an exchange of ideas and the development of joint actions. In this way, we created conditions so that when the Comunidades Project was halted, the organizations that had pending requests or open petitions for review would be able to conclude them with the help of available specialists, technical assistance, and strategic mentoring, thanks to the support of more experienced organizations, such as FUNDAR, CEMDA, and Article 19. Thus, unlike the two previous meetings, on this occasion we invited not only the participating organizations, but also other social and institutional actors that would be able to contribute to keep the mission of the Comunidades Project in full force. The recommendation was to focus the debate on the strategies necessary for strengthening what had been learned about the right to information and to utilize the information obtained. Likewise, we attempted to create incentives for the formation of alliances and to empower the organizations in the defense and exercise of their right to know.

Other than the meetings, undoubtedly the greatest value obtained from the fieldwork experience appears when we look at some of the strategies and methodologies used by the organizations. The evaluation team analyzed them in detail in their seventh interim report. In the following chapter, we mention some of those that had the best results or that led to new recommendations.
4. EDUCATING FROM A RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

As has been noted, the UNAM evaluation team analyzed in detail the strategies and methodologies that the organizations used in the context of the Comunidades Project. In this section, we will briefly describe some of them, explain the importance of focusing the teaching strategy on community issues, and describe the methodology of using “community maps.” Finally, we discuss the challenges posed in using new information technologies (the Internet and the SISI) in communities with very low educational levels.

Most of the organizations’ strategies were based on elements drawn from adult education, participant research, and mass education. This mixture takes strategies borrowed from formal and informal teaching programs that allow adults with a low level of education to develop their capacities and to acquire skills and knowledge that will broaden their sense of justice, equality, and democracy.

“Citizen education is understood as a process occurring over time: an analysis of the current situation; diagnosis or self-diagnosis; preparation of public-policy recommendations; lobbying on or negotiating those proposals and recommendations with various political actors, such as officials, candidates, and so forth; signing of agreements that result from these negotiations; and monitoring and evaluating the fulfillment of agreements. This new form of exercising citizenship introduces dialogue and involvement in public decisionmaking. It breaks with the schemes of traditional civic education and citizen education in civil society during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, which interacted with the state solely by applying pressure, in the sense of making demands. The new citizen education must include content about how the state is organized, what the powers of its various agencies are, and, very importantly, what human rights are and how they can be exercised. Nevertheless, this certainly does not imply that the new citizen participation no longer pressures the government, for example, through mobilization.”

-Arles Caruso, Reflexiones acerca de la educación ciudadana, 2007

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47 Popular education “develops a methodological, pedagogical, and didactic proposal based on participation, dialogue, and the complementarity of different forms of knowledge. All this takes place based on, and in support of, a political option that views the world from the perspective of marginalized and excluded populations and works toward their liberation.” Carlos Núñez, “Educación popular: Una mirada de conjunto,” Decisio 10 (January-April, 2005), Centro Regional de Educación de Adultos y Alfabetización Funcional para América Latina, CREFAL.

48 This latter point is from the International Conference on Adult Education, held in Hamburg, Germany, in 1997.
In general, these strategies attempt to:

- have access to the public arena;
- create learning processes geared to addressing the interests and needs of marginalized sectors and increasing their capacity for dialogue and social participation;
- contribute to strengthening their organizations;
- increase equitable distribution of knowledge about rights in order to effectively incorporate marginalized sectors in the public arena; and
- encourage the connection between people and institutions.

Unlike literacy or formal adult education programs, the didactic model shared by the various organizations participating in the project proposed, as an end goal, the development of capacities that allow community members to take an active role in improving their situations by analyzing data, planning and implementing activities, and evaluating the results that were achieved.

According to the results of the UNAM evaluation, the Comunidades Project not only endeavored to find effective formulas for raising marginalized populations’ awareness about the right to information and its legal framework, but based on experiences during just over two years of work, it also developed a recommendation for citizen education to increase their involvement in the public arena. This occurred because in searching for strategies to give meaning to RTI in the communities, most of the organizations opted to create diagnostics to identify issues already present in the communities, such as neighborhood assemblies, community assemblies, or neighborhood committees, since they already exist—or in other words, that function on a regular or an intermittent basis, but that already exist. Thus, we participate in neighborhood assemblies, where we explain the project, introduce ourselves to people, briefly explain what the right to information is, and start a discussion about the most heartfelt problems for these people (this can be in one, two, or three sessions. Then, based on these problems—not on a request for information, but rather based on the discussion of the problem—we prioritize and decide where to start.

“Our strategy is to connect with spaces already built by the community, such as neighborhood assemblies, community assemblies, or neighborhood committees, since they already exist—or in other words, that function on a regular or an intermittent basis, but that already exist. Thus, we participate in neighborhood assemblies, where we explain the project, introduce ourselves to people, briefly explain what the right to information is, and start a discussion about the most heartfelt problems for these people (this can be in one, two, or three sessions... Then, based on these problems—not on a request for information, but rather based on the discussion of the problem—we prioritize and decide where to start.”

-CESEM, Second Meeting, April 2007

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49 The term political involvement has been used with respect to not only rights and legal injustices but also basic problems of survival; for example, how to obtain water or health care services, which often are not conceptualized as rights per se. This also includes, to a certain extent, the idea of requiring the government to fulfill its programs and budgets on behalf of the citizenry. Recently, many groups are contextualizing their engagement with societal problems in the context of rights, in order to give their claims greater weight and legitimacy. Political advocacy refers to initiatives and campaigns geared toward having an influence or impact on political spheres, not just with regard to policies and laws but also in systems of power, decisionmaking processes that may be involved in the formal legal system, the government, the private sector, and other spheres that have recently been identified.” Valerie Miller, “Desafíos y lecciones de la incidencia política: Interrogantes e implicaciones para Programas de Acción, Capacitación y Apoyo Financiero,” paper presented at the Regional Conference on Political Involvement, Training, and Financial Support, Antigua, Guatemala, October 13–14, 2000. Available at http://www.justassociates.org/desafiosincidencia.pdf.
community needs and problems that could be connected to the right to information.\footnote{From their perspective, these organizations set out to promote knowledge of other rights among the beneficiaries, and based on that, they, as citizens, demanded that the government address and solve problems. In the context of the project, knowledge and exercise of the RTI was geared toward obtaining information from the federal government so that they could get their problems, whether collective or individual, addressed and resolved. This came to constitute a factor that strengthened citizenship and the promotion of social, economic, and cultural rights among marginalized communities.” Sixth interim report op. cit., p. 34–35.}

This model of involvement had better results when organizations had access to an evaluation of the various problems identified by the communities that had already been prepared. Organizations also obtained good results when it prepared the evaluation with the communities prior to addressing the topic of RTI.

In both cases, the task was to identify the needs, demands, interests, and expectations of the communities, as well as to become familiar with available resources. This implied a very broad perspective: “investigate the social problems of the community and understand the conflict between attitudes, values, personalities, institutions, and the religious, political, and cultural groups in power.”\footnote{Carlos Pazos, Apuntes sobre investigación participativa, Serie de cuadernos CREFAL (Centro Regional de Educación de Adultos y Alfabetización Funcional para América Latina) no. 10., Mexico City, 1989.}

“In this regard, another element that favors the success of this educational strategy is having courses and workshops taught by facilitators who are community members who know its sociocultural characteristics, codes (cultural and linguistic), and social dynamics.

\textit{“Access to information is a general skill that may be even more useful to people who are coordinating key health projects, for example. I think the effort is not duplicated or wasted; instead, it really reinforces, for example, those who are working in the area of health care, because it automatically gives them a tool to reinforce what they are doing in health, or for those involved in educational programs, it reinforces these because it gives you more tools for that . . . to the extent that these advocates are community members, if they are producers in the community, it will be a sort of peer training, because they speak the dialect, they are from the area, and such people are going to stick around there.”}

-SEDEMEX, Second Meeting of Participating Organizations, April 2007

\textit{“If the community asks for more workshops, we would have to train more trainers, so that those who had already had an initial training could now go it alone. We would support them with materials, and we would support them by being present during in the workshop.”}

-Jalisco Environmental Collective, Second Meeting of Participating Organizations, April 2007
If the facilitators are not members of the community, it is essential that they have experience in community work and that the community recognizes and accepts them in order to avoid the risk of having prejudice and personal judgments shut down communication and weaken the learning process.

In this context, the function of the organizations has been to support the formulation of recommendations to deal with community problems, with the use of RTI as one of several tools. It should be noted that there is a risk of starting to act like a “social worker” or “case manager,” which could create a dependency that would fail to develop skills and the empowerment of community members.\(^5\)\(^2\) This risk will be reduced depending on the emphasis placed on other socially significant concepts: democracy, citizenship, participation, equality, and transparency.

The organization’s challenge with this strategy is to run a program that allows the community to engage in a higher level of reflection about politics and the importance of citizen participation—not only as individuals but as a community. By reflecting and deliberating, people can transform their feelings of dissatisfaction into a “social demand”\(^5\)\(^3\) that can be addressed through legal channels.

\(^5\)\(^2\) “Indeed, the organizations pointed out this risk during the First Meeting of Organizations Committed to Social Empowerment in Matters of the Right to Information, organized by the IFAI on November 24, 2006. See the transcript of the discussion (http://www.ifai.org.mx/ProyectoComunidades).

\(^5\)\(^3\) A letter from Liliana Iovanovich, Argentina educator and adult-education specialist, defines this concept as “the organized and collective expression and the demands that the group members seek to implement through the decisions of public and/or private institutions.”

“One of the project’s contributions is precisely the methodology for converting the social demand into a request for information and obtaining public information that is useful for improving community management. Among others, the project provided these strategies: (1) The formation of advocacy groups rooted in the communities and trained about this right and that have sufficient visibility within the community itself and among its officials and political actors. (2) Connecting the right to public information with other fundamental rights, such as the right to petition, women’s right, civil rights, and indigenous rights. (3) Advocacy groups’ ability to have grounded reasoning and to act affirmatively, which distinguishes them from other groups that behave oppositionally and unreasonably. These three elements elevate the level of moral and ethical credibility of these advocacy groups in the task of building a culture of transparency.”

-CESEM, Final Report, February 2007
The results of the Comunidades Project indicate that a methodology for encouraging marginalized communities to adopt the RTI should be based on revaluing the role of various actors: society, state, academia, political parties, entrepreneurs, and social leaders. The advocate’s task is to facilitate the articulation of their knowledge bases and strengths with those of the marginalized community, encouraging a process in which each party fulfills a function that is distinct yet complementary. It is a matter of connecting with these sectors by fostering interaction in order to make collective decisions about a shared concern, which can be a social demand (that is, a community problem or need).

**Community Maps**

This exercise aims to help communities analyze their situation, including political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors. Over the course of several short workshops (two or three hours in length at most), participants reflected on the conditions prevailing in their neighborhoods, and they produced a map that would incorporate data, such as demographics, statistics on the number of young people, women, children, and older adults living in the community, problems faced by each segment, and available infrastructure. A reflection on economic, social, and cultural rights complemented this information. We attempted to identify distinct elements that act on the quality of life for the various sectors that make up the community, prioritizing them according to their urgency.

In subsequent workshops, participants discussed the varieties of citizen participation in communities and their scope and limitations in terms of

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“The organizations sought to involve the participants in thinking concretely about their personal and community living conditions, and this was done using participatory dynamics in almost all the cases by identifying a variety of issues that grabbed their attention. These self-diagnostics activities were generally conducted at the beginning of the project, even in the case of experiences that turned out to be more effective when working with marginalized people. They used this to try to have interesting topics from the very start, that were already personal or collective concerns that sparked thought and group debate and that served as a launch pad for learning about and exercising the RTI. That is how Settlers, EDNICA, ACCEDE and SEDEMEX proceeded, for example.”

- UNAM, Seventh Deliverable, p. 99.
community development. Using all this information, they explored the operating rules for federal programs and programs in the Federal District related to the participant-identified community issues. Based on this information, participants submitted their requests.

**SISI (www.infomex.org.mx)**

The process of learning to request information using the SISI was difficult for both the organizations and the communities.

At first, it was felt that the main obstacle to surmount would be the low levels of education and limited knowledge of new information technologies.

“In many communities, people and groups assume from the start that it makes no sense to ask, that they are not entitled to have information, that only those in the know or those in charge have this right. Even within families, it is assumed that children and women have no right to pose questions to adults or to the head of the household . . . ”

-SEPICJ, First Meeting of the Organizations, November 2006

“…We work with women who are fifty or sixty years old, on average, and you would have to see how they can adopt these tools, what a terrible fear of the computers they have, and how they can get together and learn what they’re going to ask and of whom. You wouldn’t imagine how the world of the Internet represents this question of the unknown; it instills fear in a lot of people . . . You have to train community advocates in the area of access to information.”

-Pobladores, Second Meeting of the Organizations, April 2007

However, as noted in the third interim report, and in the presentation that the researchers made at the November 8 meeting, Internet access was not a real obstacle, since the communities themselves found ways to involve cybercafé owners in the processes for obtaining public information.54

“To define the topics for the requests, the group was divided into four subgroups, called process groups, and they each identified four processes: sociocultural, productive, environmental, and civic education. Each group identified the requirements for every request on a poster board, using a participatory approach and taking into account the topical context for the issues. Each request was presented at the full group meeting, with the rest of the group and the workshop facilitators specifying its contents in additional detail.”


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54 This case includes Pobladores, IMDEC, and Cauce Sinergia Cívica.
According to a recent study by Rosalie Winocour, parents with a basic level of education look for ways to buy a computer with Internet access in order to strengthen their children’s competitiveness in school. These two elements are already part of the popular imagination, which implies, among other things, the fear that “the computer will become yet another factor in social exclusion.”\textsuperscript{55} Winocour says that in households where only the children know how to use the computer, parents and grandparents participated by putting the youngsters in charge of searches; when a family member moves away, they even learn to use instant messenger services and Skype to keep in touch.\textsuperscript{56} This will reinforce the idea that using SISI is not any more of an obstacle to the exercise of the RTI than is the use of other online programs and services, such as e-mail and search engines like Google or Yahoo.

Currently, a heated debate is taking place concerning the marginalized communities’ processes of adapting new information technologies, and although this is the subject for another study, it is worth emphasizing that we should devote more thought to this issue in finalizing the Comunidades Project. Next, we present the UNAM researchers’ key findings after assessing the projects.

\textsuperscript{55} Rosalia Winocour, “Nuevas tecnologías y usuarios, la apropiación de las TIC en la vida cotidiana,” Revista Telos 73 (October-December 2007).

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
5. RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION

This section presents the results of the independent evaluation of the Comunidades Project. The purpose is to offer the reader an overview of its main challenges and achievements, from an external, professional, independent, and rigorous perspective. As mentioned previously, the evaluation analyzed activities of eighteen organizations that joined the Comunidades Project between January 2006 and December 2007.

Main Results

Especially noteworthy among the UNAM researchers’ findings are the following topics: the organizations’ methodology, the information from field data collection, the barriers identified by both the evaluators and the organizations, and the general conclusions that the project pinpointed. To precisely locate those four aspects, it is important to consider the following:

• The experience of organizations and the development of project-specific methodologies were factors that facilitated the achievement of the project’s goals, as was its ability to create connections between the right to information and their substantive activities, and the strategy of incorporating the project into existing community groups.

• The population profile of the communities served included the fact that 70 percent had incomes less than three times the minimum wage (US$14.50) per day; 34 percent were housewives and 19 percent lived in rural areas; 40 percent had not completed their basic studies and so lacked knowledge about computer use and the Internet; 40 percent were indigenous; and 60 percent were women.

“Community beneficiaries believe that access to information is a useful right; that this usefulness is linked primarily to the community level; that they will exercise the RTI after the project, since they have the capability, and it is almost unanimously believed by PROSDAI that the beneficiaries will indeed do so if they have organizational support. If they do not have this support, only half of the organizations believe that the beneficiaries would actually exercise it.”

**Methodological Aspects**

With extreme care, the evaluators observed the organizations’ methodologies since the identification of the most effective strategies for promoting the exercise of the RTI in marginalized sectors was a key objective of the Comunidades Project. In this regard, they found that most groups implemented a series of actions tailored to the needs of their respective working groups.

- Most organizations made a specific connection between knowledge about, and the exercise of, the RTI and the construction of community diagnostics.

- Half of the cases highlighted environmental problems as the top issue for the community.

- Most organizations incorporated RTI as a tool to enhance their work and thereby improve their institutional offerings. Organizations also believed that knowledge and exercise of RTI increased their potential to influence the policies that affect their communities.

- The strategy of submitting information requests during workshops, which allowed participants to get directly involved in the process, is a teaching tool that fosters the acquisition of skills to leading to the adoption of the RTI.

- Regarding the development of a strategy that uses “cases,” which the Comunidades Project employed to guide the work plans for the organizations, the evaluators concluded that its effectiveness was less when compared to other methodologies used by the organizations to encourage the adoption of the RTI.

**Exercise of RTI and Its Usefulness**

Another element that merited the evaluators’ particular attention was the effect of organizations’ strategies and methodologies on the target population. Among the most striking findings were those concerning the use of SISI by groups with

57 Cases refers to a process that comprises methodologies and strategies geared toward solving a problem or community need through the use of the right to public government information as a tool.

58 “The ‘cases’ strategy, as we have seen, had a very low level of implementation and did not have a major impact on meeting the PROSDAI’s goal—extending knowledge about and the exercise of the RTI. This contrasts with specific forms for connecting to the community, such as inviting participants to the classes, forming groups, performing community diagnostics, promoting a dynamic of skill building on the content of the RTI that are adapted to the specific profile of the participants.” UNAM/FCPYS, Seventh interim report, op. cit., p. 211.
low levels of schooling and little or no knowledge of new information technologies. In this regard, the evaluators found that:

- Half of the project’s beneficiaries felt capable of submitting requests for public information without external support; the other half did not.

- The better-educated and technologically skilled segment of the population showed a better understanding of the mechanisms and a greater confidence in their ability to submit requests.

- One-third of people with lower educational levels and computer skills felt they were capable of submitting requests after participating in the project activities.

- Illiterate people can exercise the right of access to information, but require ongoing support and mentoring to formulate requests.

- Of the participants interviewed, 60 percent were able to describe the procedure for requesting information.

- Seventy percent could correctly state their rights regarding access to government information.

- Of the participants interviewed, 50 percent knew the type of information that they could access.

- The organizations believed that 62.5 percent of responses to requests made under the project were quality requests—that is, appropriate, timely, clear, and current.

- Ninety-four percent of participants were able to identify a possible application for the access to information; most attributed some strategic attributes to this right in terms of helping meet societal or community needs.

- Of those interviewed, 23.3 percent used the RTI after the project ended.

- More than 90 percent of respondents said they plan to request federal public information when they need it, which reflects that they perceive this right to be useful and necessary.
Main Obstacles

Based on the project’s fieldwork, interviews, participant observation, and analytical monitoring, the evaluators identified factors that hinder the dissemination and enforcement of RTI in marginalized groups. Among the most important are:

- the IFAI-provided materials do not align well with the specific needs of each community;
- the remoteness and inaccessibility of many communities;
- low educational and skill levels in target populations—in particular, lack of Internet infrastructure;
- lack of knowledge about government administrative structures and functions, both on the part of organizations and in the target audience;
- local political strongmen, who use intimidation to try to block the exercise of the RTI;
- the communities’ high levels of mistrust of the government, with nearly 40 percent of respondents expressing fear of government reprisals for requesting information;\(^59\) and
- of the eighteen participating organizations, seven verbally commented on incidents of harassment resulting from inquiries, but only two included it in their final reports, with the relevant documentary evidence.

“No matter how empowered the communal landholding organization might feel, if they do not have information they are not going to be able to do the paperwork successfully. That is the first thing. It is very important to have information. And to achieve that, one must approach the one who has the information, which is a political matter. Why don’t they give out the information? Because there are special interests within the town councils. In the communal landholding organizations, there are political strongmen who have their own identity, their own interests, their own property and businesses, and when information circulates, it creates problems of a political nature. . . . there are two types of cases that we have dealt with: one where there are official programs and where the people making a web search start knocking on the right door right from the start, and then things are handled quickly and they get credit and they get financing. . . . It is a success. This is one type of case, and it is very beneficial, because it is a success. But there are others that are politically problematic, that involve financial resources, corporate interests, with environmental issues . . .”

-CESEM Report, First Meeting of Civil Society Organizations Associated with the Comunidades Project, November 2006

\(^59\) Evaluation Team Presentation at the Third Meeting of Civil Society Organizations hosted by the IFAI to encourage the exchange of experiences in this incipient network.
Findings of the Evaluation

The external evaluation was essential for the IFAI, insofar as it measured the principal problems, successes, limitations, and the scope of the project, from its very beginning. This allowed the IFAI to quickly correct some problems and to emphasize those activities that produced the best results based on the specific profile of the communities.

• “There is evidence that project activities in the communities have led to increased knowledge about the mechanisms and procedures for access to federal information, which is reflected in the significant differences between the beneficiaries and control groups. These differences increase as the degree of adoption of RTI increases.”

• In general, the achievements of the organizations participating in the Comunidades Project allow us to see that they adopted the RTI and managed to transmit a sense of strategic utility to the communities they served, which demonstrates the feasibility and desirability of promoting the exercise of the RTI among marginalized populations.

• The current mechanisms for exercising the RTI are unsuitable given the circumstances of marginalized people.

• Not limiting the request mechanism to the SISI enables people with lower educational levels who are unfamiliar with the Internet to submit requests for public information.

• The government does not generate sufficient, quality public information to meet the interests of large segments of the population.

• The most disadvantaged communities did not pose an insurmountable obstacle, since 30 percent of beneficiaries with lower educational levels, without computer or Internet skills, and with low incomes felt they were able to submit requests for public information.

• The IFAI must adapt its training and outreach materials to match the various profiles of the marginalized populations, or it must develop new materials suitable for these audiences.

\(^{60}\) Sixth interim report, op. cit., p. 107.
• The IFAI should develop and offer training programs for disadvantaged people and training for local RTI advocates.

• The evaluators recommend promoting a project to provide IT and communications infrastructure to marginalized regions or communities (such as community centers).

• Alternative mechanisms to simplify access to public information must be identified.

• The IFAI should take a multicultural perspective in its programs promoting a culture of transparency, access to public information, and personal information protection.

Lessons Learned from the Evaluation

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, in its final report the evaluators recommended, first, to systematize the experience with the type of methodologies and teaching tools that the civil society organizations built for spreading the adoption of RTI in their communities. In addition, the report systematically analyzed the particular strategies that these organizations developed to tie the RTI to the specific needs of the communities. By looking at the civil and social organizations’ promotion of the right, the report hoped to find key factors that could be fundamental in designing a public policy to broaden the exercise of the RTI among marginalized sectors.

In its conclusions and in light of the effectiveness of each organization in terms of the level of RTI adoption in the communities, the evaluators found a set of elements that should be considered when creating RTI-adoption models, including:

a) the type of community and beneficiaries, with an emphasis on the ability to adopt and effectively use the RTI, which is usually the case with local leaders;

b) the profile of the organizations that could qualify as advocates of the Transparency Act, with an emphasis on their experience in community training programs and rights advocacy;

c) ways to work in closer cooperation with the community—that is, activities and tools that enable organizations to interact with residents, officials, and key players, in order to convene meetings and spread awareness about the RTI, with special preference for those cases that have preexisting ties to the community;

d) the methodologies and teaching strategies developed in the communities, which need to be sufficiently flexible so as to adapt to the profile and needs of the beneficiaries;

e) teaching tools that, in addition to the basic social training infrastructure, should include interactive activities and games run by facilitators, with the aim of raising awareness and understanding of certain issues related to the usefulness of the RTI; and

f) strategies for linking the right to information to community needs and interests, aimed at encouraging participants to specifically reflect on their living conditions, particularly based on participatory assessment of various problems of interest to them.

In light of the legal framework for the RTI, the electronic system for accessing government public information, and the federal government’s structure and functioning, the UNAM report states that:

In Mexico, the scenarios for exercising the RTI in the short, medium, and long term will not vary substantively and thus will not require considering other awareness-raising strategies other than those that already involve social institutions and civil society organizations providing direct support to the communities. This is because a high percentage of people in Mexico do not have the minimum educational background to spontaneously exercise the RTI. It requires the involvement of civil society organizations to help break through the almost insurmountable barrier of educational marginalization that afflicts one out of every three Mexicans.

Based on the observation that a large proportion of Mexicans do not have the skills or the means to independently exercise their right of access to information, we must promote actions similar to those taken by the IFAI-Comunidades Project and that draw on their positive experience. As the report noted:
For the PROSDAI, themselves, implementing the project has not only enabled them to provide the ability to exercise this right, but based on this experience, they are qualified to advocate for the exercise of the RTI among the communities with which they work. This creates a multiplier effect, promoting the spread and deepening of the RTI in our country.

The next chapter will present the denouement for the Comunidades Project in the Federal Freedom of Information Institute (IFAI).
6. PROJECT CLOSURE AND THE INTERRUPTION OF THE RTI AWARENESS CAMPAIGN IN DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS

This section briefly sets out how the Comunidades Project concluded. It will discuss the role played by the media during the final stage, up to the ultimate cessation of activities.

Toward the end of October 2007, while the IFAI was preparing to hold the third meeting, only a handful of organizations were editing the final versions of their reports. As mentioned in Chapter 3, unlike the two previous meetings, attended only by the organizations involved in the project, to the third one, we invited other organizations, along with journalists, academics, and the general public. This reflected one of the main objectives of this meeting: namely, creating alliances and fostering the formation of networks that could be used to widely disseminate the achieved results. To that end, reporters were scheduled to attend each of the round tables, and a press conference was held prior to the start of the meeting, supported by the Mexican delegation of the NGO called Article 19, strong support from the Collective for Transparency (Colectivo por la Transparencia) and from organizations that make up Citizens for Transparent Municipalities (Ciudadanos por Municipios Transparentes, CIMTRA).

During the third meeting, the relevance of the topics discussed and the impact of the results presented by the UNAM evaluation team were reflected in the media interest in the organizations’ work in the Comunidades Project. Several print and electronic media sources picked up some of the cases, including the “Safe School” program, presented by the youth of Citizen Channel. Other projects that attracted interest included the presentation by the Citizens for Human Rights on the federal prisoners in Nuevo Leon, who managed to get access to their personal data, and the monitoring of the Housing Program in Veracruz, presented by the women of Settlers. Although not a part of the Comunidades Project, other access-to-information cases were presented during the third meeting, including the monitoring of migrant detention centers by Without Borders (Sin Fronteras, A. C.).

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65 See http://www.cimacnoticias.com/site/07110814-Mujeres-conocen-por.30994.0.html
The media took note of and embraced the Comunidades Project because it offered a perspective on access to information that is different from the usual coverage. In this case, the RTI stories were related more to the daily lives of ordinary people than to the excesses of the government or the bureaucratic elite.

IFAI’s participation in the Comunidades Project played a key role in the results. On the one hand, the institutional backing in most cases empowered the project’s ability to garner support for its activities. This is especially true since the IFAI was a new agency—whose origins are close to civil society and with compelling achievements in carrying out its substantive duties that national experts and foreign observers have commented on and applauded. The letter of introduction was one of the resources that helped to convince organizations to join the RTI cause and participate in the project. Moreover, the proximity of the IFAI to the organizations strengthened the institution’s capacity for dialogue with the organizations and agencies that, under the Transparency Act, are responsible for sharing information. This proximity also helped the IFAI to secure advice and support so that it could meet the organizations’ needs for specialized legal and technical assistance via other service-providing civil society organizations, such as FUNDAR or the Mexican Center for Environmental Law (CEMDA).

Although the IFAI had already developed activities to promote the exercise of the right of access to information among various audiences, including civil society organizations, the Comunidades Project contributed an interesting angle to the Institute’s efforts: services for marginalized groups, a segment of the population that did not appear to have the necessary conditions to exercise this right.

After more than two years of work, the results showed that communities in these socioeconomic sectors were able to find the needed human and technical resources to make use of available procedures for accessing information, as long as they have the support of an organization they trust. The results also revealed that these communities adopt the right to information when they can understand it as a useful tool for the preservation of other fundamental rights.

These findings call for strengthening the program over the medium and long term, including tailoring a teaching model to these groups, developing manuals needed to train advocates, replicating this training in communities, and getting feedback on the results of fully completed programs.

In this context, the general coordinator of the Comunidades Project made a presentation to the IFAI governing board in October 2007. With the clear support
of the Hewlett Foundation for continuing the partnership, he recommended the initiation of a new phase in the effort to raise awareness of the RTI in marginalized communities. The overall goal of this effort was to:

strengthen the adoption of the right to information in marginalized sectors by training community advocates; strengthen organizational programs of regional and/or thematic scope by creating networks and specialized support to assist the communities in completing their RTI access. These steps would consolidate the progress achieved by the IFAI-Comunidades Project.

Regarding other aspects, the recommendations stated that the Comunidades Project had completed the stage intended to identify appropriate strategies for promoting the adoption of the RTI in marginalized sectors in order to empower them. Based on that, the general coordinator recommended taking advantage of the lessons learned and allowing for the institutionalization of the positive outcomes by initiating a new period of activities that sought to:

1) Capitalize on the experience by creating useful mechanisms (teaching materials and teaching strategies) so that the IFAI could serve these types of communities in an effective and ongoing manner, with the aim of institutionally establishing the steps entailed in working with marginalized communities. The IFAI has developed no ongoing, replicable, and long-term institutional programs that allow it to offer tools to promote the RTI in populations with this profile. It has directed all of its efforts at a sector that is already in possession of information, under the hypothesis that this has lower costs and greater benefits.

2) Develop a model for training RTI advocates that would multiply the scope of training to include all the states, specifically in light of the challenges arising from the amendment to constitutional Article 6. From this perspective, the constitutional reform would not change the scenario, but rather would empower the scope of this method of promoting the right at the local level, since the majority of state transparency agencies lack this type of tool.

3) Strengthen the incipient network of civil society organizations so that they would be in a position to observe and participate in the activities in their states resulting from the amendment.

4) Strengthen the process for adopting the RTI in those organizations and communities that were beginning to use it as a tool, by offering specialized consulting and technical support. The IFAI should lay the groundwork for
institutionalizing a public policy that facilitates marginalized communities’ adoption of the right to information and their utilization of that information to gain access to other public goods and services.

Three months later, in January 2008, the IFAI governing board decided not to approve the general coordinator’s proposal to strengthen the project’s achievements. From our perspective, this decision had at least four immediate repercussions:

1) It ignored the lessons that we learned over two-and-a-half years of work that sought to identify effective ways to give disadvantaged groups control over the right to information (RTI).

2) It broke the continuity of a successful and very important institutional policy, one that arose from a legal mandate. The IFAI did this without having any alternative institutional program that it could substitute for Comunidades Project.

3) It unnecessarily threatened the collaborative relationship between the IFAI and civil society organizations participating in the Comunidades Project, without there being any clear alternative institutional policy.

4) It inexplicably interrupted an innovative, unique, and effective effort that brought together the three-pronged, coordinated work of a federal agency, social organizations, and marginalized communities. This occurred even though the project had increasingly drawn the attention of the international community, which sees the author and promoter of the effort—the IFAI—as a noteworthy model and perhaps even one to emulate.

The decision of the majority of the IFAI governing board was based on the need to avoid “paternalistic” attitudes that supposedly usurp functions that belong to society and to not triangulate resources that should be funneled directly to the organizations. However, a new project the IFAI presented in mid-January 2008 included a proposal to request funding from the Hewlett Foundation that would be used, paradoxically, for activities in federal educational agencies, such as:

The Comunidades Project had stirred great interest among the various organizations and the media, which led to bitter reactions against the majority decision of the IFAI governing board. This was expressed in the publication of articles in the national media, including Reforma, El Universal, La Jornada, Contralínea, and Proceso among others. Juan E. Pardinas published a February 2008 editorial in Reforma newspaper entitled “From Subjects to Citizens,” in which he wrote:

Despite its excellent results, the IFAI canceled the Comunidades Project. Without support for projects like this, the access to information is a right that exists only for the most privileged Mexicans. It will be a long time before the institutional change concerning the right to information becomes a true social transformation. There is nothing more difficult than changing collective habits and perceptions.

In the end, the IFAI halted the awareness-raising activities directed toward marginalized social groups and closed the case file. As of today, no information is available that demonstrates that the Institute has initiated any program directed specifically to those communities. The risk this entails, shown in retrospect, was that the lessons of two-and-a-half years of work would be forgotten, without having viable institutional alternatives to comply with the legal mandate to promote the right to information in those communities. It is unusual for a Mexican state agency to come across a formula for social empowerment that helps communities get ahead. It is even more unusual for that formula to be abandoned without greater reflection, and illogically, the rejection was attributed to the purported paternalism of working directly with grassroots organizations in poor communities.

Ibid., 5.
The IFAI’s internal auditing agency started the specific audit 03/08 in April 2008, but it cancelled it without any explanation, and without the delivery of preliminary results or observations, as promised in February 2009. It immediately initiated a new audit of the same project, the 01/09, the results of which still have not been released in April 2009. On this point, see Miguel Ángel Granados Chapa, “Juan Pablo Guerrero,” Reforma, June 17, 2008; Sergio Aguayo Quezada, “Miscelánea,” Reforma, June 18, 2008; Daniel Lizárraga, “Investigan a Juan Pablo Guerrero,” Proceso, June 8, 2008.
The following section sets forth some possible lines of action that will allow us to capitalize on the lessons to be learned from the Comunidades Project, in order to extend the RTI to increasingly broader segments of the population. It also discusses the tasks for a plan geared to making progress based on the achievements of the Comunidades Project.
7. LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

The Federal Freedom of Information Institute (IFAI) has encountered difficulties in carrying out its legal obligation to promote and raise awareness about the right to information and the benefits of public management of information. Much was spent on outreach, but very few people exercise this right. Although the number of requests made to the federal government surpassed 370,000 in December 2008—five years after the implementation of the Transparency Act—half the requests came from only 7,000 SISI users, out of 129,000 users registered during this period. Demand is concentrated among a certain class of young urban professionals, whose educational and income levels are well above the national average. For the most part, these people already had the ability to access government information prior to the establishment of the Federal Transparency and Access to Public Government Information Act (Ley Federal de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información Pública Gubernamental) in 2002. Despite the gains after the Act went into effect in June 2003, ordinary Mexican citizens still do not exercise this fundamental right to access information. The poorest Mexicans are even less able to access information in a simple and easy way.

Paradoxically, this sector—the country’s poorest—would benefit the most from the exercise of the right to access information. First, it could help them learn more about the social programs designed for them, and it could give them better tools to defend their basic rights. With the

“A high percentage of people do not have the minimum educational background and technological skills to spontaneously exercise the right to information. Hence, faced with evidence from the Comunidades concerning the effectiveness of achieving access to the RTI in marginalized communities, it is necessary to encourage similar actions based on the project’s best lessons. The project not only enabled the participating organizations to provide the capacity to exercise this right, but through this experience, they became qualified to promote the exercise of the RTI within the communities in which they work. This becomes a multiplier that encourages the spread and deepening of the RTI in our country.”

-Moisés Domínguez Pérez and Marta Fabiola Zermeño Núñez, external evaluators, UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences, December 2007.

“The central thing learned from the IFAI-Comunidades Project was that the appropriation of the RTI by community members requires conditions of trust that are hard to achieve when dealing with direct relationships between government agencies and marginalized populations, which means that grassroots social organizations must act as intermediaries.”

-Comunidades Project, December 2007
necessary information, they could have a more equitable position with regard to government officials. It is well known that few things are more disempowering than ignorance, which inevitably leads to oppression and abuse. With that in mind, the Comunidades Project was given the task of finding effective ways to make people with this socioeconomic profile aware of their right to information, since it was obvious to some in the IFAI that the costly campaign directed to the general population was not reaching this particular demographic group.

As mentioned at the outset, pursuant to its statutory mandate, the IFAI has developed various activities to serve individuals, academic institutions, and social organizations, mainly workshops, conferences, forums, and other public events, and mostly in the context of specific cooperative agreements. The Comunidades Project added a novel recommendation to these existing efforts: the development of institutional activities that identified effective ways to empower groups at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the right to information, using a program that trained and supported civil society organizations that have credibility in their environment and experience in community work.

This effective, innovative, and unique effort, in which the IFAI supported a joint and coordinated undertaking, rested on three pillars: state agencies, social organizations, and marginalized communities. These actors spread awareness about the RTI in a three-pronged manner. This effort showed that it is possible to strengthen the citizenship of the poorest using empowerment through the exercise of the right to information. This increasingly drew the attention of the international community, who saw in the IFAI, as the author and promoter of the effort, a model worthy of observation and even emulation.

The Comunidades Project was supported with grant funding from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in the amount of US$750,000 for the period that ran from 2005 through 2007. In the first six years of the IFAI’s existence, the project was the only substantive program submitted to a critical, expert, and rigorous external evaluation. This was a fortuitous decision that allowed us to promptly correct the project’s course, to thoroughly assess its impacts, and to draw from it lessons for designing public policy that, with certainty and knowledge of the basic facts, could achieve the effective dissemination of the RTI in marginalized communities.

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76 The Federal Transparency Act states in Art. 33 that the IFAI “is responsible for promoting and raising awareness about the right to access to information . . . ;” in Art 37, Sec. VI that it “shall guide and advise individuals about requests for access to information”; and in Sec. XIII, that it shall “make public servants aware of the benefits of the public management of information.”

77 “The Institute established collaborative ties and trained the members of at least 264 civil society organizations, 11 unions, 60 company, or corporate agencies, 2 national political coalitions, and one consultancy office.” Informe Laboral 2006, op. cit., p. 69
The Right to Information for Marginalized Groups: The Experience of Proyecto Comunidades in Mexico

A key element in explaining these positive results was the trust that was built among the beneficiaries. According to the external evaluation, the participation of civil society organizations explains the project’s successful results of its work to promote the adoption of the RTI. These organizations embraced their role in the effort, and in an essential and strategic manner, they managed to create or make use of the trust placed in them by the communities in order to encourage and sustain their participation throughout the project. In an environment where societal mistrust against governmental institutions prevails, trust explains the organizations’ strategic role. In this regard, they were the bridge that made it possible to transfer the exercise of the RTI to marginalized communities that otherwise would have remained indifferent to IFAI’s awareness-raising efforts.

The lesson is clear: it is possible to expand the use of the RTI in disadvantaged communities if the institutions responsible for this task promote specific actions that incorporate intermediary agencies that the target population trusts. Regarding the design of future public policy, the evidence shows the presence of an intermediary and trusted party, with effective channels for communicating with these communities, is a necessary condition for effective governmental dissemination of this right among these social groups.

The evaluators identified other achievements by the organizations that help explain the positive results. On the one hand, as noted above, they connected the exercise of the RTI to addressing the specific problems and needs of the community, and they adapted educational content and dynamics to the profile of beneficiaries and the infrastructure of the community. In other words, they adapted it and gave it a practical use. Related to the latter, they conducted specific exercises to prepare requests and managed to articulate the right to know at the federal and local levels (mainly municipal).

Among the most significant lessons from the UNAM’s independent evaluation is that the IFAI’s current strategies for the mass promotion of the RTI have been insufficient to raise awareness of the right to know among marginalized sectors of the population. The evaluators did not go into the budgetary implications of this conclusion, but we cannot help but do so: the costs of IFAI’s mass publicity campaigns seeking to raise awareness about the RTI have been excessive in comparison to the results produced. In spreading knowledge of a fundamental right as complex as the RTI, it seems inefficient to conduct expensive outreach campaigns to the general population using expensive mass media. Since 2003, the IFAI has spent an average of 15 million pesos annually from its Social Communication unit to cover various campaigns, and the 2007–2009 budget allocates nearly 20 million pesos annually for this purpose. The experience
of the Comunidades Project, its low operating costs, and its impacts on its beneficiaries offer evidence that lead us to believe it is possible to extend the use of the RTI in marginalized communities. However, this can only be achieved based on specific, targeted awareness-raising strategies, ones that have a much lower budgetary implication.

For government institutions like the IFAI that are responsible for disseminating the right to freedom of information, the lesson is clear: the spread of the culture of transparency that has led to huge IFAI budget outlays (for local informational events and outreach campaigns) has proved insufficient to reach several social groups, as indicated in the studies that the IFAI’s own Social Communications unit has commissioned. One example suffices to illustrate this: the cost of the institutional campaign called “los conejillos lanza-zanahorias” (“bunny rabbit carrot launcher”), which would have reached dozens of communities. The results of the Comunidades Project showed that federal agencies, including the IFAI, have great difficulty working with marginalized sectors because people do not trust those agencies. Direct contact does not ensure effectiveness. Organizations are the actors that play an essential role in opening spaces of trust.

Moreover, it was clear that the beneficiaries’ profiles were an important element in the potential exercise of the right: low levels of schooling, lack of computers and Internet access, together with the limitations implied by indigenous status were three structural constraints to be overcome in promoting the RTI in marginalized communities with these characteristics. Once again, here we emphasize the importance of the primary lesson from the Comunidades Project: given that millions of Mexicans share some of these traits, they can only hope to exercise the RTI if they have the support of an intermediary, such as civil society organizations that are trusted in their communities and close to their problems. Another key support is the networks of local organizations interested in community development. This is most apparent in rural communities, particularly indigenous ones, where the opportunities for knowledge and utilization of resources like the RTI are primarily collective in nature and are based on local networks.

Finally, there is a pending subject that far surpasses the scope of the project: the need to reverse the high level of mistrust that marginalized communities feel toward the government. Many respondents (almost 40 percent) expressed the belief that the government would retaliate against a person for having requested information. The experiences from several cases confirm the importance of organizations as a vehicle to instill the needed trust so that people will avail themselves of the RTI. Clearly, the current mechanisms for exercising the RTI
are unsuited to the conditions of marginalized people, and the government does not generate quality public information in sufficient quantity to meet the interests of large segments of Mexico’s population.

In summary, the results from more than two years of study indicate that when provided with the support of an organization they can trust, communities in these socioeconomic sectors found ways to get the necessary human and technical resources to make use of available access procedures. The results also show that the right to information is understood to be a useful tool for the preservation of other fundamental rights.

Regarding the qualitative scope of the project, the achievements include an enhanced capacity for the served communities to:

• become involved in the public arena;

• have the ability to encourage the educational programs aimed at meeting the interests and needs of marginalized sectors so that their abilities for dialogue and social participation will expand;

• have an ability to strengthen the capacities and services of the organizations involved in community work;

• disseminate knowledge on the subject of rights so that marginalized sectors can be incorporated effectively into the public sphere; and

• create conditions that favor connections between individuals and institutions, especially federal ones.

Based on that and considering the UNAM evaluation, we can conclude that the Comunidades Project managed to create a process of ownership and empowerment, both for the organizations and among the served populations.

What the IFAI Learned and the Agenda for the Future

The IFAI actions to disseminate and promote the RTI have thus far focused on sectors considered strategic because of their potential to more effectively exercise this right (in comparison to disadvantaged populations), and so the

78 "In 2006, 33 percent of LFTAIPG users were academics; this sector has been consolidated as the primary user of the right to access to public information, which demonstrates its strategic importance in disseminating a culture of transparency", Task Report 2006, p. 70.
The Right to Information for Marginalized Groups: The Experience of Proyecto Comunidades in Mexico

Institute has designed its materials and outreach programs to target this type of audience. Given the results of the Comunidades Project, we can claim that ignorance about new information technologies and low levels of schooling do not constitute barriers to the exercise of the RTI in marginalized communities.\(^79\) Recent publications have indicated that exercising the right to information involves addressing a series of procedures that require the development of specific knowledge and skills.\(^80\) If the goal is to extend this right to other sectors of the population, the challenge now for the IFAI is to develop a strategy for training advocates who can support communities in the process of accessing and using information from the various levels of government for their own benefit. This requires the design of teaching models and materials suitable for audiences with low educational attainment and little knowledge about the way that jurisdictions and powers are distributed among the three levels of government. This latter point is particularly relevant in the context of the recent constitutional amendment and the tasks that would be pending in promoting the exercise of the RTI at the state and municipal levels.

An outstanding result of the Comunidades Project is that the right to public information exercised by individuals in their immediate environment is a fundamental tool to stimulate spaces for debate and participation in public affairs related to the communities’ quality of life. To the extent that communities are empowered to review information that is publicly available, and to request the needed information that is not available, better conditions will exist so that the government may generate a sufficient amount of quality information to meet the interests of large segments of the population.

The law places the obligation to disseminate the RTI and to advise individuals concerning their requests on the IFAI. How can we reach the groups that are farthest from the decisionmaking process? We know that less than twenty thousand users—city-dwellers whose incomes match a socioeconomic profile above the national average—have made almost all the requests. How can we serve the rest? The IFAI’s Comunidades Project provided an effective response. It must be understood, of course, that the right to information implies a genuine concession of power to those who make requests. But we cannot dwell at length here on the importance of the balanced and autonomous relationship between civil organizations and the state for any modern democratic environment.

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\(^79\) Presentation of the Fourth interim report, op. cit., slide 44.

\(^80\) See Derecho a Saber. Balance y Perspectivas Cívicas (Mexico City, FUNDAR, 2007).
In our view, government agencies, such as the IFAI, that are responsible for the dissemination of the right to information must:

1) Capitalize on the experience by creating useful tools (teaching materials and teaching strategies) to effectively serve this type of community on an ongoing basis and to achieve community-member empowerment through the use of the RTI. The goal would be to facilitate the institutional establishment of efforts that require working with poor communities. In the case of the IFAI, for example, ongoing, replicable, and long-term institutional programs have not been developed that would enable it to provide tools for raising awareness of the RTI among populations with this profile. All efforts have been directed at a sector already empowered with information, under the hypothesis that this has a lower cost and a higher benefit.

2) Develop a model for training RTI advocates that would allow the scope of training to expand to all the states, particularly in light of the challenges arising from the constitutional amendment of Article 6. The amendment does not change the scenario, but it does potentiate taking this method for raising awareness about RTI to the local levels, since most state transparency agencies lack this type of tool.

3) Direct the training on those issues so that it focuses on emphasizing their status as public servants obliged to respect and serve citizens, not just in compliance with the letter of the law but also with its spirit—that is, in a timely, suitable, clear, and comprehensive manner (getting it right the first time).

4) Strengthen the role of civil society organizations in the empowerment of citizens who are marginalized from public policy decisions so that they can exercise their right to information. Where possible, offer free advice and training to organizations so that their knowledge of the subject continues to increase.

5) Strengthen the emerging network of civil society organizations so that they will be prepared to observe and participate in activities taking place in their states that will arise as a result of the constitutional amendment. We have no doubt that the most important thing is to forge alliances and create networks to facilitate the exchange of experiences, technical knowledge, and expert advice.

We hope this testimonial of the Comunidades Project’s achievements will be useful for any similar ventures in the future. However, in the future, the experience should not be limited to transparency institutes or agencies. Because of its potential implications for improving the status of marginalized communities
and its potential effects for overcoming poverty, this experience ought to be embraced by central governmental agencies. For example, at the federal level, the Ministry of Social Development or the Ministry of Public Education could promote the right to information in a project similar to Comunidades, as a mechanism of societal oversight of the efficiency of its own programs. In another possible application, for example, if the Opportunities Program (Oportunidades) requires recipients to attend a health clinic or send their children to school, it might also consider offering RTI training to recipients in order to assess the pattern of its beneficiaries.

The previous chapters have presented the contributions of the various actors involved in the Comunidades Project: the IFAI, civil society organizations, and evaluators. The appendix that follows presents the viewpoints of the organizations that participated in the projects. Through short texts written by the people responsible for the work in the field, we can see where the main interests of their organizations lie, what aspects they consider to be relevant, and whether they feel that they have incorporated the exercise of the right to information into their future activities.
APPENDIX

Relevant Cases Presented by Participating Organizations

So that we could include their voices in this report, we asked the civil society organizations that participated in the Comunidades Project to prepare a testimonial after they completed their work. We asked them to remark on how they ran the project and to describe any aspects of their experiences they felt were important to share. The following organizations accepted this invitation: Citizens for Human Rights (Ciudadanos en Apoyo a los Derechos Humanos, A. C.); Citizen Channel (Cauce Ciudadano, A. C); Education for Street Children (Educación con el Niño Callejero, I. A. P.); Settlers (Pobladores, A. C.); and Mexico State Development Services Center (Central de Servicios para el Desarrollo del Estado de México, A. C., SEDEMEX). Their responses are included below.

CADHAC’S EXPERIENCE WITH FEDERAL PRISONERS AND THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION

At Citizens for Human Rights (CADHAC), a civil society NGO, we have been working for years to defend and promote human rights in the state of Nuevo Leon. Throughout our thirteen-year history of action, our work has focused particularly on defending and providing support for people who are incarcerated in our state.

As an organization, on multiple occasions, we have been able to verify that inmates are subjected to a series of human rights violations, which include torture; cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment; violations of their right to privacy; lack of medical attention; inadequate nutrition; inadequate infrastructure; and exploitative labor practices.

Concerning the serious failings and systematic violations of prisoners’ human rights, we have been able to gather evidence and document that a primary...
problem rests in the prisoners’ lack of awareness concerning their prosecutions and the various administrative procedures in which they are enmeshed—both those accused of state-level offenses and those sentenced for federal crimes.

For cases under state jurisdiction, it is the state authorities who are responsible for carrying out the sentences and who are likewise responsible for the situations described. However, the inmates who are under federal jurisdiction find themselves under the authority of the Decentralized Administrative Agency for Prevention and Social Rehabilitation (Órgano Administrativo Desconcentrado Prevención y Readaptación Social, OADPRS), a branch of the federal Department of Public Safety (Secretaría de Seguridad Pública, SSP). This agency handles matters concerning paroles, as well as supporting work, educational, and cultural programs.

In our experience, the OADPRS works slowly and lacks transparency. This leaves inmates in a legally ambiguous position; they are not aware of their own rights and the avenues available to them to exercise those rights.

The specific irregularities we have detected with OADPRS include failure to provide a response to inmate’s petitions, leading to excessive delays in granting early release, and an unjustified denial of parole.

It is important for inmates to be aware of the status of their cases and their chances for obtaining early release, because these benefits allow inmates with certain characteristics to serve two-fifths of their sentences outside of prison.

We have seen that, due to administrative delays and OADPRS’s reluctance to grant these benefits, even those inmates who fully meet the requirements for early release live in a state of uncertainty with regard to the length of time they must spend behind bars. The end result is the unjust and deplorable case of individuals who are in jail—sometimes for years—but who should not be there, or who manage to finally win early release mere days before their sentence is fully served.

This federal agency not only disregards inmate’s requests but also those submitted from civil society in general. Out of all the official letters that we have sent as an organization over the years, we have not received a single response.

In light of the delicate and vulnerable situation that the inmate community faces, we decided to participate in the IFAI-Comunidades Project during the second half of 2007, conducting three workshops designed to provide inmates
with access to information. We held workshops for federal inmates in two of the three penitentiaries in Nuevo Leon: The Caderetya Rehabilitation Center (Centro de Readaptación Social Cadereyta, CERESO Cadereyta) and the Topo Chico Center for Prevention and Social Rehabilitation (Centro de Prevención y Readaptación Social Topo Chico, CEPRESOSO Topo Chico).

In these sessions, we focused our work on teaching inmates how to formulate inquiries about their petitions for early release. This pilot program demonstrated that inmates had a strong interest in taking advantage of this access to information.

It is important to note that the workshops did not take place without challenges, especially delays and denials on the part of the penitentiary officials, as well as the constant surveillance of the workshops, including videotaping.

After years of experience with the penal system, we know that unfortunately prison officials and society in general assume that those convicted of crimes have no rights whatsoever.

We found that this line of reasoning led to the justification of torture and cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment, as well as the systematic violation of prisoners’ human rights and complete disregard on the part of the people in charge of overseeing the penal system.

Given this reality, we proposed to emphasize prisoners’ status as people who have rights. To accomplish this, we conducted educational activities with approximately 200 inmates, and we handled hundreds of requests for personal information addressed to OADPRS on behalf of others.81

Given the large number of requests, and the fact that federal prisoners in Nuevo Leon had not used them in the past, the response from the authorities was the blanket rejection of all the requests. They alleged that the request were not made within the framework of the Transparency Act, and that there were other means for obtaining the information, including a toll-free number (that was out of service) and an Internet link (that had not worked for several days). Faced with this stonewalling on the part of the authorities, a complaint was filed with the Federal Freedom of Information Institute (Instituto Federal de Acceso a la Información Pública, IFAI).

81 It is important to note that the difference between the ones who were given training and those who submitted information requests is not due to disinterest on the part of the former. Instead, it arises because they did not meet the requirements to paroled or officials deliberately mixed together federal and local inmates, even though they knew the program was not directed at both populations.
After the required waiting period, the IFAI, through a ruling on the complaints that were filed in October 2007, ordered the SSP to respond to all the petitions reviewed and to turn over the information that the inmates had requested concerning their administrative proceedings in process with OADRPRS.

The notifications concerning the delivery of documentation began to arrive in January 2008. After soliciting the help of several local notaries public, CADHAC produced the notarized powers of attorney for each prisoner—a Transparency Act requirement that which must be met in order for the information to be delivered when the interested party cannot personally appear to receive the response to the request for personal information. We managed to gather together a group of notaries who went with us to the penitentiaries.

With both the powers of attorney and the hopes of the inmates now in our hands, we went to the headquarters of the Department of Public Safety, located in the Federal District, to get a copy of the documentation provided by that department.

When the inmates received the documentation, they were dissatisfied with the results, since the information they were given was very vague and in some cases nonexistent.

The prisoners reacted to this situation in many ways, depending on the response. We can categorize the answers received as follows:

(a) Denial of early release. The inmates felt the explanations for the denial given in the documents provided by the Department of Public Safety were ridiculous and unjust, and in some cases, they did not even reflect correct information from their cases. For example, some first offenders were denied early release because it was stated that they were repeat offenders. As a result, they requested that their files be reviewed. Some felt helpless when they found out they had been accused of crimes they had not, in some cases, ever been told about. In addition, some cases lacked clear references to their actual cases and case files.

(b) The Department of Public Safety responded to some of the petitions with a ruling that declared that certain documents concerning early release referred to in the request did not exist. In this case, those inmates who knew that the administrative process had been initiated, and yet were informed that it had not, were very upset when they found out the truth: that OADPRS was inefficient in carrying out its own duties properly and in a timely manner.
In contrast to what these results might seem to indicate at first glance, they have actually opened opportunities for new strategies in the search for access to justice for one of the most vulnerable sectors of society: people behind bars.

When their requests were denied, the inmates could finally confirm that it was the administration that was the primary barrier between them and early release. Even if the requesters received documents that indicated that certain information did not exist, this allowed the inmates to compare this with relevant documentation proving the opposite. These are new tools that allow us to improve the strategies we employ, so that access to release (parole) is no longer a chance event that is subject to contingencies.

The fact that access to information allowed inmates to exercise their rights with regard to this benefit and others has implications behind the effects discussed above. It has also served to open a path toward a new phase in prisoners’ struggle to achieve access to a dignified life. When we can manage to pinpoint the causes for official delays and denials, we improve our chances of eliminating these, and at the same time, our continual observation of officials’ actions requires them to become more efficient.

Despite the time, paperwork, and costs it entailed, we believe that this project has been a method to open a space in which penitentiary system transparency might be achieved. We believe this, despite the closed doors, the pressures, insinuations, and setbacks to which we were subjected. This is especially clear when we note that in last four months of 2007—the period in which the petitions were being handled—produced 58 percent of the 135 early releases granted in the entire year,\(^2\) and of these 35 were inmates who had requested information from OADPRS.

This result shows us that exercising the right to information is not only a guarantee involving knowledge of the state’s actions or inactions; it also may lead to quicker and more effective actions on the part of the authorities, which boosts citizen empowerment and closes the door on injustice and impunity.

\(^2\)According to OADPRS’s own data, requested via SISI.
COMMUNITY FOR YOUTH SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Citizen Channel (Cauce Ciudadano) is a civil organization that was founded in 2000. It works with youths in organized gangs in northern Mexico City, employing the Skills-for-Life methodology. This process is very interesting to us, because we believe that this level of organization should not be done away with, but rather transformed. That is, that they should keep this gang membership identity, but use it as a basis for positive actions in the communities where they are living, whether these actions benefit themselves or the community as a whole.

Skills for Life is an educational focus centered on teaching ten skills that help young people confront the demands and challenges of daily life. These skills are psychosocial in nature: they can be applied in the area of personal actions, social relations, or actions intended to transform the environment in ways that improve health and well-being. The heart of the program includes both empowerment and self-improvement, as well as the ability to take part in diverse groups and fight for common goals, seeking to improve one’s ability to live a healthier and more enjoyable life, with greater control over the factors that influence health and well-being, and participate in the construction of societies that are more just, unified, and fair.

This model allows us to continue producing something we call community resilience, which is the possibility of surviving a period of crisis and emerging from it even stronger than before, sharing the experience with young people in the same neighborhoods. This youth have developed a variety of community projects with the support and leadership of Citizen Channel’s founders. These leaders had also been founders or members of gangs.

That is how we started to develop something we call “youth social activism,” which transforms youth from mere recipients of public policy, from a very early age, and also allows young people to develop the tools and capabilities that will help them successfully deal with the demands of daily life.

In 2004 we started working on rights-oriented projects connected to the community, and there were a few who began to stand out in two sets of skills, specifically: creative and critical thinking as a community and cultural response to the issues that the state was not dealing with, even though it should be the state’s duty and obligation to meet these needs. We began to work on economic,
social, cultural, and environmental rights, going over how they are laid out and how they impact people’s daily lives. We were interested in getting the participants to design methods that did not just promote these rights but also allowed them to exercise these rights as social actors. And we added in the topic of access to information, supporting the youth through the process of monitoring specific programs associated with the schools, and in particular the Safe Schools Program (Programa Escuela Segura).

The strategy was channeled in two directions. The first has to do with transparency and access to information, while the second has to do with strengthening life skills, especially critical and creative thinking, using participatory games. We worked with high school students in the north of the Federal District.

Each workshop consisted of five two-hour sessions. In the course of these sessions, we dealt with topics such as critical and creative thinking, the Federal Transparency and Freedom of Information, handling the SISI, access to government public information, other means to access public information (TELIFAI, liaison units, written requests), concepts contained in the Transparency Act, community problems, the role of the IFAI as a guarantor of the right to public government information.

During the training process, we noted that communities had minimal knowledge of the Transparency Act. So that is why when we distribute information and promote this right—using everyday topics, complaints, and problems—this opens up a horizon for the young people concerning new forms of participation in their school communities (Safe Schools Program), in their neighborhoods, and in their personal lives (requesting personal information).

Strengthening their creative and critical thinking helps them make decisions and solve problems. That lets us explore the Transparency Act as a tool that offers new ways for youth to be leading actors in the decisions that are made in development spheres (school, family, neighborhood). This allows them to use their free time in a more positive manner.

This project benefited 283 young residents of the Gustavo A. Madero and Azcapotzalco districts directly, by offering them training workshops in Life Skills and Transparency and Access to Government Public Information.
Three measurement instruments were developed to assess the project:

1) Workshop evaluation. This form was used to evaluate the content selected, the time devoted to each topic, the instructional strategy, and the materials used in the two channels that the training covered: the Transparency Act and life skills. It was administered to the participants in the transparency workshops. This evaluation gave us information on the workshop, in general. The strategies used to deliver the workshops particularly stand out, having been rated as “excellent” by 59 percent of the participants.

2) Knowledge assessment. A knowledge base consisting of five questions was administered, covering the SISI and concepts related to transparency and access to information. We administered it to the workshop participants. The preliminary results of the assessment scoring show that more than 50 percent of those tested got four out of five questions right, which indicates their grasp of the concepts related to the Transparency Act.

3) Product evaluation. This instrument measured the focus group participants’ level of knowledge and level of enjoyment for the products that were presented. It was administered to the participants in the focus groups. The participants indicated that 47 percent had enjoyed the products, a percentage similar to the level of interest shown in the topics covered.

In this evaluation, the focus group participants showed their interest in listening to audio broadcasts about the Transparency Act and topics such as agencies where they could go to deal with issues like eating disorders, drugs, STDs (prevention), sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, sexuality, and others.

Our experience with this project points to four challenges that a culture of transparency faces in communities:


2. Identifying transparency and access to information as a right, and as a tool to solve everyday problems and conflicts.

3. Giving new meaning to the institutes for transparency and access to information; that is, succeeding in approaching not just the Federal Freedom of Information Institute, but also being positioned with respect to state and municipal agencies.
4. Sharing the struggle underway to obtain the right to transparency and access to information, and making it meaningful for citizens.

**INFORMED COMMUNITIES: COMMUNITY STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION**

**Organizational background**
EDNICA is a private support agency, founded in 1989 for the purpose of serving and preventing children from living on the street, based on the Community Involvement Model, which seeks to mobilize a community’s social resources and capital on behalf of street children and young people in the area, from a human rights and community-development perspective. Thus, EDNICA’s work strengthens self-management and organizational skills so that the community itself can create initiatives on behalf of children and youth who are at risk for becoming street children. This offers medium- and long-term alternatives to help solve the street-children phenomenon.

Putting the model into practice has led to the development of two cycles of community involvement. In Observatorio neighborhood, it contributed to the creation of the Fundación San Felipe de Jesús, IAP (1998). Near the Indios Verdes metro stop, the Civil Association “NIJIVE” (Niños y Jóvenes de Indios Verdes or Children and Youth of Indios Verdes) was formally created in 2000. The third community involvement got underway in May 2001, in the area of Colonia Morelos, in the Venustiano Carranza district. This intervention has developed slowly, incorporating various groups of beneficiaries and involving a variety of community actors in its operations.

Likewise, the Childhood Educational Center (Centro Educativo por la Infancia, CEI) began work in the Colonia Ajusco, with a focus on ongoing community intervention. The purpose of this model is to focus preventative services on child workers and at-risk children in the area, as well as on their families. At the same time, it seeks to incorporate innovative methods to focus services for the groups of children in question, who can later be organized into the community interventions in other contexts.
IFAI-Comunidades Project
The invitation that EDNICA received to participate in IFAI-Comunidades was a major opportunity, since this project fits well within the community work that the organization is carrying out with child workers, their families, and with the social actors who comprise the social fabric of the communities in which we work. At the same time, it has enriched the institutional actions directed toward strengthening citizenship and promoting human rights and children’s rights.

In the meanwhile, the culture of transparency and accountability, as well as the exercise of the right to information (RTI) are arenas traditionally reserved for experts—academics, journalists, and civil society organizations—and it is a transformative experience to push forward on a project for boys and girls to help them learn about and exercise the RTI as a tool to interact with the authorities in their lives and lead their lives like true citizens.

In this sense, it is relevant to mention that this involves an attempt to strengthen a form of citizenship in which people recognize that they are individuals with rights, which takes on added meaning when they understand themselves as components of a society and as jointly responsible for public life.

At the same time, children’s participation in the project, encouraging and recognizing them as individuals with rights, has an impact on the way they are viewed by their families, teachers, and adults, in general. Unfortunately, many people believe that children are not capable of social organizing and participation, that they do not know what is in their own best interests, and that people only associate them with an idea of a “better future, when they will be responsible for it.”

In addition, mothers were incorporated into the project as a target population. We felt it was relevant to work with this group, since they do not clearly recognize their rights and the state’s responsibility to ensure living conditions that support their personal, family, and community development.

Thus, EDNICA’s participation in the IFAI-Comunidades Project represents an opportunity to strengthen citizenship awareness among children, as well as their families, and therefore participate in social life through the exercise of the RTI. At the same time, the project has fostered awareness of children’s capabilities among the adults of the community.
Community Work

EDNICA’s participation in IFAI-Comunidades was carried out within the project Informed Communities: Community Strategies for Promoting Access to Public Information. This project was conducted in two working-class urban communities in Mexico City: Morelos and Ajusco. EDNICA operates community centers serving the needs of street children and youth in each neighborhood.

It is relevant to mention that these communities lack a culture of citizenship focused on accountability and access to public information, which meant that the project allowed them to approach government structures and come in contact with their authorities. The communities’ most important features include:

Morelos Community—Morelos Center. This is one of the oldest and most centrally located neighborhoods in Mexico City. It is situated within the Venustiano Carranza district, and its socioeconomic and cultural features are characterized by urban marginalization, made much worse due to the high tolerance toward substance abuse and violence. In addition, organized crime and drug trafficking are present, which translated into an atmosphere of insecurity.

At the same time, there are few opportunities for human and social development. Added to that is the fact that one finds here an atmosphere of resistance to and confrontation with the authorities, both federal and local.

Ajusco Community—Childhood Educational Center (CEI). The project’s activities impacted the following colonias: Ajusco, Pedregal de Santo Domingo, Santa Úrsula Coapa, and Huayamilpas. These colonias emerged following a land invasion that took over communal farming plots in the 1970s, which has resulted in ongoing issues with irregular land titles. Although basic public infrastructure (electricity, water, sewers, roads, phone service, etc.) is available in the area, the neighborhood still suffers from major deficiencies because of an ongoing scarcity of water.

There is a high incidence of socioeconomic problems, such as overcrowding and poor-quality housing, violence in the home and on the street, addiction, child labor, and educational underachievement, including high dropout rates. At the same time, it is one of the most conflict-ridden areas in the Coyacán district in terms of lack of safety and security, especially involving theft of auto parts and a constant increase in drug dealing and substance abuse.
Methodology
Among the project’s primary challenges was enabling community members to achieve a meaningful understanding of their needs and the tools to address them. Thus, the design of the training sessions was a key element in achieving a comprehensive understanding of the RTI and its usefulness.

The theoretical framework used elements drawn from mass education, education on human rights, children’s participation, and community development.

We should emphasize that prior to putting the IFAI-Comunidades Project into practice, EDNICA’s Community Center sponsored an educational program aimed at at-risk children, as well as at mothers, intended reduce the children’s likelihood of falling prey to the street. This situation made it easier to develop the project, because the everyday work of the Centers promoted children’s rights and community participation.

The operational phases of the project were:

Announcement
Since the project was directed to a population that EDNICA was already serving, it was decided to hold a closed announcement using posters hung in the community centers. In addition, the operations teams personally invited the public and offered them a general explanation of the project.

Groups
Five task groups were created, based on the person’s age, the center where he or she received services, and the time of day when they came to the center.

Ajusco, morning session: nineteen boys and girls between the ages of ten and thirteen.
Ajusco afternoon session: seventeen boys and girls between the ages of nine and fourteen.
Ajusco, mothers: twenty mothers, between the ages of twenty-seven and fifty.

Morelos, children: twenty child laborers, between the ages of eight and eleven.
Morelos, mothers: twenty mothers and community health workers, ranging in age from thirty to fifty. Most worked in the informal sector, in addition to their responsibilities for their homes and families.

One fact that favored group cohesiveness was that the members already knew each other and had ties of friendship. They also knew the team in charge of the
project. That is why we did not run team-building and trust-building activities, although this is nevertheless a very important element among groups that do not know one another.

**Informational sessions**

The public workshop consisted of twelve sessions, each lasting ninety minutes, where the following topics were covered:

1. Human rights  
2. Children’s rights and women’s rights  
3. The structure of the government  
4. Federal and local agencies  
5. Transparency and accountability  
6. Citizen participation  
7. Community issues

The workshop’s structure encouraged participants to be involved actively in each session, sharing their experience and knowledge on the topics covered. This also allowed them to understand the content and identify its usefulness in their lives.

The operational team encouraged reflection and discussion focused on the realities of the participants’ communities and families. Thus, familiar situations, that the participants were aware of via community work, were used as references.

During the sessions, reflection activities were supported by teaching material associated with the thematic foci, such as:

- Olly Olly In-Come Free! Version adapted from the Convention for Children’s Rights, Government of the State of Jalisco  
- Chutes and Ladders. Game to promote civil values and activities. Democratic values. Electoral Institute of the Federal District.  
Community analysis
The second phase sought to produce information about the communities’ main problems or needs using a participatory model, in order to map out the needs in a way that associated them with the federal agencies responsible for serving these areas. The first level entailed individual identification of issues, so that they could later be discussed in groups from various perspectives, creating a shared vision.

One of the aspects that encouraged the teams’ identification of community issues was creating maps on kraft paper (1.20 m x 2.00 m), where the community’s main streets and points of interest were drawn. Then the places were associated with the areas needs, and issues were indicated. This was a tool that encouraged discussion and enriched the group’s shared vision.

The informational issues and needs identified in the communities are in the tables on the following two pages.

Based on this analysis, we prioritized topics, and we made contact with the authorities responsible for each issue. Each of the groups formulated requests for information and then sent them to federal agencies.

Information Requests and Tracking
Formulating a request for information required that the children and mothers first access the SISI website and become familiar with it. This first visit was made with supervised guidance, whereas later visits were made independently.

Formulating and tracking requests was made easier because the centers had computer equipment, so users could access Internet information on a daily basis. At the same time, our decision to create task groups meant an increased control over the requests, as well as over the monitoring of the authorities’ responses.

The group discussed the information that it had obtained, and it made decisions about what actions to take in order to change or solve the identified issues.
AJUSCO COMMUNITY

EDUCATION AND LEARNING CENTERS
• Deteriorating public school infrastructures and equipment
• Criteria for awarding educational scholarships
• Increase in violence within school communities
• Inadequate educational quality

CULTURE AND RECREATION
• Few recreational alternatives for children and youth
• Scarce and run-down community green spaces
• Lack of care for furnishings and infrastructure in existing community centers

SAFETY AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE
• Increasing lack of public safety
• Drug dealing and drug use in the community environment
• Illegal sales of alcoholic beverages
• Distribution and drug dealing near school zones
• Addiction services and treatment centers

WOMEN
• Criteria for awarding social-services support for single mothers
• Service agencies for victims of domestic violence
• Sexual and reproductive health care centers

HEALTH
• Access to medical insurance for children
• Few specialists on staff in community health centers
• Quality of medical services
• Little access to specialized health services (mental health and psychiatric services, speech therapy)

URBAN SERVICES AND UTILITIES
• Lack of clean drinking water
• Inadequate public services: Cleaning, roadwork, outdoor furniture, and public lighting

OTHER
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<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Access to credit for housing construction and micro-credit</strong></td>
<td>MORELOS COMMUNITY</td>
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<td><strong>EDUCATION AND LEARNING CENTERS</strong></td>
<td>• Access to school scholarships</td>
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<td>• Deteriorating public school infrastructures and equipment</td>
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<td>• School dropouts</td>
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<td>• Violence within school communities</td>
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<td>• Enciclomedia (on-line educational resource portal)</td>
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<td><strong>CULTURE AND RECREATION</strong></td>
<td>• Not enough recreational options for youth</td>
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<td><strong>SAFETY AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE</strong></td>
<td>• Increasing lack of public safety</td>
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<td>• Drug dealing and drug use in the community environment</td>
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<td>• Weapons trafficking</td>
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<td>• Resources slated for operations in the colonia and results obtained</td>
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<td>• Ousting of semi-permanent street vendors</td>
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<td>• Counter-piracy operations</td>
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<td>• Extortion practices of government officials targeting informal vendors</td>
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<td>• Abuses on the part of police agencies</td>
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<td><strong>HEALTH</strong></td>
<td>• Lack of medicines in pharmacies</td>
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<td>• Low-income insurance</td>
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<td>• Discrimination in health services</td>
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<td>• Quality of medical services</td>
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<td>• Mexicans’ health</td>
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<td><strong>ADDICTIONS</strong></td>
<td>• Increase in drug dealing and use</td>
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<td>• Increase in addictions among youth</td>
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<td>• Lack of public agencies devoted to addiction prevention and treatment</td>
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<td><strong>WOMEN</strong></td>
<td>• Support for single mothers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Domestic violence</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>URBAN SERVICES AND UTILITIES</strong></td>
<td>• Inadequate trash-collection service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Maintenance of urban furnishings, gardens, lighting, benches, and streets

Based on this analysis, we prioritized topics, and we contacted the authorities responsible for each issue. Each of the groups formulated requests for information and then sent them to federal agencies.

**Information Requests and Tracking**
Formulating a request for information required that the children and mothers first access the SISI website and become familiar with it. This first visit was made with supervised guidance, while later visits were made independently.

Formulating and tracking requests was made easier because each center had computer equipment for its clientele, so that users could access the computer equipment on an everyday basis. At the same time, the decision that had been made to create task groups increased control over the requests, as well as the response from authorities.

The information that the clientele obtained was discussed in the group, and decisions were made about what actions to take in order to change or solve the issues identified.

**CASE INTEGRATION**
Case integration entailed the formulation of various information requests, tracking these requests, and using the information obtained to solve the community issues that had been identified and ranked.

The following were some of the cases that were articulated in the communities:

**CASE A: IMPROVING SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE AND FURNISHINGS**
**AGENCY: DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION**

**Community issue**
The infrastructure and furnishings in public grade and high schools located within the community are in poor condition. Project participants discussed inadequate or insufficient furniture and infrastructural maintenance at the primary schools they attended.

The conditions found in some of the community’s public schools are hazardous and unhealthy, and student furnishings are insufficient. The children and mothers pointed out specific situations, including:
General comments on the Dr. Ángel María Garibay, Tlamachticalli, and Gabriela Mistral grade schools

- The school is very run-down; the classrooms and chairs need painting.
- The chalkboards are very old, and they are hard to read.
- The stairways are crumbling, and you can see the rebar through the stair treads.
- There is no seating for left-handed students.
- There are no trash receptacles in the classrooms or in the schoolyard.
- There is not enough equipment and balls for recreation and physical education.
- There is not enough water in the bathrooms, which sometimes leads to classes being canceled.
- The online educational resources cannot be used, and they are not available in all the classrooms.

General comments on the Xitle grade school

- The stairways are crumbling, and you can see the rebar through the stair treads.
- The fire escapes are loose.
- The handrails are very loose.
- The bathrooms are dirty because there is no water, toilet paper; they are not cleaned regularly.
- When there is no water, we are allowed to skip school because we cannot use the bathrooms.
- School breakfasts are passed out near the dumpsters, and it smells very bad.
- The school does not have sewers for the bathrooms; they use a septic tank.
- There is trash in the schoolyard. We cannot play soccer because there are piles of dirt in the schoolyard.

Requests for information

Based on the comments from children and mothers, 17 requests for information were submitted in order to learn about the funds that were allocated to these schools, as well as the criteria that existed to use the monies. At the same time, information was requested concerning the criteria for maintenance in public schools.

These requests asked for documentation that would contain the following information:
The Right to Information for Marginalized Groups: The Experience of Proyecto Comunidades in Mexico

• Authorities responsible for providing maintenance services for primary schools in the Federal District.
• Budget allocated for the 2006-2007 school year for the following primary schools: República de Suazilandia, Dr. Angel Ma. Garibay, Xitle, and Tlamachticalli, all in the Coyoacán district.
• Criteria used to allocate the annual budget among public primary schools.
• Specific budget allocation for maintenance for bathrooms in the Xitle and Tlamachticalli primary schools, in the Coyoacán district, for the 2006-2007 school year.

Information provided by the Ministry of Public Education
The ministry provided the specific amount of resources allocated for each of the primary schools for which information was requested, indicating the budget item that these were slated for: office supplies, cleaning, computer and electronics supplies; supplies for minor maintenance, and teaching materials.

The ministry indicated that the school staff itself determined the specific destination for the resources.

Actions undertaken
Based on the information provided, the participants took action:

They informed people about the amount of resources allocated, posting signs at each of the schools; they also delivered flyers to teaching and administrative staff and parents.

At Xitle primary, the participating children and mothers requested that the administrative staff and the PTA participate in making decisions concerning the use of the resources allocated to the school.

During the 2007-2008 school year, sixth-grade students and their families planned to present a recommendation specifying how to apportion the funds that the school receives. Similarly, the group looked into having the PTA present a request to the Ministry of Public Education to increase the school’s budget and thus improve its maintenance.
CASE B: REQUEST FOR SOCIAL SUPPORTS FOR WOMEN
AGENCY: NATIONAL WOMEN’S INSTITUTE

Community issue
Gender roles within communities continue being a factor that leads to inequality within families, schools, and the community as a whole.

Female participants in the project indicated that they experience domestic violence, and the authorities do not adequately address the issue. Despite the existence of laws and institutions supporting women in these communities, they are inadequately implemented.

The women especially pointed to the need for certain programs and services:
- Services to prevent and sanction domestic violence.
- Support during divorces
- Counseling services for women
- Specialized medical services, primarily sexual and reproductive health
- Recreational and cultural programs for women
- Supports for single mothers
- Loans for housing and micro-enterprises.

Requests for information
In the case of the mothers who participated in the project, four information requests were put together for the National Institute for Women:
- The amount of resources awarded for women’s services in the colonias of Santa Úrsula, Santo Domingo, Ruiz Cortines, and Ajusco, all in the Coyoacán district from 2000 through 2006.
- Services and administrative procedures for accessing social supports for Coyoacán’s single mothers or other residents who find themselves in marginalized circumstances.
- Agencies that could provide guidance and support in filing for divorce.
- Agencies that offer programs in the area of human development for women with low self-esteem.

Information provided by the National Institute for Women
Arguing that it is not an operations agency and does not have a program for dealing with requests, the liaison unit responded indicating that the information requests should be redirected to other agencies and organizations.

In this regard, it was suggested that the government of the Federal District, the
District of Coyoacán, and the Women’s Institute of the Federal District should be approached, as well as consulting directories and websites:

- www.inmujeres.gob.mx, under the link “Empresarias y Emprendedoras [Businesswomen and Women Entrepreneurs]”
- “National Directory of Civil Society Organizations with Women’s Programs,” at www.inmujeres.gob.mx
- www.sedesol.gob.mx
- www.economia.gob.mx
- Opportunities for Women
- Nurseries and Daycare centers to support working mothers
- Temporary Worker’s Program of the Social Development Department

**Actions undertaken**

With the information obtained, the mothers went to the websites for these assorted agencies and put together a directory of organizations that could support them.

Based on that, some of the participants have attended training workshops and discussion groups offered by government agencies at the local level, as well as some offered by civil society organizations.

**CASE C: PUBLIC SAFETY**

**AGENCY: DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY**

**Community issue**

Project participants pointed out that their communities are not safe. In public spaces they are witness to street fights, verbal attacks, assaults, auto parts robberies and other thefts, and growing drug dealing and drug use. This situation means that the residents of these communities do not feel they have the protection they need to keep themselves and their belongings safe. Furthermore, residents’ social lives have been narrowed to those activities that take place in private spaces, since they feel vulnerable in street settings.

Added to this, in the context of the Morelos neighborhood, participants more clearly pointed to organized criminal activities associated with drug dealers, the theft of car parts, fencing stolen goods, and piracy. Local authorities carried out operations to combat drug dealing in Colonia Morelos during February 2007, but these actions were viewed with uncertainty and fear by community members, because from their point of view this only addressed one part of the problem, while the rest of the community continued to be plagued by drug
dealing and drug trafficking. In addition, in the days following the Department of Public Safety’s local intervention, the streets surrounding the La Fortaleza, a property that had been expropriated, continued to be filled with many armed Federal District SSP (Ministry of Public Security) officers, which triggered fear and uncertainty among residents.

Requests for information
This case led to the formulation of eight information requests concerning the 2006 budget allocations for: police salaries within the Coyoacán district, the fight against drugs in Colonia Santo Domingo; as well as the report of the results of the actions carried out by the AFI (Agencia Federal de Investigación, or Mexico’s FBI) and other federal agencies responsible for public safety, crime prevention, and organized crime in the Morelos neighborhood during 2005 and 2006.

Information provided by the Department of Public Safety
The liaison unit informed the requesters this was not within their jurisdiction and suggested that they direct the requests to the Federal District SSP, the PFP (Policia Federal Preventiva, or the DEA), and the PGR (Federal Attorney General’s Office).

It is worth mentioning that the Morelos Center submitted information request no. 0002200053907 on May 7, 2007, requesting that the response be delivered through the Internet (SISI). Instead, the information was delivered on June 1 to the offices of the Morelos Community Center. The person delivering official memo no. PFP/EM/S-III/00607/2007 placed conditions handing over the document. Specifically, he requested that the person taking delivery of the document produce identification by means of an official document (voter’s registration card). Once this person handed over the acknowledgement, he asked the Center team members about the activities that they carried out there. After receiving information about the institution, the officer left.

Actions undertaken
The topics of lack of public safety and mistrust of police forces are continual concerns in the colonias where EDNICA works. Families have voiced their distrust and feel intimidated by police officials.

For example, the personal delivery of the information that the Morelos Community Center had requested via document 0002200053907 let the police agency to assume a stance of intimidation with regard to those who had requested the information and to threaten the community’s interest in
maintaining communication with the SSP. However, the mothers of the Morelos neighborhood have initiated contact with the district authorities to express their concerns about the lack of public safety, and to request that action be taken to reverse this situation.

**Results and challenges**

The actions that EDNICA undertook as part of the Informed Communities project represented achievements both for the clientele and the communities where this project was carried out and also for the institutional arena.

In the case of the children and mothers who participated in the project, they did not just learn about the RTI. It also became a tool for them to put other rights into practice. The structure of the training sessions encouraged better understanding of the government’s structure, as well as the responsibility of authorities to ensure that citizens enjoy adequate personal, family, and community development.

Group participation and identification of community issues strengthened the community development processes that EDNICA fosters. To the extent that joint task areas were identified, the groups have developed actions that benefited the communities they live in. In this way, they have been empowered by community work.

This project strengthened the mothers’ and children’s exercise of citizenship and participation in social life, through the participants’ identification of community needs and issues, requests for public information, and organizing efforts based on these as a way to undertake actions that can change their current situation.

This is an especially important victory for the children, because people widely believe that children do not have organizational capabilities. Instead, the public generally views minors only in terms of the future, while ignoring the present and the authorities’ responsibilities to children. The project allowed families and community activists to learn about children’s views of their own community and to also acknowledge that the youth have organizational capabilities, as was seen in their identification of actions to be carried out in relevant arenas, including schools, recreational areas, health care, addictions, and a life free from violence.

Because of this project, the participating children have more information about their rights—especially about the RTI. In addition, they have shared this
information and training among their peers, and they have undertaken actions in the community that have an impact on the issues they feel most strongly about.

In the case of mothers, carrying out the project boosted their interest in becoming educated about other topics related to the exercise of citizenship and community organizing. We have capitalized on this interest by offering workshops on human rights and community organizing.

In the area of institutions, this project’s successes include the development of new tools for the educational programs we run for children and families, turning the RTI into a tool for promoting community organizing. At the same time, knowledge about and exercise of the RTI has allowed us to get information to evaluate and influence the formulation of public policies associated with children, as well as make the allocation of public funds more transparent.

Gaining access to and learning about communities requires a never-ending involvement that must also respect the community’s time commitment, dynamics, and wisdom. For EDNICA, this project has allowed us to strengthen our institution’s activities in serving the needs of street children and child laborers.

Although EDNICA has engaged in prior projects geared toward citizenship building and social participation in the communities where this project was implemented, we know that we must continue on with activities that encourage local self-directed processes and community development.
FOLLOW-UP TO THE SEDESOL HOUSING PROGRAM
IN TWO VERACRUZ MUNICIPALITIES

History
Pobladores A.C. (Settlers) is a social organization that works in urban, peripheral, and rural communities in the state of Veracruz. For the last twenty-four years, it has worked to promote social organizing, leading to productive processes and social management that allow people to obtain housing that is just, democratic, and sustainable.  

We have developed a variety of initiatives with this goal in mind. The most important include support for health care for low-income people through the work of the Low-Income Health Center (Casa de Salud Popular) in Colonia Hidalgo in the municipality of Minatitlán; creating and running a Community Support Fund so that female community members have access to financial resources to further business initiatives as well as formation from gendered perspective; and finally the Progressive Social Housing Production project, which has been used to design an organizational model to provide access to financial resources for home improvement or housing construction, based on savings, credit, and subsidies.

Pobladores has developed intensive efforts in social management work and has formed partnership with various government organizations to ensure that the needs of the population are met. The issue of transparency and the right to access to information is relevant because it allows citizens to exercise their right to participate in monitoring the honest, effective, and efficient use of public resources to ensure that the spending benefits the population.

Hence, we consider ourselves fortunate to have participated in the IFAI-Comunidades Project because it allowed us to train in the exercise of the RTI, not as a mere instrument of academic or journalistic analysis, but on a scale that would make it possible to gain objective knowledge about the running, decisionmaking process, and results of government programs, including

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83 Settlers’ work has merited international recognition: Selected as one of the Ten Best Practices for Improving Housing Quality (UN-Dubai) (1998) and nominated to the World Housing Prize by the Building and Social Housing Foundation (2003).
84 At the end of December 2007, Settlers was recognized by the National Housing Commission as a subsidy
The Right to Information for Marginalized Groups: The Experience of Proyecto Comunidades in Mexico

SEDESOL’s Housing Program.

Why the SEDESOL Housing Program?
In 2005, two colonias where Pobladores has worked for over ten years were labeled areas of high marginalization by SEDESOL’s Housing Program (Programa Hábitat SEDESOL, PHS). These communities have a significant shortcoming in provision of basic services and urban facilities. Since the overall goal of the PHS is “to help overcome urban poverty, improve low-income housing, and create ordered, safe, andlivable spaces in cities and neighborhoods, with both a sense of history and a vision toward the future,” funds for neighborhood improvement were allocated through this program.

The activities that PHS carried out were visible in the colonias, but most of the residents did not have knowledge of nor direct participation in making decisions or questioning the type of actions undertaken. Thus, we needed to know more about the implementation of this program in the colonias of Moctezuma and Ampliación Hidalgo in the municipalities of Xalapa and Minatitlán, respectively, which the IFAI-Comunidades Project made possible.

How did the project work?
We proceeded in three stages:

(1) Helping people learn what the SEDESOL Housing Project is, its operating rules, and its specific guidelines.

(2) Making residents aware of their right to:

- be taken into account in PHS’s decisionmaking concerning projects for their neighborhoods, as indicated in the operating rules and coordination arrangements between the different levels of government for implementing projects; and
- have access to information on PHS projects in their colonias.

(3) learn about the RTI, the Transparency Act, and SISI to obtain information of interest to the communities, to track this process, and to analyze the responses obtained.

Based on the implementation of this project, we can see that:

- The primary participants were adult females, with an average age of
forty-five years, and with little or no formal education, who had difficulties in getting access to and using the Internet. Nevertheless, they came to commercial establishments to use computers and get hands-on training.

• In general, the residents in both colonias had little knowledge of government operations, their operating rules, or the ties and partnering mechanisms between the federal, state, and municipal levels. However, there is a perception that social mobilization and the role of political parties is important in the success of an undertaking.

• Although the operating rules of the SEDESOL Housing Program indicate the importance of involving people in development projects, the reality is:
  • Most of the population does not know what the Housing Program is and how they can participate in it.
  • Local town councils and SEDESOL, in these specific cases, did not provide sufficient information about PHS to the public.
  • Housing development agencies must play an important role in the decisionmaking process for projects to be implemented; however, their make-up is an indication of their origin, since there is no real representation of the population in these agencies.
  • The target population becomes a mere recipient of decisions made in other agencies, and the goal to involve them is little more than rhetoric.
  • The city council made the decision to finally get part of the population involved. In both cases studied, the Housing Program partnered with Oportunidades.
  • Whether this strategy is appropriate or not, this population does not represent the majority of the colonias’ people, and it generally maintains a submissive stance with respect to the authorities, so that decisions are only absorbed but not discussed or questioned. They are simply accepted.
  • Planning for PHS projects is not carried out based on actual possibilities of implementation, which means that when it is almost time to deliver the results of the work, the budget can be reassigned to other projects. This is done without concern for the affected populations, who are often unaware that such plans even existed.

• In Colonia Moctezuma, the only activity conducted by the PHS is a Community Analysis carried out in 2005. None of the projects listed as priorities were
implemented. Even more troubling is the fact that in 2006, the Service Priority Diagram that included this colonia disappeared from PHS’s Service Locations in Xalapa. Even today we do not know why this colonia was excluded.

• In Colonia Ampliación Hidalgo, various PHS activities were noted, some of which were visible, including paving streets, building a surveillance module, and remodeling DIF (social services) facilities in the community. However, the following was noted:

  • The lists on the website that report the PHS projects are incomplete, and in many cases, they do not clearly define the project type and its location.
  • Even more troubling, for one projected listed as “completed”—the Job Training Workshop School in Colonia A. Hidalgo (Project No. 4819 of the Minatitlán municipal zone, under the area of Housing’s 2006 projects on urban facilities and city image)—questions about its location and cost received a response from the Liaison Unit that the project had been canceled in its entirety by the municipality.
  • Requests for information on the Listing of Women of Colonias Hidalgo and A. Hidalgo (of Minititlán, Veracruz, to the Conducting of the 2005 and 2006 Study on Colposcopy and Mammography within the Framework of the Oportunidades Human Development Program) were solicited first from the Oportunidades Program, which then asked us to go to the Health Department. When we raised the same question to this agency, we were referred to the Federal District Health Care Services.

Finally, we were referred to SEDESOL, who sent the requested lists, which included at least ten women who did not receive care; in addition, two men were listed on the 2005 list.

• In Xalapa, the women involved in the project have continued with this social and organizational work to defend and demand a green space and require the city council to provide funds for its creation.

• In Minatitlán, there is a great deal of distrust about the PHS’s operations, but the partnership must be strengthened in order to move on to another phase of access to information that would enable compiling cases and requesting clarification in relation to works and activities not completed, yet reported as completed. This is one aspect that is still pending.
Conclusion
Based on the results obtained, we can see that we did manage to raise the women’s awareness for those who were involved in the program. They came to understand about their right to information and that the exercise of this right is an important tool that, in turn, allows other rights to be exercised.

We believe, however, that the RTI is far from being widely known in underprivileged Mexican communities, so outreach and training in these sectors will continue to be crucial. The Federal Freedom of Information Institute plays an important role in this area, as does the participation of the media and civil society organizations.
SEDEMEX
CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENT SERVICES IN THE STATE OF MEXICO

In 2007, the Center for Development Services in the State of Mexico, A.C., ran a project on transparency and access to public information in rural areas around Mazahua in Mexico State. The objective was to acquire experience at a community and institutional level and that can be summarized in the following points:

1. We believe that public information is essential in rural areas in order to achieve integrated development, since for years this information has been used to benefit only a few. In the absence of information, there is confusion, lack of clarity, political strongmen, and mistrust of institutions.

2. When the project was carried out in communities, we noted that telecommunications infrastructure and material means were needed in rural areas in order to put the right to information into practice.

3. Following the training sessions, people grasped the spirit of the project. They not only learned about the ways to access information, but they also recognized the value of the right to information: “If you don’t have information, it’s like being blind,” they said. Fostering knowledge about programs and institutions that encourage development in Mexico will enhance the likelihood that people, as citizens, will demand these rights. It will also ensure that support resources actually reach the people who need them the most, with better mechanisms for accounting and social oversight.

4. This project also produced an improvement in people’s status as citizens. During the training sessions, we noted that they were interested in— and surprised to learn—that their communities have these rights, a fact that had for a long time been denied or hidden.

5. At the institutional level, public information and access to it allowed us to conduct studies on the financial allocation of funding that the government provides or dispenses to municipalities and states. Through this we managed to identify criteria for allocations and restrictions so that resources actually reach rural areas and trigger development processes.
The democratization process is truncated if the right to information does not cover those social groups deprived of the power of citizenship. So, it is unfortunate that projects like IFAI-Comunidades are being crossed off the democratic agenda. We believe that a similar program must be reinstated at a national level, especially one aimed at marginalized communities in rural and urban areas.
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For more information about Proyecto Comunidades go to:

www.derechoasaber.org.mx/comunidades