9

Accessing Accountability: Individual Versus Collective Voices[1]

'Social accountability' reforms have multiplied and spread, both within Mexico and around the world, involving diverse combinations of citizen voice, participation, and transparency to encourage institutional responsiveness.[2] Yet analysts still know very little about which specific action strategies and institutions are most likely to produce accountability in practice. This chapter asks: what kinds of institutional strategies give rural, low-income citizens effective voice in antipoverty programs? The study that follows compares 'best-case' examples of two very different approaches, each embedded within major national antipoverty programs.

In political science, analysis of oversight institutions has been strongly influenced by a conceptual framework that distinguishes between 'police patrol' versus 'fire alarm' approaches (McCubbins and Swartz 1984; Siavelis 2000). In this view, the key distinction is between centralized public agencies that engage in 'command and control' style monitoring, versus more decentralized, indirect approaches that delegate the task of monitoring to citizens, who are mandated to sound the alarm when danger strikes (Smulovitz 2003).

The 'fire alarm' image resonates with accountability politics because it literally projects the voices of citizens concerned with defending themselves or their communities from threats. Loud alarms are difficult to ignore. They also have the advantage of potentially protecting the identity of those sounding the alarm from possible reprisals

[1] This chapter draws on field research projects ably carried out by Libby Haight and Felipe Hevia de la Jara in 2005 and 2006, in the context of an ongoing UC Santa Cruz-based research project on transparency in the Mexican rural development policy process. This project was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Global Development Program. Thanks very much to Libby Haight and Raul Pacheco Vega for editorial suggestions.

[2] For overviews, see Ackerman (2005) and Peruzzotti and Smulovitz (2006).

from arsonists. At the same time, the metaphor elides key distinctions within the 'alarm-sounding' process and implicitly assumes that public agencies are both willing and able to respond once they are alerted. For the fire alarm metaphor to be effective at capturing how institutions respond, one must hope that a fire department is actually located nearby. The metaphor also assumes that the fire department is the solution rather than part of the problem. In other words, the police patrol and fire alarm metaphors highlight the 'alerting' process, without addressing the question of what kinds of incentives encourage public institutions to act in the public interest.

Different kinds of alarms are needed to address multiple possible sources of institutional failure. Individual alerts to localized service providers are insufficient to address systemic problems that result from power imbalances that are located further 'upstream' in the policy decision-making process. The street-corner alarm box cannot ensure that the fire department has the right staff and equipment, nor is it adequate for reporting corruption in the fire department itself. Moreover, fire alarms also conflate individual with collective action involved in alerting the authorities to problems. This distinction is relevant insofar as collective action is likely to be more effective than individual alarms at holding unresponsive institutions accountable, at least for under-represented communities.

The viability of different alarm strategies depends on the social and institutional context. In Mexico, for example, few crime victims call the police, for fear of being doubly victimized. In terms of public security, some rural Mexican communities responded to this challenge by creating their own, autonomous, scaled-up, locally accountable governance institutions, as the cases discussed in Chapter 7—such as the Community Police movement in Guerrero, the Good Government Councils in Chiapas, and coalitions of municipal and agrarian authorities, as in Oaxaca's Zoogocho region. In these regions, neither conventional governmental police patrols nor fire alarms worked. To ensure public accountability, these communities elected their own autonomous police patrols. Though grounded in pre-existing institutions of local self-governance, by scaling up to regional levels they constituted autonomous counterweights—new forms of 'dual civic power' that responded to the failure of the conventional authorities. In other regions, in contrast, rural social and civic organizations fight for accountability by trying to take advantage of cracks in *existing* public institutions, especially when opportunities arise for informed participation in and oversight of the policy process—as in the case of the many programs with regional councils detailed in Chapter 8.

This chapter explores how two different 'fire alarm' strategies work by comparing the institutional and political dynamics of social accountability reforms within antipoverty programs—Oportunidades' human capital investments and Diconsa's rural store network. In a society in which 12.7 percent of children under five still suffer from chronic malnutrition, both programs clearly have a long way to go before their missions are fulfilled.[3]

The accountability strategies within both programs are 'demand-driven', but Oportunidades' is based on individual initiative while Diconsa's is designed to encourage and respond to collective action. Moreover, this collective action strategy reaches beyond the local, to regional, state, and national levels. This emphasis on scale contrasts with the 'client power' accountability strategy promoted by the World Bank's approach, which limits citizen empowerment to improve public service delivery to the most local level—the receiving end of policy decisions (2004). A 'scaled-up' approach to collective action for accountability, in contrast, has the potential to address upstream failures.

Oportunidades, Mexico's flagship social program, was intended to increase investment in human capital. Originally named Progresa when first launched in 1997, the program pioneered the 'conditional cash transfer' approach, which used payments to mothers to encourage families to increase their use of the government's basic education and health services. The program built on an official discourse of 'co-responsibility' (Lucissano 2002, 2004). To bypass local intermediaries and ensure strict poverty targeting, the program began with a highly centralized approach to the selection of communities and means-tested individual family 'beneficiaries'. After Mexico's watershed 2000 election, the new government changed the program's name to Oportunidades, and created a 'Citizen Attention' window to allow program participants both to register questions and to file complaints about service delivery.[4] Oportunidades also convened local committees made up of beneficiary *vocales*, or spokespeople, but as discussed below, the available evidence indicates that these committees represented the program to the participants, rather than vice versa (Hevia de la Jara 2007).

The Rural Food Supply Program, managed by the Diconsa agency, took a different approach to co-responsibility, designating entire communities and their elected representatives as the state's coresponsible counterparts. In the context of Chapter 8's comparison of channels

[3] This data comes from the National Health and Nutrition Survey 2006, carried out by the National Public Health Institute (cited in Cruz Martínez 2006).

[4] Diconsa also has a program called 'Citizen Attention', operated by an 'internal control unit' of the Ministry of Public Administration, but its impact is unclear.

for collective voice through deliberative regional councils, the rural food store program was the most established and most accountability-oriented program among them. Until the late 1980s, Diconsa also operated a large-scale urban retail food store network, as a subsidiary of the National Basic Foods Company (Conasupo). Though Conasupo was dismantled in the late 1990s amidst congressional corruption investigations and as part of the government's privatization policy, Diconsa still supplied more than 22,000 community-run village stores from its 300 regional warehouses as of 2007.[5]

The Diconsa program originated in the 1970s, drawing from the left wing within Mexico's postrevolutionary tradition, whereas the Oportunidades approach was a product of the market-oriented, individualized policy strategies of the late 1990s.[6] One could describe their two approaches to social accountability in shorthand terms as 'old school' versus 'new school'. They share several key characteristics: both were geographically targeted to low-income rural communities, both were of national scope, both were administered by the same Social Development Ministry, and both reached several million families each.[7] Indeed, 72 percent of Diconsa customers surveyed were also Oportunidades participants (Guerra Ford 2005*b*: 154). Yet the two programs differed fundamentally in terms of their strategies for reaching people.[8] The regional council citizen oversight strategy was part of an antipoverty program that provides public goods, in the form of secure

[5] Historically, Conasupo's combination of pragmatism and flexibility allowed its intervention in grain markets to become a politically effective tool for managing conflict and reproducing the regime's long-term stability (Grindle 1977; Ochoa 2000). On Conasupo's privatization, see Mitchell (2001).

[6] After the 2000 change in ruling party, the new leadership changed the program's discourse to emphasize citizen rights, layered on top of the previous, more paternalistic discourse about 'beneficiaries'. The new program leadership referred to questions and complaints from beneficiaries as 'citizen demands'.

[7] This discussion will not address Oportunidades' post-2002 expansion into urban areas. For ethnographic analysis and urban–rural comparison of different enrollment strategies, see Hevia de la Jara (2007).

[8] In economic terms, the two programs are quite complementary. As the official evaluations report, the Diconsa-supplied village stores make basic foods cheaper and more accessible than they would be otherwise (Guerra Ford et al. 2005*a*). They therefore increase the effective purchasing power of Oportunidades payments. Yet their relative economic impacts differ greatly. Oportunidades' family payments are substantial in comparison to their income, whereas the village stores provide modest incremental benefits of approximately 5% savings on basic food costs to all inhabitants within the stores' area of influence. These benefits also reach those who do not shop in the stores, insofar as they provide competition that keeps private retail prices down. In this sense Diconsa stores provide a local public good, whereas Oportunidades provides private transfer payments. The programs also differ substantially in the costs to the federal government, with federal transfers to Diconsa accounting for less than 3% of Oportunidades' 2005 budget. Since Oportunidades spends 6% of its budget to deliver the payments and monitor beneficiaries, and Diconsa's federal transfers cover the costs of delivering food

community access to low-cost staple foods. To set up stores, low-income rural communities had to organize and request them. In contrast, the Oportunidades welfare payment system was targeted to individual families, as was the complaint system. In other words, the institutional nature of each channel for voice was consistent with each program's strategy for delivering its services—collective versus individual.

While Diconsa constructed its counterpart social subject in terms of a socially and territorially defined community, Oportunidades defined its counterpart in terms of individual mothers and their families. Program discourse referred to the families as 'beneficiaries' and to the mothers as 'entitlement-holders' (*titulares*). Yet both programs' design presupposed that each agency would respond to participant concerns once alerted, insofar as neither accountability process was independent of each respective agency, and neither had sanctioning powers to discipline officials who violated the public trust. In other words, both accountability strategies encouraged voice but lacked teeth. This raises the question of what institutional incentives might encourage responsiveness to voice, and this is where the distinction between individual versus collective voice becomes key.

These two different kinds of citizen-driven accountability strategies unfolded in a broader context in which institutionalized opportunities for public participation, deliberation, and making direct claims on the state, apart from top-down corporatist organizations, political parties, and elections, had been percolating through the Mexican state apparatus since the 1980s. This diverse array of innovations comes together under the umbrella term *contraloría social*, the Spanish term for 'social accountability' or 'societal auditing'.[9] The concept refers to a wide range of 'state–society interfaces' that in principle attempt to promote civil society engagement to bolster vertical and diagonal forms of accountability. As of 2005, of at least 130 Mexican federal programs that published 'rules of operation', 83 included some specific reference to encouraging societal auditing (Hevia de la Jara 2006*c*: 19). Though the Mexican government has required regular 'external' evaluations of social programs since 2002, those studies have not documented whether social accountability reforms actually work. Indeed, at least until 2007, the agencies themselves determined their evaluation agendas (Fox and Haight 2007*a*). One can therefore conclude that the agencies that were supposed to be held accountable by *contraloría social*

to stores, one could also compare the two programs in terms of overhead costs, in which case Oportunidades spends more than twice as much as Diconsa, in relative terms.

[9] For comprehensive overviews of *contraloría social* in Mexico, see Hevia de la Jara (2005, 2006*c*, 2006*e*, 2007).

reforms did not make it a priority to find out whether such innovations actually met their goals.[10]

Methodologically, this chapter draws on official government evaluations and opinion surveys that have recently become public, as the result of Mexico's evaluation and public information mandates. Because these studies were carried out either by government agencies or under contract to them, their findings are unlikely to overstate the social auditing programs' limitations. The chapter combines institutional analysis, interviews with participants, and quantifiable indicators of participation and accountability processes. The data sources permit generalizations about nationwide patterns, and their findings are supplemented by interviews with program participants at local, regional, and national levels. The chapter's primary method for analyzing the two programs differs, however, because of their different strategies for projecting the voices of program participants. In Oportunidades, individual complaints are analyzed with primarily quantitative indicators, whereas Diconsa's collective voice mechanisms are better suited to institutional analysis.

To frame these two programs in the broader context of Mexican state–society relations, the rural food store program and their associated regional councils embodies a classic postrevolutionary repertoire: government reformers partnered with organized social actors to encourage the mutual empowerment needed to transform state intervention.[11] In the 1980s, governmental reformers reformulated state–society partnership strategies and in some notable cases tolerated a higher degree of social actor autonomy from the ruling party, a bargaining process eventually known as *concertación social*. The most well-known early experience with *concertación* involved the bargaining between the Mexico City government and autonomous neighborhood organizations following the 1985 earthquake. In the wake of the contested 1988 election, President Salinas's National Solidarity Program promoted a discourse of participation and co-responsibility between the state and poor people, often bypassing official corporatist

[10] Until we know more about whether social accountability programs actually have an impact on the state, to refer to them in terms of 'accountability' involves a certain degree of wishful thinking (much as agencies like a Ministry of Justice or Public Security may or may not actually pursue their nominal goals).

[11] This approach reached its high point during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), with its promotion of land reform and worker-managed industries, and was partly revived during the reform opening under president Luis Echeverría Alvarez (1970–6). Both presidents managed widespread dissent by channeling social participation within the confines of the corporatist ruling party.

channels while still discouraging electoral opposition.[12] In 1991, this program formally recognized the principle of *contraloría social*. Yet the Mexican government's first nationwide experience with this relatively pluralistic approach to state–society bargaining with organized poor people dates back to 1979, with Diconsa's rural food store program (Fox 1992*a*).

The Diconsa Rural Food Store Program: Institutional Accountability through Collective Action

The village store program was designed to support food security by making consistent supplies of low-cost basic food available to remote, low-income populations. The program was designed to regulate, rather than to replace, private food markets (where they exist). Rather than subsidize the price of food, Diconsa absorbed the operational and transportation costs involved in delivering supplies from its regional branches and warehouses to the villages. Diconsa provided approximately 22,000 village stores with basic foods, such as corn, beans, cooking oil, salt, sugar, rice, crackers, sardines, and increasingly, corn flour. The assumption behind the program was that in the absence of this market intervention, basic food supplies in remote, seasonally corn-deficit villages would either be erratic or expensive due to high transportation costs and uncompetitive local retail markets. Both official evaluations and independent field research confirmed the village stores' pro-consumer regulatory impact.[13] As one official evaluation put it:

The structures of rural markets are characterized by not being totally competitive. The opening of a private store, increasing the supply of goods, should

[12] Note Harvey's balanced analysis, which recognizes the degree to which *concertación* represented both a concession to popular movements and an effort to deflect them from electoral opposition (1990*b*). On the Solidarity program, see Bruhn (1996), Cornelius, Craig, and Fox (1994), Dresser (1991), Kaufman and Trejo (1997), and Soederberg (2001). On its ideological origins in Mexico's social left, see Moguel (1994). For examples of Solidarity program relationships with autonomous social organizations, see Fox (1994*b*) and Haber (1994).

[13] Two recent field studies confirmed Diconsa stores' regulatory impact. A 2006 survey of 847 households carried out in 11 villages in Oaxaca and 2 in Chiapas found that prices in Diconsa and private stores were similar according to half the households, while just over one-third of households reported that Diconsa stores were cheaper. (Jessa Lewis, personal communication, March 14, 2007). Independent field research carried out by Libby Haight in the Chilapa region of Guerrero in June of 2005 found that in localities that lacked Diconsa stores, staples cost on average 1–3 pesos above Diconsa's established prices. In other localities visited, prices in private stores were exactly the same as the prices in Diconsa.

reduce prices, but this does not always occur. Therefore this should be treated as a market monopoly, in which government intervention is necessary to regulate prices through a policy that we could call 'anchor prices,' which would at least permit the population to have an option of relatively low average prices. (Guerra Ford 2005*a*: 65–7)

By 2005, the Diconsa stores reached an estimated nine million people who live in localities that were officially considered to be of 'high or very high marginality' (Guerra Ford 2005*a*: 389). Raw corn accounted for 17.9 percent of total sales (Guerra Ford 2005*b*: 334). Diconsa sold 62 percent of its corn in only five states: Oaxaca, Veracruz, Chiapas, Tabasco, and Puebla (Diconsa 2005*c*: 1–5).

Diconsa stores were highly geographically targeted, focusing on low-income rural communities. In 2005, 67.3 percent of stores were in villages ('localities') considered to be either high or very high 'marginality'.[14] If one also includes villages considered to be of 'medium marginality', then 86 percent were located in low-income communities (Haight 2006). In spite of the 'middle class' implications of the term 'medium marginality', two-thirds of their employed inhabitants earned less than twice the daily minimum wage, equivalent to approximately US$8 (CONAPO 2001). The category 'medium marginality' was defined by a series of indicators that emphasize physical infrastructure rather than family poverty. The potential population served by the village stores located in communities of very high and high marginality totaled 8.8 million people (14 million if one includes those of medium marginality). The correlation was very high between each state's level of poverty and its percentage of stores in high or very high marginality localities, as indicated in Chart 9.1.[15] By these criteria, the program was extremely well-targeted in southern Mexico, especially in indigenous regions, while most of the stores that were not well-targeted are located in northern states.

The rural food store program experience is especially relevant for the analysis of social accountability because it was Mexico's first national

[14] The government's external evaluation found a lower level of targeting because of program guidelines that excluded communities with more than 2,500 inhabitants from the official target population. Since this population ceiling had been lowered from 4,000 in 2004, many stores that were located in very low-income villages were subsequently redefined as poorly targeted. As a result of this arbitrary population ceiling, the 2005 evaluation found that only 47.8% of stores were well-targeted (Guerra Ford 2005*b*). Nevertheless, even according to these narrow criteria, a review of the evaluations from 2002 through 2005 shows that the pattern of poverty targeting improved over time.

[15] Calculations by Haight (2006), drawing on data in Guerra Ford (2005*b*) and Diconsa (2005*a*).

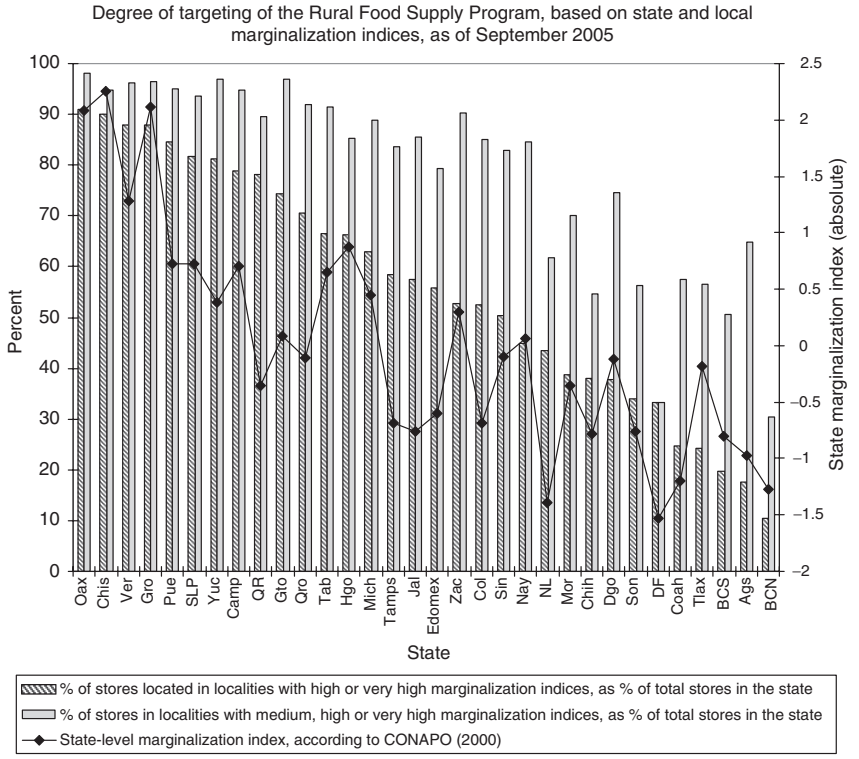

Chart 9.1. Targeting of the Rural Food Program, based on poverty levels of store localities

Source: Haight (2006), based on data in Guerra Ford (2005*b*) and Diconsa (2005*a*).

social program that was designed explicitly to promote collective action by organized beneficiaries to monitor the performance of federal program operations. Village assemblies elected local store management and oversight committees, which in turn sent representative to elect regional councils to oversee warehouse operations. Program design assumed that in the absence of scaled-up stakeholder oversight, officials would be tempted to divert subsidized food to private intermediaries.

The village stores provided a 'public good' in the economic sense of offering reliable, open access to low-cost staple foods to the entire community, both directly through sales and indirectly through competition with private outlets. This 'public good' service created a communitywide material incentive for collective action. Program failures were especially transparent to stakeholders, since they took the

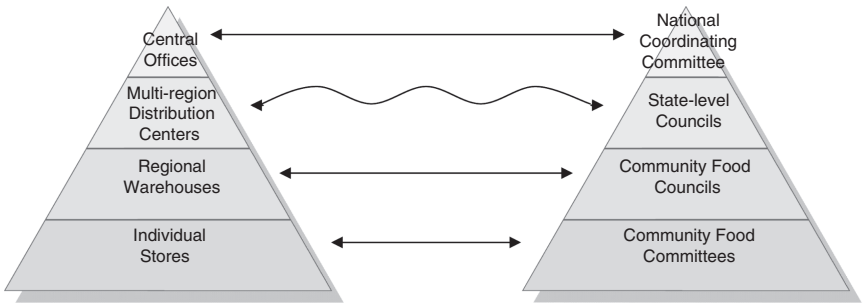

Figure 9.1. Diconsa: administration and representation

form of unreliable or substandard food deliveries.[16] In principle, the regional oversight councils were able to keep track of inventory if and when it reached the warehouse. The food supply councils were also organized into statewide networks, though most of the state councils did not appear to be autonomous from the agency. Council delegates also elected a national coordinating council to negotiate directly with Diconsa management. As illustrated in Figure 9.1, the program's management structure was paralleled by counterpart layers of representation at each level. The degrees of each representative body's internal democracy and autonomy from the agency changed over time and varied widely in different regions and states, as discussed further below.

The process of representation within these official channels for participation was marked by the program's origins. In its early years, reformist program managers created a rare opportunity for regional collective action that was relatively free from the control of the ruling party. This opening was encouraged by the program's initial staffing, which recruited hundreds of nonpartisan community organizers to help launch the committees and the councils. Though they often worked in authoritarian contexts, the program's federal imprimatur gave the community organizers room for maneuver—symbolized by the government seal prominently emblazoned on their trucks: 'Federal Executive Power'. In many regions, the Diconsa warehouse became a 'free space', permitting regional freedom of assembly and association—often for the first time.[17] This opening in turn allowed the food council

[16] Diconsa considers local store managers and the staff who deliver the food from warehouses to the villages work to be 'community staff' rather than employees, in order to encourage them to be accountable to the communities served (and to avoid paying public sector union wages and benefits).

[17] On the key role of 'free spaces' for autonomous collective action, see Evans and Boyte (1986).

leaders to find common ground on other issues, and many spun off autonomous producer organizations.[18]

While most food councils' limited focus on improving program operations and community economic development reflected their generally collaborative approach to Diconsa management, the more autonomous councils repeatedly proved willing and able to engage in confrontational tactics. During the first wave of national food council mobilization, in 1985 and 1986, approximately one-third of the food councils were tangibly autonomous of Diconsa management (Fox 1992*a*: 194). They regularly engaged in mass direct action to protest inadequate quantity and quality of basic food supplies, and to hold Diconsa functionaries accountable for broken promises.[19] For twenty-five years, food councils repeatedly occupied or blockaded Diconsa company offices when faced with unresponsive or corrupt managers.[20] Management repeatedly purged grassroots outreach staff seen as too sympathetic to the more autonomous councils. The key arena for contestation was usually at the regional level, where councils had the greatest oversight capacity and clout. Sometimes the more autonomous food councils were also able to come together at the state level, though government 'divide-and-conquer' tactics usually prevented them from gaining a clear majority of the councils.

The autonomous food councils, though not overtly politicized and therefore little noticed by urban intellectuals, were among Mexico's most significant national peasant and indigenous movements of the 1980s (Fox and Gordillo 1989). During the Salinas presidency (1988–94), managers of the National Social Enterprise Fund (FONAES), an agency tasked with bolstering community-based economic enterprises, were both sympathetic to the Diconsa program's participatory vision and were interested in reinforcing nonpartisan channels of 'concertation' between state reformists and the rural

[18] These experiences have been studied most in the state of Guerrero. See Bartra (1994, 2000), and Fox (1992*a*).

[19] As Arcadio Morales, the leader of the first wave of Oaxaca's Food Councils put it: 'many program supervisors think that they are the ones organizing us . . . but it's we who have organized ourselves, based on our own needs . . . and if we have been able to advance with our organization, it is because no political parties or religious creeds are involved. . . . What's going on is that the communities have lost faith in many of the government agencies . . . (*El Día*, March 24, 1984: 6).

[20] For example, in 1988, 500 peasants from 280 communities in Yucatan took over the main Diconsa offices to demand the firing of the manager, who they charged with corruption, causing lack of corn supply for two weeks. Even after he ostensibly presented his resignation 'ejidatarios declined to give up the Conasupo headquarters, including twenty trucks belonging to the rural program, because the resignation had not yet been officially announced, and above all, because Diconsa had yet to meet their other demands, including the normalization of corn supply' (Vega Martínez 1988).

poor.[21] Diconsa and FONAES officials convened the first official 'congress' of national food councils in 1992, followed by national meetings in 1993 and 1994. In 1994, the Councils also began a process of organizational conversion into 'civil associations', a more autonomous status that allowed them to receive funding from FONAES for production and marketing projects. The national meetings in 1999, 2001, and 2006 were convened by the food councils themselves, through their new national coordinating network, though in coordination with Diconsa managers.

For an example of the public discourse used by the more autonomous food councils, consider the following protest statement, published as an insert in the national newspaper *La Jornada*. Thirteen of the Oaxaca councils—about half of the state's total—addressed their demands to Mexico's president, the Social Development minister, to the governor, and to other food councils (notably not mentioning Diconsa management). They charged:

> The Community Food Councils of the state of Oaxaca that sign here register our deepest dissatisfaction with the grave situation caused by the lack of supply of products for our basic needs, above all corn, in the marginalized rural communities of our state. This situation further worsens the already precarious living standards and pushes the rural population dangerously close to situations of social instability. (*La Jornada*, January 30, 1996: 21)

This last line is an example of a discursive device often used by more moderate Mexican social organizations, in an effort to gain clout by signaling the threat of greater militancy if their concerns are not addressed. The statement continued:

> we publicly denounce Diconsa management, who instead of dealing with the supply problems, dedicate themselves to their mean-spirited desire to defend their own interests, carrying out a policy of sowing division within the communities in our organization, in an effort to silence our voice's just call for dignified food supply for our communities. . . . If our demands are not resolved, that will demonstrate Diconsa management's lack of political will to establish the necessary agreements through dialogue and concertation, with respect for the principles of the population's co-responsibility and participation in the definition and leadership of initiatives for their own development, contradicting in practice the policies of the President of the Republic, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León.

This last line combines both the councils' appropriation of official 'pro-participation' discourse, in an effort to hold state managers

[21] For a rare independent study of FONAES, see Pérez Yarahuán (2003).

accountable for their hypocrisy, while also following the long-standing Mexican political tradition of appealing to the higher authority and legitimacy of the ostensibly benevolent president when faced with unresponsive officials.[22]

Corn quality issues have provoked protest ever since the beginning of the rural food program. Much of Diconsa's stock has been imported from the USA, #2 yellow corn, which is considered animal feed. In the early 1990s, the food councils challenged the government policy of promoting the substitution of grain-based corn dough by industrially manufactured corn flour. They called for support from the ruling party's National Peasant Confederation (CNC) to stop 'this authoritarian move by the Ministry of Trade and Industry, which is an attack on rural communities' culture and customs' (Pérez 1993). For two decades, the councils campaigned for Diconsa to supply domestic white corn, with limited results. Finally, as part of the 2003 agreement signed in response to the broad-based 'The Countryside Won't Take Anymore' protest movement, the president committed Diconsa to procure exclusively Mexican-grown white corn for the village stores, and to buy from organized producers—though this did not end the councils' complaints about inconsistent corn supply and quality.[23]

The food councils' combined consistently moderate goals with occasionally radical tactics. For example, while most observers of Oaxaca social movements considered the state's food councils to have been tamed back in the late 1980s, in 2001 2,000 members blocked federal highways for 8 hours and took over the Diconsa offices. According to a news report, they called for the firing of the Oaxaca state program manager: 'the dissidents accused the functionary of dividing the councils and repressing staff who questioned his acts' (Ríos and Ruíz 2001).[24]

The rural food program's level of federal support ebbed and flowed over time. Diconsa went through five different general managers

[22] Shortly thereafter, following a statewide meeting of Guerrero's 15 Food Councils, 55 councils published a statement protesting food price increases, including the slogan 'we don't want yellow corn and old beans!' Their ambitious demands also included: extending the government's milk program to indigenous communities, larger and timely deliveries of white corn to the villages, a national campaign for a million signatures to defend the rural economy and preparation for a national meeting of village store committees (*La Jornada*, March 13, 1996: 38).

[23] Consider, for example, a case in San Luis Potosí when members of the community food committees took over the warehouse to protest Diconsa's delivery of 800 tons of rotten corn. They demanded and received the resignation of the Diconsa manager (*La Jornada de San Luis* 2005).

[24] Detailed patterns, trends, and impacts of Community Food Council protests have not been systematically documented.

during the six years of the Vicente Fox presidency, suggesting that the agency was a low priority (e.g. Pastrana 2002). Following the sharp spike in rural poverty caused by the 1994–5 peso crisis, in contrast, the federal government used Diconsa's extensive national coverage of low income rural communities to cushion the blow, as Chart 9.2 indicates.[25] Federal budget transfers to Diconsa more than tripled between 1994 and 1996.[26] During that same period, however, a new national social policy strategy gained influence. Then Undersecretary of Finance for Spending Santiago Levy argued strongly that generalized food subsidies should be replaced by income transfer programs that were both geographically targeted *and* family means-tested. The new strategy—then known as the Education, Health, and Food Program (Progresa)—gave mothers regular welfare payments in exchange for their children's school attendance and participation in health programs. Though most Diconsa stores were geographically targeted—located in villages considered to be of 'high or very high marginality'—Levy considered the program to be a *generalized* subsidy, putting it in the same category as the Mexico City-focused tortilla program, which reached urban consumers (Levy and Rodríguez 2006: 216–17). He persuaded the cabinet to eliminate grain subsidies for urban consumers and to invest heavily in Progresa, which became the government's flagship social program. The Finance Ministry managed to significantly reduce Diconsa's budget, as Chart 9.2 indicates, but was unable to eliminate the program.[27]

Rather than resist this attack, Diconsa management proposed closing stores in communities with more than 4,000 inhabitants, ostensibly in the name of improved sociogeographic targeting—regardless of whether their official poverty levels were high. Other Diconsa staff alerted food councils to the Finance Ministry plan to cut the program, and the councils mobilized legislative allies in Mexico's first ever opposition-dominated congress (Pastrana 1999*a*, 1999*b*). Within Diconsa and the Social Development Ministry, the most senior advocates of community participation and representation were

[25] On the increase in rural poverty during this period, see Fox and Aranda (1996*a*).

[26] Because the Diconsa program is primarily paid for by its own sales, its costs to the federal government were always relatively modest, especially when compared to the government's generalized subsidies for urban corn, tortilla, and wheat consumption during this period (for details, see Levy and Rodriguez 2004: 206).

[27] These cuts followed the dismantling of most, but not all of the National Basic Food Company. Conasupo's other two targeted programs, the means-tested urban milk and tortilla distribution programs, also survived initially. Though the tortilla program was eliminated early in the Fox administration, the milk program continued—and was used to provide electoral support to the PRI (FUNDAR 2006).

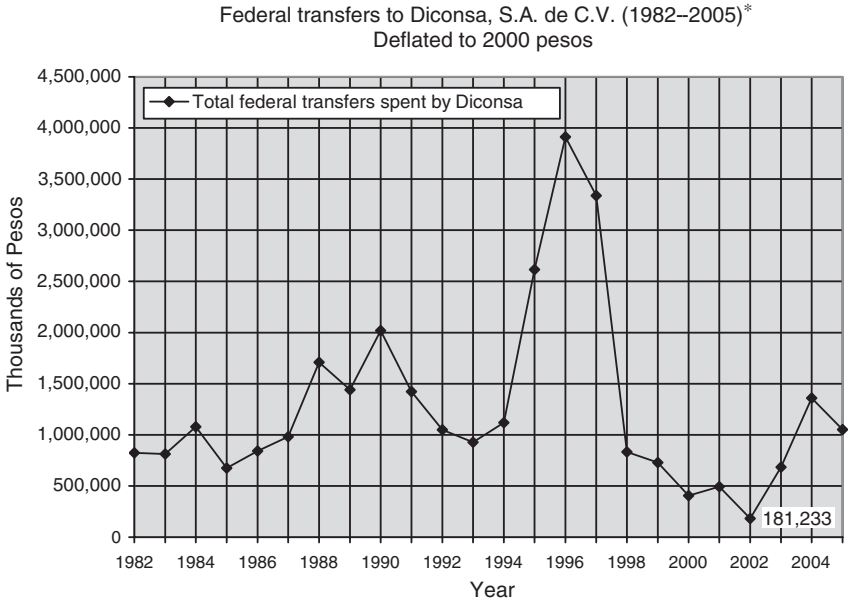

Chart 9.2. Federal budget transfers to Diconsa (1982–2005)

Source: Public Accounts data, provided by the Finance Ministry, Under-Secretariat of Spending, June 10, 2005.

Note: the data for 2005 reflects only authorized spending and was not deflated. Thanks to Libby Haight for locating and analyzing this data.

relieved of command during this period. As Carlos Rojas, President Zedillo's former Social Development Minister (and previously senior strategist for the Solidarity program) put it:

Beginning in 1998, the President stopped supporting the program. Now [under the PAN] officials see the stores as part of the government, not the community. . . . I always promoted the idea that the stores belonged to the community. Is it a crime to use the trucks that are returning empty to transport their coffee? For me, clearly no, but for them, yes.[28]

According to Luis Tames, Diconsa's head of Operations from 1997 to 1999:

The program for us implied a pact with the people, with organized consumers. . . . We were a different left, in [Diconsa] Operations, supporting

[28] Interview with Libby Haight, Mexico City, August 24, 2005. Note that his period in charge of the Social Development Ministry, in the mid-1990s, coincides with the highest ever budget allocations to Diconsa.

community organization. But you end up squashed by the powerful. . . . That's why we organized the national congresses [of food councils]. . . . We wanted to organize the *campesinos* independently, to be self-managed actors. We sought a new social pact for food supply. . . . We were a non-PRI left. . . . But when the PANistas came, everything changed. Before we went to the warehouse takeovers to negotiate a way out, we never saw them as illegal acts. Now the damn PANistas come with their lawyers up front. They don't negotiate with the people, they want to punish them. All this about sticking to the rules is a PANista tool for changing the rules of the game.[29]

Nevertheless, the program survived. Most of the food councils had been in a lull during the 1990s, but according to María José Arrellano—who, after serving as former village store manager and regional council leader, was elected National Coordinator of the Consejos, from 1999 to 2005:

[W]hen the Finance Ministry's attack came, we wanted to organize really well to defend the program. . . . We went to the media, to social organizations and to Congress. . . . We said 'if we are partners with Sedesol, then Sedesol is our partner too, so let us speak, we want Sedesol to listen to us. . . . We sent a document with thousands of signatures to Congress to demand the budget. That's when they began to talk about closing stores and ending up with only 11,000. . . . That's why we organized the 4th National Congress of the Community Food Councils. . . . They obliged us to cancel plans for the congress twice, because they were afraid that we were going to make a lot of noise in response to the attack. Finally we held it in Nuevo Leon, with two important results. First, we changed the rules so that the council leadership could serve three years instead of two [to allow for continuity and learning], and to overlap with mayors' terms. The second important result was the creation of the National Coordination, with three representatives from each region (North, South, and Center). There were two previous sets of national leaders, but the company got rid of them.[30]

Representatives of the councils threatened to block highways before meeting with congressional leaders, who they warned 'We can't tell the folks who to vote for, but we can tell them who *not* to vote for . . .' (Pastrana 1999*b*: 8, emphasis added). This approach suggests that equating the official structure of council representation with conventional top-down corporatism would be an oversimplification. The 1999 national meeting called not only for the defense of the program, but for raising the 'right to food' to the level of a constitutional right and for the inclusion of the councils in Diconsa and the Social Development

[29] Interviews with Libby Haight, Mexico City, February 2006.
[30] Interview with Libby Haight, Mexico City, July 25, 2005.

Ministry's national level decision-making processes.[31] Diconsa's unsympathetic then director in 2000, Juan Francisco Mora Anaya, recognized their impact:

> [t]he Community Food Councils campaigned in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, and since then it's been clear that [budget cuts and stores closings] could provoke a social conflict. There was a plan to do that but it was not carried out . . . it was logical, but it did not go forward. Once the affected villagers learned about the plan they began to oppose it. There were protests and marches in the communities, because they are very well organized around their stores. They don't belong to the Social Development Ministry, they belong to the communities, and they mobilized. (Ballinas 2000).

As a result of this organized response, in spite of historically low levels of federal budget transfers, the number of rural stores even *grew* after 2000. The councils' mass mobilization and lobbying sent a powerful signal about stakeholders' willingness and capacity to defend the program from both neoliberal policymakers and hostile operational managers.

Senior Finance Ministry policymakers still considered the program to constitute unfair competition with the private sector, but they had to live with it 'because the Community Food Councils are very powerful, politically speaking . . . above all the ones from Guerrero, Puebla and Oaxaca, they have a strong capacity to mobilize people.'[32] The councils' mobilization went beyond the defense of the program, in an effort to influence its operating rules, and they pushed for a seat on Diconsa's national board of directors. As Mauricio Martínez Ramírez, representative of Oaxaca's Laollaga council observed, that access would allow 'greater oversight of the spending of resources, but not influence over their allocation'. He went on to observe 'the word subsidy makes their hair stand on end. . . . We don't care what they call it—our concern is with guaranteeing the corn supply, in the quantity and quality required, at fair prices for the consumer' (Ríos 1999: 63).

Back in the mid-1980s, Diconsa management brought in PRI operatives to weaken the more autonomous councils (Fox 1992*a*). But by

[31] For details, see Comisión de Prensa de los Consejos Comunitarios de Abasto (1999). In their 2006 congress, the councils reiterated their demand for inclusion in ministerial-level policy decisions.

[32] Pablo Reyes, Director General de Programación y Presupuesto 'B', Treasury Ministry, interview with Libby Haight, Mexico City, May 25, 2005. Trained as a University of Chicago economist, Reyes was convinced that the store program 'distorted' prices because its subsidy of the costs of bringing basic foods to remote villages made it a 'disloyal competitor' with the private sector. Program advocates, in contrast, claimed that the program provided alternatives to otherwise uncompetitive private stores.

the late 1990s, PRI leaders saw the councils as more of a constituency than a threat, and council links with congressional leaders turned out to be crucial for defending the program against the Finance Ministry. Oaxaca offers a key case for considering different kinds of council power. While they steered clear of the political opposition, Oaxaca councils had influence over food policy at state and national levels. Oaxaca alone accounted for 20 percent of national Diconsa corn sales, in part because the councils had received supplemental working capital from the state government, which in turn allowed the stores to provide more corn to their communities, which in turn bolstered their constituency. This relationship reflected a combination of cooptation and effective bargaining that would be difficult to disentangle without further research. Shortly before the 2004 governor's elections, an internal Social Development Ministry assessment considered twenty of the state's thirty councils to be part of the PRI electoral effort.[33] This could be read in two different ways. On the one hand, nonpartisan federal officials considered two-thirds of the councils to be incorporated into the state level PRI machine. On the other hand, they recognized that a third of the councils had managed to resist the PRI's entreaties. The difficulty of making assumptions about how councils make decisions based on their external affiliations is reflected in a comment by the former national coordinator of the councils: 'In Oaxaca . . . what they do is they negotiate with who they have to negotiate with, and then they do whatever they want . . . '[34]

The PRI's use of the Oaxaca councils was part of the governor's strategy to co-opt a vast array of social and political organizations, including many that had once been associated with the opposition and some that later became part of the 2006 civic resistance.[35] This pattern is a reminder that co-optation is neither unconditional nor indefinite.

[33] This confidential document was prepared by a mid-level field operative of the Social Development Ministry in Oaxaca, who was also an author of a study that included this description of the role of the Food Councils: 'Led by the current Federal Congressman Manuel García Corpus, they began to receive support from Sedesol programs in 2003, which were used for political purposes. In 2004 the resources were used openly in support of the PRI's candidate for state governor. Sedesol resources were used to strengthen the governor's control over Diconsa in Oaxaca. . . . The State Planning Council generates a budget allocation as Community Food Councils but in reality the resources are distributed by Federal Congressman Manuel García Corpus' (Anonymous 2004, Fox and Haight 2007*b*).

[34] María José Arrellano, interview with Libby Haight, Mexico City, July 25, 2005.

[35] For example, the same Sedesol document includes details how the Nueva Izquierda Oaxaqueña, led by Flavio Sosa, received funds as part of a strategy to divide the left's electoral opposition (Anonymous 2004). His subsequent return to the opposition led to his arrest, becoming 'the first political prisoner of the presidential term' (Hernández Navarro 2006*d*).

Moreover, as it turned out, an alliance with the PRI within the arena of state politics did not limit their willingness and capacity to defend the program vis-à-vis Diconsa management, the Finance Ministry, and the congress. By 2006, the Oaxaca councils had regained a degree of autonomy; the new leader of Oaxaca's statewide council network confirmed that they had worked with their congressional allies to defend the program. In his view,

> [Diconsa management] never wants to meet with us because of their bourgeois interests. . . . We are the ones who oversee the program to make sure it works well, we are societal auditors (*contralores sociales*), together but not mixed up. . . . [When Diconsa pays too much for the food] it's either because they're too stupid or too corrupt. . . . We defended the state manager in Oaxaca because they wanted to impose a PANista from Mexico City. Up on top [in the federal government] their attitude was very closed, but now they respond because we get together. . . . [President] Fox wanted to disappear the program. We've gotten to this point because the communities pressure.[36]

He also charged that Oaxaca's councils were underrepresented within their official national network: 'there is racism from Mexico City to the north of the Republic, they feel superior, they feel rich and white. It's cost us'. He also took some of the credit for the unprecedented congressional decision to increase Diconsa's 2006 budget:

> sometimes we are very good at knocking on doors . . . we have some friends who are federal congressmen, and we have known them since they were state congressmen . . . of the thirty councils in the state, ten are very savvy. Another third are under control [of Diconsa], they just raise their hand.[37]

Oaxacan congressional representatives were strategically located, presiding over both the Social Development Commission and the congressional leadership as a whole. According to the leader of the National Coordination of Food Councils, Enrique Pérez,

> The Deputies from Oaxaca helped a lot. [Congress] initially approved M$750 million for the food supply program—not for investment, just for operations. We ended up with M$1250 million, including M$200 million earmarked for the vehicle fleet. . . . The councils' 31 state representatives went to the Congress three times. . . . The Oaxacan councils had the connection with congress.[38]

[36] Interview, Celso Avendaño Chavez, state coordinator of Oaxaca councils, Guadajalara, March 2006.

[37] Interview, Celso Avendaño Chavez, state coordinator of Oaxaca councils, Guadajalara, March 2006. Note how his assessment differed from the Social Development Ministry's internal document cited above—his focus was on council autonomy vis-à-vis Diconsa, rather than autonomy vis-à-vis the PRI.

[38] Interview, Oaxaca, with Libby Haight, December 2005.

Table 9.1 Community Food Council member views of Diconsa rural food program

Members with direct responsibility with program management and oversight	81%
Councils that met monthly or bimonthly in the past year	63%
Complete membership attendance at council meetings	38%
Councils that met fewer than three times in the past year	19%
Average number of meetings annually	7.9
Members who report program food supply is satisfactory	86%
Members who report lack of food supply as number one problem	10%
Members who report access to warehouse sales and price margin data	62%
Councils that report to community assemblies	59%
Members with less than one year experience	50%
Members with more than two years experience	35%
Members who received training	62%
Average age	43.5
Members who are female	19%

Table 9.2 Rural Food Committee members' views of Diconsa program

Committee holds assemblies	64%
Frequency of assemblies every two weeks	46%
Committee addresses issues not related to food supply	17%
Committee consults with community about what decisions to make	50%
Committee participates in the oversight of the store	60%
Do you know where store 5% markup from sales goes?	58%
Committee participates by proposing alternatives to solve problems	44%
Assessment of Committee functioning: good, so-so vs. bad	59%, 25%, 11%
Members who receiving training	35%
Average age	41.5
Members who are female	39%

In the process, the program not only survived, it provided a well-received service relatively consistently, and the community participation processes actually functioned in many regions—according to the official external evaluations carried out by the National College of Economists (Guerra Ford 2005*a*, 2005*b*). They included large-scale surveys of three distinct sets of participants: store customers, members of village committees, and regional councils. Table 9.1 shows that among regional council members, 81 percent reported that they had direct responsibility for program management and oversight, 63 percent met monthly or bimonthly, 62 percent reported access to warehouse sales and price margin information, and 59 percent reported to community assemblies. Table 9.2 shows that among the village committee

Table 9.3 Village store customer views of Diconsa program

Customers who shop mainly at Diconsa stores	84%
Main reason: cheaper products/closest store	47%, 33%
The store has benefited the community a lot, a little or not at all	67%, 24%, 4%
Diconsa store prices are cheaper than local alternatives	59%
Diconsa store prices are similar to local alternatives	34%
Diconsa store product quality is good, so-so, poor	80%, 19%, 1%
Takes less than 15 minutes to get to the store	93%
If there was no Diconsa store in the community, would have to travel to buy basic foods	50%
Knows what the Rural Food Supply Committee is	86%
Community participates in the selection of representatives on committee	66%
Knows how often the committee meets	57%
Knows what the committee does	66%

Source: Guerra Ford (2005*a*, Chapters 3 and 8)[39]

members, 60 percent reported that they participated in store oversight, 66 percent held regular assemblies, 46 percent met every two weeks, and 17 percent addressed issues not related to food supply. Table 9.3 shows that, remarkably, 66 percent of villagers surveyed reported that the community participated in the selection of the store oversight committee and 57 percent even knew how often they met. Table 9.3 also shows that among customers surveyed, 59 percent reported that prices were cheaper than alternatives (34 percent say they were similar—which is consistent with the expectation that the program's presence regulated private retail prices).

The program's participatory processes were highly institutionalized. According to the official evaluations, the vast majority of regional councils carried out their formal duties, such as regular meetings, handling stores' orders of nonbasic foods and reporting on the community stores' own separate capital accounts to the Diconsa warehouse managers. The councils clearly functioned as routine co-managers of the food program. Yet the official procedural compliance and survey data are insufficient for understanding whether the councils had the autonomy and capacity to hold Diconsa accountable for program performance. Diconsa controlled the 'external' evaluation agenda, and therefore the studies assessed the councils only in terms of their compliance with

[39] According to one of the CNE evaluators, it is the practice of the Social Development Ministry to tell the 'external' evaluators which communities they should study (interview, Libby Haight, Mexico City, October 25, 2005) Their rationale was to avoid the problem of evaluators going only to easy-to-reach communities, but the practice could be used to steer evaluators away from problem areas.

Table 9.4 Mapping Community Food Councils: autonomy and capacity as of 2006

CCA degree of autonomy from Diconsa:	CCAs active, with impact	CCAs active, with limited impact	CCAs not active, low impact
High	*Durango*, **Guerrero** (Montaña), **Tabasco**, Yucatán	**Hidalgo** (Huasteca), ***Puebla*** (Sierra Norte, Mixteca)	
Partial	**Chiapas** (Selva, Altos, Sierra), Nuevo León, ***Oaxaca***, ***Sinaloa***, **Veracruz**	Campeche, **Guerrero** (center, coast), **San Luis Potosí**, Tamaulipas	Baja California Sur, Jalisco, Morelos, *Tlaxcala*
Dependent		**Chiapas** (coast), Chihuahua, Coahuila, **Hidalgo** (Altiplano) ***Puebla*** (center), Quintana Roo, Zacatecas	Aguascalientes, Baja California Norte, *Colima*, Estado de México, *Guanajuato*, **Michoacán**, *Nayarit,* Querétaro, *Sonora*

Note: The states in **bold** indicate the top ten in terms of numbers of stores (ranging from 800 to more than 2,000 each). The states in *italics* indicate those represented on the councils' national coordinating committee chosen in April 2006. The underlined states are among the top five in sales of raw corn. CCAs are Cousejos Comunitarios de Abasto.

Source: These ratings of autonomy and capacity reflect Jonathan Fox and Libby Haight's observations and interviews with council leaders prior to and during the Sixth National Congress of Community Food Councils, Guadalajara, April 2006, as well as interviews with the former elected leader of the National Coordination of the Community Food Councils, María José Arellano (July 2005, February 2006, and January 2007)

Diconsa's rules. They did not address Diconsa managers' compliance with *their* commitments to the councils.

To assess the food councils in terms of their capacities as agents of accountability, Table 9.4 highlights two main indicators: first, councils' degree of *autonomous decision-making* vis-à-vis Diconsa on the one hand, and second, their capacity to *influence* Diconsa on the other hand. The findings reflect a pattern that is consistent throughout the program's history: the regional councils varied widely in terms of both of these capacities. The table's key indicators distill broad trends at state levels, noting those cases where different councils within the same state clearly follow different trends.

In a significant minority of states, councils made decisions about how to engage with the program with some degree of autonomy from the government. Councils in many of these states also managed

to influence Diconsa operations. Yet autonomy and capacity are distinct—autonomy does not necessarily lead to influence over program operations. In Hidalgo, for example, the state's food councils united in an autonomous stance, yet as of 2006 they had not managed to influence actual program operations.[40] In some cases, moreover, councils that appeared to lack autonomy reported some degree of influence over program operations.

Highly autonomous food councils made decisions and took actions independently of Diconsa officials. This included a sustained commitment to oversight of government operations, as well as willingness to propose policy changes and to directly criticize program officials. This did not mean that their agendas went beyond intervening in the management of the food program, nor did autonomy necessarily mean that council decisions were made by community leaders who were directly accountable to their villages. Councils could be autonomous from Diconsa without necessarily being internally democratic, as in the case of Puebla food councils that were under the control of *Antorcha Campesina*, widely considered to be tough enforcers allied with the former ruling party (they reportedly controlled five of fourteen in the state). Partial autonomy refers to councils whose leadership bargained with program officials over how to manage the program, but within terms of debate controlled by Diconsa management. Under 'partial autonomy', food company officials attempted to intervene in internal council decision-making. Dependent councils did not even bargain with Diconsa officials, and they confined their activities to following procedures within the program's rules of operation.

Any list of regions with high levels of autonomy and capacity would lead off with the Chilapa council in the state of Guerrero, a very broad-based, consolidated organization that bargained hard with the government. They gained room for maneuver in part by generating one of the largest community capital funds of any council in the country.[41] The Chilapa food council, like a significant minority of others in the 1980s and 1990s, was also closely associated with a consolidated regional producers' organization.[42] As of 2006, about half of Guerrero's councils

[40] Their autonomy was demonstrated in 2006 national meeting in Guadalajara, where the state contingent walked out to protest the process of electing the new leadership slate for National Coordination of Community Food Councils. The conference organizers had simply called for an up-or-down vote for a single slate, without debate.

[41] See Diconsa (2005*b*). The volume of community capital accumulated reflects the result of past purchases, which is an indirect indicator of the degree to which the stores are serving their communities (except in cases where officials made discretionary contributions of public funds, as may have happened in Oaxaca).

[42] For a rare study of regional peasant politics that explains the role of the food council, see Meza Castillo (2000).

were militantly autonomous, while the other half worked more closely with Diconsa management. In both Durango and Hidalgo, autonomous councils also had statewide influence—though with uneven impact on actual Diconsa operations.

In Chiapas, the Ocosingo food council would be an example of partial autonomy, with impact on Diconsa. The program operated in a region known worldwide because of the Zapatista movement, which rejected engagement with government social programs. Yet their council's representative spoke of 'our Zapatista brothers' and claimed that 40 of the 120 stores supplied by their warehouse were in Zapatista zones—a relationship facilitated by dialogue with the municipal leaders of Ocosingo. He reported that some of the Zapatista autonomous municipalities do not accept the Diconsa program, as in the case of Polhó, yet others do, as in Aldama.[43] The Sinaloa food councils offerred another example of partial autonomy, sustaining a statewide network while lobbying for both state and federal laws that would guarantee the right to food. In Veracruz, council leaders eschewed confrontation with Diconsa management but were committed to encouraging high levels of program performance. The experience of the Veracruz councils suggests that a confrontational stance is not the only indicator of autonomy and capacity. Early on, one council leader put it this way: 'in Veracruz we fight for our freedom because we are not yet free. We are still enslaved by poverty and hunger'.[44]

Food councils' autonomy and capacity were limited by Diconsa's 'no reelection' clause, which prevented regional leaders from accumulating expertise and bargaining power vis-à-vis agency officials. Administrators could watch elected leaders come and go. Diconsa's control over the training of new council members also prevented the transmission of lessons of past struggles, as each generation had to (re)learn how to find the cracks in the system. In some regions, the councils were also seen as mere adjuncts to or employees of the warehouse managers, rather than as their overseers. In addition, the councils required funds for operating costs, most notably transportation and food for the volunteer community representatives, who regularly traveled long distances to regional meetings. Councils officially were officially due 1 percent of store profits for their travel costs, but Diconsa managers ably used their control over the actual flow of funds to limit council autonomy.

To fully understand the diverse regional patterns of participation, much more detailed comparative studies would be needed. In some regions, regional and store management committees were incorporated

[43] Interview, Manuel Moreno Sánchez, Guadalajara, April 2006.
[44] Cited in the 'El Campo y El Campesino' page in *El Día*, August 18 (1984: 6).

into traditional community service obligations, as is widely reported in Oaxaca. Another factor that encouraged both autonomy and capacity was the presence of a critical mass of other autonomous councils within the same state—as in Guerrero, Durango, or Hidalgo. As of the 2006 national congress, in most cases Diconsa managers managed to keep dissident, autonomous councils to a minority within each state. The agency could retain control of the main agenda as long as autonomous councils were unable to muster a unified majority within any single state. Controlled and dispersed pluralism proved to be manageable.

The history of the Diconsa rural store program shows that the 'old school' approach to voice, transparency, and accountability contributed substantially to the program's survival and performance. Reliable access to low-cost staple foods in remote villages had come to be widely considered to be a right. When the program was working, this right was often taken for granted, with routine forms of participation and oversight embedded in the local institutional landscape. When the program was not working, or was under threat, mass mobilization was often the response, including both direct action and national legislative lobbying. This chapter now turns to analysis of a best-case example of the 'new school' approach to accountability, based on individual rather than collective voices.

Oportunidades' Social Accountability Program

Oportunidades is Mexico's flagship social program, an international pioneer of what have come to be called 'conditional cash transfer' (CCT) programs. Widely hailed in official international development agency circles, CCT programs encourage low-income families to invest in their children's human capital by providing material incentives to use public education and health services. Specifically, CCTs provide cash payments to means-tested families, usually to mothers, conditioned on monitored school attendance and basic preventive health measures. Mexico's program is primarily rural, where its coverage is also geographically targeted.

First known as the Education, Health and Food Program (Progresa), the program was launched in 1997. Progresa gained worldwide fame in large measure as the result of its rigorous impact assessments. The Zedillo government commissioned the International Food Policy Research Institute to do the evaluation, which used semi-experimental methods to demonstrate tangible improvements in key education and health indicators, such as school attendance, repetition

rates, food consumption, and incidence of illness.[45] For example, one study reported an 11 percent decline in infant mortality among participating rural families (Barham 2005). The findings' scientific rigor bolstered the program politically, and the incoming Fox administration significantly expanded its coverage to reach five million families—approximately one quarter of the entire national population.

The program was designed to bypass local political brokers, and in principle neither municipal nor state government officials could influence which individuals would be chosen to receive payments. However, some attempted to insert themselves in the process, and governors were active in behind-the-scenes negotiations over which municipalities would receive coverage (Hevia de la Jara 2007). Election observers reported clientelistic electoral manipulation of beneficiaries in 2000 (Global Exchange 2000), and their surveys found that 40 percent thought that Progresa belonged to the PRI (Alianza Cívica 2000). Subsequent academic studies found quantitative evidence suggesting electoral geographic targeting before the 2000 elections (cf. Rocha 2001; Takahashi 2006). De la O found that in the 2000 presidential election, localities with Progresa had higher voter turnout and a larger PRI vote share than did comparable rural localities (2006). These two findings are probably not coincidental, though the data correlations do not disentangle gratitude for the program from possible politicization of access.

To bolster the program's political legitimacy, the new government named as director a former leader of the nonpartisan Civic Alliance, Rogelio Gómez Hermosillo. Early on, he recognized electoral abuses of the program (e.g. Paniagua 2001). Of Oportunidades' eight top national officials, none were members of the PAN. In addition to the national coordinator, several other top managers also came from nonpartisan civic organizations. Among Oportunidades' thirty-one state level

[45] To access the vast official evaluation literature, see www.ifpri.org and www.oportunidades.gob.mx. After the 2000 election, the new government allowed the IFPRI studies to be made public. According to an anonymous lead Mexican evaluator in the late 1990s, Progresa leadership had strongly resisted releasing evaluation findings, even though they were largely positive. After 2000, the new government also shifted responsibility for third-party program evaluation to national research centers, including Economics Research and Teaching Institute (CIDE), the National Institute of Public Health and Center for Advanced Research in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), Mexico's leading social anthropology research institute. Their impact studies are extensive and publicly accessible. For a feminist analysis, see Luccisano (2002, 2004). For a study of Progresa through a philosophical lens, see Dieterlen (2003). In addition, Oportunidades also carries out its own internal monitoring and evaluation, and their findings are potentially accessible to the public through specific information requests via the Federal Information Access Institute. For overviews of the role of evaluation, see, Behrman and Skoufias (2006) and Schlefer (2004).

managers, only thirteen were considered PAN political appointees (Hevia de la Jara 2007). This pattern contrasted sharply with the more overt politicization of the rest of the Social Development Ministry leadership. The program's national coordinator proudly announced, following the 2003 mid-term elections, that not a single charge of electoral crimes was filed against Oportunidades (Hevia de la Jara 2007). These indicators suggest that a 'civic current' dominated the top ranks of agency management during the Fox administration.[46]

Election watchdog groups did not give up their scrutiny of Oportunidades just because one of their own was in charge. Yet independent research on state elections in 2004 did not find evidence of systematic electoral manipulation of voters by Oportunidades (FUNDAR 2006). Observers differed over the role of Oportunidades in the 2006 presidential elections, though some incidents were clear-cut. During the campaign, the Oportunidades coordinator for the state of Tlaxcala was forced to resign because of electoral manipulation (FUNDAR 2006). In Sinaloa, the state government reported collusion between PAN elected officials and the state delegate of the Social Development Ministry, involving suspension of payments and threats of withdrawal in order to coerce voters (Méndez and Valdez 2006: 8). Indeed, after the Secretary of Social Development stepped down to coordinate the PAN's presidential campaign, it was revealed that a consulting firm linked to the PAN had been given full access to the government's internal social-geographic databases on social program beneficiaries, including individual names and addresses (Méndez and Garduño 2006; Muñoz and Saldierna 2006). On election day, however, neither election observers nor opposition parties documented widespread manipulation of Oportunidades. Most complaints about politicization involved abuses by leaders of local program committees and municipal officials (who did not actually control program operations, but are capable of bluffing).[47] After the 2006 elections, according to exit polls, 41 percent of participants in Oportunidades voted for the ruling PAN, in contrast to 31 percent for low-income voters overall (those earning less than $200/month) and 31 percent for rural voters overall (Reforma, 2006). This finding does not constitute evidence of electoral manipulation per

[46] The 2006 change in presidential administration led to a turn away from this 'civic current', in spite of Mexico's ostensible creation of a civil service. As one state coordinator from the civic faction put it, as s/he began preparing his/her departure, 'it seems that the PAN does not forgive Oportunidades because the poorest municipalities opted for the PRI or the PRD in the last elections . . . [the program directorship] is part of the division of jobs between the different groups in the PAN, and as they say, "*nos tocó bailar con la más fea*" [we got stuck dancing with the ugly one], in this case, the most conservative faction' (personal email communication, March 12, 2007)

[47] On patterns of program complaints, see Hevia de la Jara (2006*d*).

se, and could simply reflect voter gratitude for what is a substantial stipend for Mexico's lowest-income families.

In spite of the election campaign debate about the role of social programs, the Oportunidades program had campaigned extensively to tell beneficiaries that their vote was free and secret. The program presented itself as not related to any political party (though President Fox's own campaign of televised promotions claimed credit for it). Oportunidades leadership also timed new enrollments to avoid coinciding with electoral campaign calendars (FUNDAR 2006). Yet survey results, discussed below, indicate that substantial numbers of program participants still perceived their access to the program to be politically conditioned, as recently as 2006.

Possible electoral manipulation is not the only reason why citizen oversight is important. Independent oversight is also needed to improve the *quality* of service delivery, which in turn is crucial for meeting the program's human capital goals. Not surprisingly, participants' food consumption went up as their cash income rose. This spending went further if they had access to Diconsa rural stores. Demand for education and health services also clearly went up, but it is not clear whether the supply increased correspondingly. The vast evaluation literature does not address this question, but some puzzles suggest a possible disconnect, especially in education. For example, while students clearly spent more years in school, the evidence on educational attainment did not show that they learned more. One study by long-term evaluators found '. . . no impact on achievement test scores' (Behrman, Parker, and Todd 2005: 10). A recent World Bank study found that the federal government's spending on its largest and most effective compensatory education spending program for the most disadvantaged schools dropped substantially after 2000, both in absolute and relative terms, during the same period when Oportunidades' enrollments doubled (Patrinos et al. 2006: 8). If Oportunidades-driven increases in student enrollments were *not* matched by comparable investments in more teachers, schools, and books, then it would not be surprising if student achievement rates dropped.[48] Basic education for indigenous students remained especially weak. For example, no more than 6 percent of indigenous students had access to indigenous language textbooks and their teachers had little training (Yonker and Schmelkes 2005).

[48] Indeed, many observers recognize that the Fox administration chose not to invest the political capital required to take on the issue of educational reform, which would have required challenging the PRI faction that controlled the teachers' union. Not coincidentally, the president encouraged a political alliance with the leader of the teachers' union, in order to offset political challenges from the left.

As a World Bank comparison of CCT programs recognized, 'one of the main challenges . . . is how . . . to tackle the more difficult issues of improving the quality of health and education services' (Rawlings 2004). Indeed, at the same time that the CCT strategy gained the support of mainstream development agencies, the World Bank was also emphasizing the need to improve the quality of basic services through 'client power'. The empowerment of poor people in their direct interactions with service providers was considered the 'short route to accountability'—in contrast to working through representative political institutions that had limited influence over the actual functioning of the state's administrative apparatus (World Bank 2004*a*). Client power ostensibly involves a degree of voice, as in the case of parental involvement in school management and measures to involve them in verifying teacher performance. Yet CCT programs assign frontline service providers the task of verifying participant co-responsibility—a prerequisite for receiving the welfare payments. This gives the teachers, nurses, doctors, and other service providers enormous power *over* their 'clients'. For example, if participants complain about teacher absences or abuse by doctors, then those teachers or doctors can drop those families from the list of beneficiaries.[49] As a result, by their design, CCT programs inherently *constrain* the client power that the World Bank recognizes is crucial for improving service quality. This constitutes an unforeseen *cross-institutional disconnect* between attempts to induce two different kinds of behavior—compliance and voice (Fox 2004*a*).

Nevertheless, three elements of the Oportunidades program could potentially have improved program performance by encouraging participant oversight. They include: first, the world-class evaluation system, second, the Community Promotion Committees, and third, the Citizen Attention complaints window. The evaluation system proved very effective at informing national and international policymakers. Policy evaluations, if made public, are widely seen as instruments through which transparency can generate accountability. Yet the evaluations were exercises in 'upward transparency', targeted exclusively to policymakers, rather than 'downward' to the beneficiaries themselves.[50] The program's public evaluations did not permit beneficiaries

[49] To be sure, in practice, few Oportunidades program beneficiaries are actually disenrolled for noncompliance—reportedly only 1%. This is impressive and illustrates the power of material incentives to influence participant behavior, but is not an indicator of the impact of the ever-present *threat* of disenrollment, which can influence both the capacity of already vulnerable beneficiaries to express concerns and the behavior of service providers.

[50] Even within upward transparency, the evaluation results had little influence over service providers not under Oportunidades authority—such as the education and health

to learn about institutional performance in ways that enabled them to use the findings to encourage accountability. For example, the national aggregation of results generated robust statistical samples that bolstered impact findings, but the lack of disaggregation made it difficult to identify problem areas. As the head of the Oportunidades Evaluation Department put it, 'the state governors ask for state level data, and we are not able to respond'.[51] For example, one evaluation found both little reduction of malnutrition and significant distribution problems with the program's nutritionally fortified food supplements intended for pregnant and nursing mothers and young children. The data suggested a link between this incomplete distribution and persistent malnutrition, but the evaluation agenda did not direct researchers to address the question of what might have caused the distribution problems. The public version of the evaluation did not *locate* the problem, institutionally or geographically. As a result, evaluators could only observe that 'The information does not report the causes of the lack of delivery of the supplement' (Meneses González et al. 2005: 334).

Nevertheless, one dimension of the evaluation process did project grassroots voices in ways that influenced the national policy process—through little-known qualitative research. The new Oportunidades leadership discovered that many overwhelmingly poor communities were only partly covered by Progresa, which helped to explain widespread ethnographic reports of intracommunity divisions.[52]

systems. As the head of evaluation put it, 'the most we can do is show the evaluations to the health sector' (interview, Iliane Yaschine, Sedesol, Mexico City, March 3, 2005).

[51] Interview, Iliane Yaschine, Social Development Ministry, Mexico City, March 3, 2005.

[52] The IFPRI evaluation included a sociological study of beneficiary perceptions, which found that the program provoked divisions between beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries, but these findings were buried deep within IFPRI's website (Adato 2000). Yet they were consistent with a little-known, unpublished 'grey literature' on actual Progresa operations. For example, Progresa also commissioned Mexico's leading social anthropology research center to carry out ethnographic research in 12 communities. Their 1999 report came to similar conclusions about the unintended impacts on community cohesion, but was not made public. For a censored version, see Nahmad, Carrasco, and Sarmiento (1999). With modest World Bank support, a Social Development Ministry research and training center commissioned a field-based ethnographic study that raised similar issues, but it was not made public either (Aguilar Rivero 2002). For a broader gender analysis, see Luccisano (2002). Three dimensions of program implementation caused intracommunity divisions. First, widespread ethnographic evidence suggests that during its first years, the program often reached less than a majority of those who considered themselves to be very poor. Second, Progresa's lack of transparency aggravated confusion and tension between low-income families, since the reasons why some were included and not others was a mystery to them. Third, the program's lack of public recourse mechanisms prevented families that felt that they were unfairly excluded to petition for reconsideration, undermining trust both in the government and in those neighbors who were included. As a result, many members of the independent National Network of Rural Women's Advisors felt these impacts directly through divisions in the

Oportunidades managers found that Progresa had kept down the administrative costs of means-testing individual families by paying private surveyors based on the number of households visited. This approach created incentives to concentrate on the easier-to-reach households, while avoiding more difficult-to-reach homes and excluding households where no one was home during the first visit. In response, Oportunidades managers brought the survey process in-house and sent staff back to communities that had already been ostensibly 'covered', to enroll low-income families who had been missed by Progresa.[53] According to internal Oportunidades data, this 'densification' of the rolls added *1.7 million* new families, mainly in 2002–4, leading to a much higher degree of coverage of Mexico's poorest rural communities (Hevia de la Jara 2006*b*). Curiously, this major accomplishment of Oportunidades was not disseminated, perhaps because the 'densification' strategy constituted an implicit recognition of the exclusionary impact of Progresa's approach to targeting.

The second Oportunidades strategy that had some potential to project participant voices involved the Community Promotion Committees (CPCs). While in principle Progresa was supposed to convene local committees to provide input into the selection of beneficiaries, the available evidence indicates that did not happen (Nahmad, Carrasco, and Sarmiento 1998: 106; Adato 2000). Since the beginning of the program, local liaison was facilitated by 'promoters' ostensibly elected from among program participants. Mothers also met regularly at health clinics, but there is no independent evidence to suggest that these gatherings became autonomous spaces for discussion and collective action. Official evaluations suggested that some promoters were empowered by their new roles, though their selection process appears to have been top-down. Independent field reports from women's rights NGOs found 'authoritarian practices', as promoters focused mainly on ensuring beneficiary compliance with program requirements (Espinosa 2001).

Some of the new Oportunidades managers had similar concerns about the promoters. In 2002, their liaison strategy shifted to create instead small local committees of elected 'spokespeople'—*vocales*.

dozens of grassroots cooperatives that they had spent years organizing. The intensity of their reaction is reflected in the provocative title of their collectively written assessment of Progresa, which was called 'The devil's money' ('El dinero del diablo')—a term quoted from a grassroots leader (Frade 2000).

[53] A senior operational manager confirmed this account, noting that 'there was undercoverage in high and very high marginality communities, mainly due to the poor quality of the surveys carried out by external firms' (email communication, Concepción Steta, September 11, 2006).

Some kind of local liaison was clearly needed, since each official field staffer dealt with a universe of 8,000 families, with administrative tasks involving 40,000 (Hevia de La Jara 2006*b*: 10). Little field-based evidence is available regarding the actual operations of these liaison structures, though some survey data exists (discussed below). The Oportunidades evaluation agenda did not address them. The only reference in their many hundreds of pages of official studies concluded:

> In general the committees studied do not function as such, and have shown little leadership in other arenas. Their functionality has depended on having good relationships with the liaison staff (*enlaces*). . . . This leadership (which in political terms is a form of brokerage or intermediation) could require oversight, but it becomes functional for the community and for the beneficiaries. The leadership could be partisan, but not always. Though some ex-promoters and *vocales* are involved in clientelistic relations and take advantage of their position—for example, they 'orient' the processes of recertification and densification—only in a minority of the cases is it clearly partisan. (Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2005: 311, cited in Hevia de La Jara 2007)

Apparently in response to reports of abuse of power by these local promoters, Opportunidades convened new local committees of elected *vocales*, with each member assigned to education, health, nutrition, and 'oversight'. According to Hevia's research:

> The deficiencies in the election of the Community Promoters led them to abuse the power they were granted, holding a privileged position in the program and acting as an authority over the community, imposing unpaid work tasks, asking for money and using the program for political campaigning. This represented not only a deviation from the Program's Rules of Operation, but also weakened the relationship between the Promoter and the community and undermined mutual trust. This is why the Community Promotion Committees were created, as a way to break the authoritarian power held by the Promoters, as well as to strengthen compliance with the Program and its monitoring by the *vocales* for health, education and control. . . . The *vocales*, who now share the power and responsibilities, continue to be elected, in assembly, by the majority of the program beneficiaries. (Hevia de La Jara 2007)

One Oportunidades state coordinator added:

> The change from promoters to committees was, in my opinion, more virtual than real because the *vocales* (education, health and control) did not receive sufficient training (because of staff workload) nor specific tasks to carry out, with corresponding follow-up.[54]

[54] Personal email communication, March 3, 2005.

Yet toward the end of the Fox administration, Oportunidades staff had met their enrollment ceiling of 5 million families and accelerated their efforts to build the Community Promotion Committees. By the end of 2005, they numbered 51,000, including 215,074 *vocales* in more than 86,000 villages and hamlets. By August, 2006, the CPCs numbered 67,513 and the *vocales* numbered 291,058 (Oportunidades 2006*e*). More than a third received training in 2006. The training brigades were composed of one program staffer and two college students recruited from the National University's biomedical program.[55] The training manuals were almost exclusively administrative in focus, detailing extraordinarily precise directions regarding logistics and procedures, such as exactly how to distribute program materials and document attendance, as well as guidelines for managing group dynamics (Oportunidades 2006*a*, 2006*b*, 2006*c*). Almost all of the manuals' discussion of CPC duties focused on their support role in administering the program, with very little said about the role of the spokesperson responsible for oversight.

Nevertheless, in spite of this heavily administrative focus, the training process did include an effort to contribute to what was referred to in the context of Mexico's 2006 election campaign as 'electoral shielding' (*blindaje electoral*). To begin with, membership in CPCs was limited to women who were not members of any political party (Oportunidades 2006*c*: 23). Teaching materials included widely distributed posters depicting smiling women and the slogan 'I am a beneficiary of Oportunidades and my vote is free', followed by a discourse that stressed rights as well as responsibilities. For example:

> My rights as a citizen allow me to: elect my representatives, say freely what I think (and) vote for whatever candidate or political party I want to. . . . For no reason will I permit ANYONE to: pressure me to vote for someone, to threaten to take away my Oportunidades support if I don't vote for who they say, who lies to me, saying that Oportunidades belongs to some political party (or) takes my election registration card. . . . Did you know someone who threatens to take away your Oportunidades support to get your vote is committing a crime? (Oportunidades 2006*e*: 134–6).

Clearly, the Oportunidades teaching and outreach materials were informed by a strong civic stance, reflecting the commitments of the civic current in management. Yet the results of a large-scale survey of *vocales* suggested that the CPC leaders continued to see themselves

[55] An internal survey of these university participants found that 31% considered the committees to have 'significant impact', 62% considered beneficiaries' principal problem to be 'lack of information' and 35% considered the program to be 'politicized' (Oportunidades 2005*c*).

Table 9.5 Perceptions of local Oportunidades leaders (*vocales*)

	True (%)	False (%)
A *vocal* should inform the participants (*titulares*) about the services offered by the Oportunidades Program	90	9
The Community Promotion Committee is a group of women participants elected by the majority of the beneficiaries and who organize to benefit the community	10	86
Social oversight helps citizens to demand their rights	20	75
Support from the Oportunidades Program is independent of how you vote	22	74
The talks by Oportunidades staff were clear	98	2
Oportunidades staff always cleared up any doubts	92	7

Source: This survey was carried out *after* training by program staff. Sample size: 830 *vocales* in 22 states, reported in Oportunidades (2006*e*).

mainly as program support staff, with little understanding of the rights discourse promoted by the official teaching materials—even *after* their training. Remarkably, as Table 9.5 shows, 86 percent of the CPC leaders did *not* consider themselves to be representatives of the beneficiaries, 75 percent did *not* understand social oversight, and *only 22 percent* considered access to the program to be independent of how one votes. Very few *vocales* considered themselves to be grassroots representatives tasked with being active agents of accountability. The unsigned text accompanying this Oportunidades survey exuded frustration because the responses had changed so little before and after the huge investment in training.

On balance, the available evidence indicates that the program's system for representing participants—first with promoters under Progresa, followed by Oportunidades' *vocales*—served to *represent the program to the participants rather than vice versa*. The *vocales'* limited capacity to project voice upward to the program administration is a major reason why Oportunidades' third channel for voice, the Citizen Attention program, was so potentially significant, since it allowed participants to communicate directly with state and national level program officials.

Seen through the lens of accountability politics, the Citizen Attention window provided a degree of 'answerability' to program participants, allowing them to project their voice 'upward' to state and federal levels within Oportunidades. First launched in 2002, the program combined the role of information provider and ombudsman. For those participants who were aware of Citizen Attention, it offered a back-channel to file complaints about service provider performance,

possible abuse, incomplete payments, or expulsion from the program. While the office was part of the same agency that participants might complain about, it was several steps removed from the immediate service providers. Complaints could be registered through an 800 telephone number, in person at the state program headquarters, or through sealed boxes made widely available at the cash distribution points.

Civic-minded program managers within Oportunidades recognized that citizen complaints and information requests were dramatically underregistered, both because of their limited credibility and because of fear of potential reprisals.[56] The introduction to the first annual report was quite explicit:

> The data presented could be only part of the citizen demand that exists in the country, the rest remains in silence. In this sense we reaffirm that this report gives resonance to all those voices that dared to raise a concern to the Oportunidades program, and that managed to do so in spite of the difficulties inherent in their situation of poverty. . . . We warn that there is still a serious problem of under-reporting. (Oportunidades 2004*a*: 5)

Indeed, Citizen Attention program managers were wary of making their progress reports public because they considered the complaints data to paint an inaccurate portrait of the actual distribution of problems in program operations. Program managers took an epidemiological approach when assessing patterns of reported complaints. In other words, where the numbers were very low, they considered the most likely explanation to be underreporting rather than flawless program operations. Low numbers in certain states were considered evidence of insufficient program outreach and low staff productivity. As might be expected, operational staff often did not welcome the questions raised by the program's ombudsman efforts. Nationally, Citizen Attention had a staff of only 50, which translated into one administrator for every 100,000 families enrolled.

In spite of these obstacles, large numbers of program participants *did* reach out to the Citizen Attention program. The official term for beneficiary inquiries reflects the discourse of the civic current: 'citizen demands'. Most were information requests involving program operations, but a 'hard core' of between 13 percent and 15 percent involved more serious charges of abuse of power by Oportunidades staff, *vocales*,

[56] Interview, Rebecca Barranco, Director of Citizen Attention, Oportunidades, Mexico City, October 22, 2004.

Table 9.6 Oportunidades' Citizen Attention program: Trends in 'citizen demand'

	2003	2004	2005	2006
Total 'citizen demands'	72,433	78,837	80,076	87,714
'Complaints and denunciations' (%)	11,264 (15.5%)	10,798 (13.7%)	10,579 (13.2%)	17,128 (19.5%)

Source: Oportunidades (2004a), Acanual 2005. Base datos MsExcell. Thanks to Rebeca Barranco, Director of Atención Ciudadana for access to annual data, and to Felipe Hevia de la Jara for assistance with data analysis.

or related health or education personnel.[57] The trend summarized in Table 9.6 shows relatively large and growing numbers of inquiries, reaching over 87,000 in 2006, including a growing proportion of the more serious 'complaints and denunciations' over time. This data indicates the Citizen Attention program's increased outreach and credibility. For comparison, the Federal Information Access Agency (IFAI), which covers more than 200 agencies in the federal government's entire executive branch, received fewer public information requests in 2006—a total of just over 60,000.[58]

In 2004, the majority of 'citizen demands' were submitted in person (53.7 percent), with 28.6 percent submitted by phone and the rest by fax, email, letter or online (Oportunidades 2005: 4). Among the officially denominated category of 'complaints and denunciations' received at the national office, Oportunidades staff were the focus of 63.3 percent, followed by health staff (8,9 percent), the payment agencies (6.6 percent), *vocales* (5.6 percent) and school staff (4.3 percent).[59] Table 9.7 shows the main reasons for these complaints.

Those complaints that were filed in writing tended to receive more attention, and the institutional response was more likely to have been documented in agency files. Here follows one example of a written complaint:

To whom it may concern: I wish to inform you that the auxiliaries and the *vocales* of Oportunidades of the neighborhood of MXXX called us together,

[57] Management assessed productivity in terms of total numbers of citizen demands addressed, which created incentives to deal with as many simple information requests as possible, rather than the more difficult denunciations of abuses.

[58] See 'Estadísticas SISI' at www.ifai.gob.mx, accessed April 14, 2007.

[59] Data refer to July, 2004–July, 2005, from Sistema de Atención Ciudadana, Oportunidades, 2005, cited in Hevia de la Jara (2006*b*). Note that an additional federal ombudsman agency exists to address medical malpractice charges, the National Commission for Medical Arbitration, founded in 1996 (www.conamed.gob.mx).

Table 9.7 National patterns of complaints received by Oportunidades

Types of complaints/denunciations:	Total
Abuse	473
Solicitation of money	336
Electoral manipulation	225
Obligatory manual labor	98
Access to payments conditioned	49
Dropped from rolls because of operational errors	31
Total	1,212

Period covered: One year, July, 2004–July, 2005

Source: Sistema de Atención Ciudadana, Oportunidades, (2005) and Hevia de la Jara (2006*b*)

the participants in Oportunidades, to support the candidate of the PRI, with the pretext that if we don't support him with our presence and vote, they would take away programs like Oportunidades, 'Solid Floor' and payments for the elderly, since the supposed candidate is the one who moves the program. Meanwhile, the day October 23, we went to the neighborhood of Ixxx to the rally, since if we didn't go, they would mark us down for missing sessions on our attendance card, doing us harm in this way. We know that we should not [have to] support candidates, but they threaten us. . . . We thank you in advance for the solution of this problem, since there are many anomalies that we do not denounce because of fear of reprisals from the vocals and the auxiliary Cxxx, because some time ago someone tried to end these problems and they threatened to beat her and expel her from the Oportunidades program, which led her to have to move away. (three signatures, original document cited in Hevia de la Jara 2006*b*: 56–7, actual names kept confidential)

The few documented cases repeatedly refer to requestors' need to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals, and indeed the Citizen Attention procedures require respect for anonymity. However, complaints involving the health or education systems were simply passed on to those ministries. Not only did Oportunidades' Citizen Attention staff lack any leverage over employees of other ministries, once the complaint was passed on, the commitment to anonymity was lost—which risked revealing the identities of accusers to the same teachers or doctors who were charged with abuse. Those who reported electoral abuses were directed to the specialized federal prosecutors' agency, the FEPADE, which had a high public profile but in practice had little-to-no impact on sanctioning electoral abuses of antipoverty programs (Haight and Suárez Zamudio 2007).

Table 9.8 Official responses to complaints/denunciations

Official case conclusions	Number	Percentage
Positively	1,366	15
By orientation	5,739	62
Negatively	671	7
Investigation under way	1,337	15
Pending	48	1
Lack of petitioner interest	32	
Total	9,193	

Definitions:
Positive: When the official response supports the petition or when the complaint moves forward
Negative: When the response does not support the petition or when the complaint does not move forward
By orientation: When the petitioner is given the information requested, when they are informed of the correct way to present a complaint or denunciation, or when they are encouraged to check the website.
Investigation under way: Case is studied by Oportunidades authorities
Lack of petitioner interest: When petitioner is asked for additional information and does not respond within three months

Period covered: July 2004–July 2005

Source: Hevia de la Jara (2006*b*)

The Citizen Attention program registered its responses to 'citizen demands' in terms of the following categories: 'positive' resolution, resolution 'by orientation', rejection ('negative' resolution) as well as 'under investigation' (in very few cases), as shown in Table 9.8. The category known as 'by orientation', representing the majority of cases, proved to be the most problematic. Many of the most serious complaints were registered via toll-free telephone calls, which offered anonymity and did not require literacy. Operators standing by were capable of resolving simple information requests or payment problems through their access to online databases, which may well have left most callers satisfied. However, operators' standard response to cases of serious complaints was to recommend that they be filed in writing. Such calls were then registered as having been resolved 'by orientation'. No system followed up or kept track to see whether those who had dared to call in to denounce abuses had actually followed up in writing (Hevia de la Jara 2006*b*). Because of the combination of complainants' limited literacy, fear of exposure and/or lack of trust in the complaint boxes, it is safe to assume that few actually did follow up in writing. More generally, analysis of the agency response procedures and data management system revealed that it was impossible to confirm whether complaints were positively resolved. Of the complaints registered at the national

offices, only 15 percent included any written documentation of the response (Hevia de la Jara 2006*e*). Only one quarter of those included sufficient documentation to conclude that the problem was actually addressed.[60]

Surveys of beneficiaries carried out by the federal government's Ministry of Public Administration offer a different perspective on Oportunidades' social auditing initiatives. A comparison of similar surveys carried out in 2003 and 2005 provide evidence of the program's increased emphasis on both the CPCs and the Citizen Attention program toward the end of the Fox administration. Table 9.9 shows a near-doubling of the share of respondents who reported knowing how to present complaints, as well as the functions of the Community Promotion Committees. Yet this data also clearly shows that a substantial majority of Oportunidades participants remained unaware of both potential channels for voice.

Overall, the Citizen Attention program contributed directly to project participant voice for resolving simple program implementation issues, serving as an information access system. The program clearly addressed a major felt need, as evidenced by the large and growing numbers of 'citizen demands', but the staff available remained tiny given the size and complexity of a program involving five million families. Complaints were duly processed, but the agency lacked empirical evidence to demonstrate whether the Citizen Attention program could resolve problems of abuse. Its ombudsman capacity for dealing with more serious problems appeared to be quite limited. Most importantly in terms of the need for improving the quality of the services that human capital depends on, the program lacked any leverage over problems located in the education and health system, such as abusive doctors or absent teachers—not to mention insufficient public investment in those services. As a result, these modest channels for expressing voice had very limited potential for addressing the cross-institutional disincentive problem built into the structure of the CCT program.[61]

[60] Considering the extraordinary precision with which Oportunidades monitors the behavior of and payments to 5 million individual families, the absence of precise documentation of tangible institutional responses to complaints of abuse can be interpreted as evidence of its low priority.

[61] These issues were implicitly recognized by the discourse of the newly appointed director of Oportunidades in the Calderón presidency. In his first declarations, he 'expressed his concern for improving the quality of the services offered to the beneficiaries of Oportunidades, especially health and education, and announced that he would develop the functions of oversight and auditing to avoid the misuse of the Program' (Oportunidades 2006*f*).

Table 9.9 Beneficiary access to Oportunidades information

Information received by beneficiaries surveyed regarding	2003	2005
Types of support for health	68%	81%
Types of support for food	55%	70%
Types of support for education	43%	57%
Goals of Oportunidades	36%	47%
Rights and commitments of beneficiary families	33%	57%
How to present complaints and denunciations	19%	37%
Where to present complaints and denunciations	14%	30%
Functions of the Community Promotion Committee	17%	29%
Functions of the municipal liaison	12%	22%
Have you received information about social auditing? (*contraloría social*)	31%	33%
Where payments are delivered, have you seen boxes for sending complaints, denunciations, or recognitions?		48%
Have you presented a petition, as a suggestion, recognition, complaint, or denunciation about the operation of the Oportunidades program?		3%
If so, by what means?		Mobile box: 17% Fixed box: 12% Telephone: 6% In person: 67%
Was the response satisfactory?		57%
If not, why not?		No response: 67% Problem not addressed: 33%

Source: Secretaría de la Función Pública (2004, 2005)

Conclusions

Both Oportunidades and Diconsa programs officially recognized participants' right to voice, granting them the 'standing' to point out problems in operations. Yet the two programs' strategies for exercising this right differed greatly, along lines that parallel their different approaches to delivering basic services to the rural poor. Table 9.10 sums up many of the key differences between them, in terms of opportunities for participation, transparency, and accountability. The central difference involved scaled-up, versus locally bounded and individualized channels for participation and representation.

Table 9.10 Comparing Diconsa and Oportunidades: participation, transparency, and accountability

Participation, transparency and accountability provisions	Oportunidades	Diconsa-rural
Individual participation requirements	Program access conditioned on school and health program attendance	Signatures on initial request for stores, participation in election of store oversight committee
Participant oversight channels ('demand side')	Individual communications to ombudsman office, local committees of elected *vocales*	Elected local store oversight committees, regional councils monitor warehouses
Ombudsman agency ('supply side')	Citizen Attention office (limited to Oportunidades program, no jurisdiction over health and education)	'Control office' of the Public Administration Ministry can receive complaints
Possible program oversight linkages among participants beyond the community level	No	Regional, state, and national-level networks of oversight councils
External program evaluations address beneficiary participation processes	No	To a limited degree
External program evaluations easily accessible to participants	No	No
External program evaluations oriented towards beneficiaries (i.e. agenda informed by beneficiary concerns, disaggregated data, accessible format)	No	No
Accountability institutions reviewed in external program evaluations	No	No
External evaluations easily accessible on agency website	Yes	No[62]

[62] There is a section in Diconsa's website under 'Rural Program' where an executive summary is indicated, but the link is empty (accessed, February 4, April 17, 2007). The full evaluations are available elsewhere, deep within the Social Development Ministry's site.

The two programs' 'voice strategies' differed not only in the *nature* of the actors involved (individual versus collective) but also in the *scale* of their intervention (household versus regional and national level). Scale matters because of the importance of upstream impacts. While individuals or local committees may well help to ensure that specific services are delivered or public works are completed, their locally bounded scale often confines their denunciatory or supervisory role to the micro end of the policy process, lacking any capacity to influence the broader process of resource allocation.[63] In the case of the Community Food Councils, their regional scope allowed them to monitor whether food that reached the warehouse is actually delivered to village stores. Yet monitoring why deliveries may fail to reach the regional warehouse was beyond their scope—hence the importance of statewide and national representation and networking among food councils. This potential disconnect between monitoring locally versus supervising all the relevant links in the chain of the policy process underscores the importance of vertical integration and scale to accountability politics (to be addressed further in Chapter 11).

Returning to the metaphor introduced at the beginning of this chapter, both programs' 'social accountability' strategies shared the 'fire alarm' approach, insofar as they relied on beneficiaries to alert agency managers to problems with program operations. In principle, Oportunidades actually had two systems—one involving local leadership committees, and the other offering access to program officials through an ombudsman program. Until the Citizen Attention program was created, Oportunidades was transparent 'upwards', to policymakers, but not 'downwards' to beneficiaries. In practice, the available evidence indicates that only Oportunidades' ombudsman program functioned to project beneficiary voices to higher levels within the agency. Diconsa, in contrast, relied on local, regional, statewide, and national level representative structures to provide oversight and project voice upwards.

In terms of the accountability impacts of each program's channels for voice, both provided some degree of 'soft accountability', in the sense of

[63] For example, in the State of Mexico, the state government's Office of Social Accountability created more than 63,000 local committees to oversee infrastructure projects and local services (Hevia 2005: 20). These committees may well have had some impact on the receiving end of services and projects (though no impact assessments are available). Yet independent research on that state's budget and investment process for municipal funds during the same period found systematic electoral manipulation of the resource allocation process (Lavielle 2006). Even if some of the funds were well spent in terms of building infrastructure, thanks in part to local oversight, the overall process appears to have been politically biased.

official answerability without the threat of sanctions. Yet the Citizen Attention office only provided answerability for *individual* problems, and then primarily for easily resolved issues. The Community Food Councils, in contrast, had the clout to sit down with agency managers at the regional, state, and national levels, and to call them to account for systemic problems—such as insufficient or poor quality corn deliveries, or broken promises regarding corrupt officials. This did not mean that the Councils' voice was always heeded, or that they exercised full political autonomy. But they had the right and the capacity to call for answers regarding upstream problems in program operations, and were not confined to the 'end of the pipe'. Moreover, at a critical turning point when the whole program was threatened with elimination by the Treasury Ministry, the food councils were also able to hold congressional representatives accountable and use the political system's incipient checks and balances to defend the program.

The fundamental difference between these two programs involved representation. Diconsa's 'target population' had the potential to defend their interests in the context of the program because they were represented at local, regional, state, and national levels. When combined with the service delivery strategy based on the provision of a public good, one can conclude that the program was structured, at least in principle, to treat millions of villagers as *citizens*. In the case of Oportunidades, in contrast, the 'target population' lacked representation. Participant families were considered 'beneficiaries', and the mothers who 'held title' to the benefit were known as *titulares*. With the program's transformation from Progresa into Oportunidades, the newly appointed 'civic current' within the agency's management began referring to participants as 'citizens' as well, most notably in the context of the Citizen Attention ombudsman program. Yet this shift in official discourse was not matched by a qualitative change in the process of representation. In practice, participants remained beneficiaries and lacked *rights*, in Tilly's sense of 'enforceable claims' (1998).

In conclusion, Diconsa's 'old school' approach, which predated electoral competition and remained vulnerable to clientelistic manipulation, had very different origins from Progresa/Oportunidades, which was created and consolidated in the heat of Mexico's national transition to competitive electoral politics, and was carefully designed to limit the opportunities for intervention by local political machines. Yet this chapter's comparison of accountability politics within the two programs found that Diconsa's official channels for scaled-up

representation, bolstered by the potential threat of mass protest, produced more autonomous power and voice for the rural poor than Oportunidades' openness to receiving individual complaints.

While in principle both programs' social accountability mechanisms projected voice without teeth, the Diconsa rural program's channels for voice, backed up with collective action, echoed voice more loudly and more broadly—both vertically upward and horizontally across villages and regions. This difference changed the 'incentive structure' for administrators, increasing the potential cost of ignoring participant concerns. The broader implication is not only that collective action matters, and not only that scale matters, but also that for social accountability reforms to produce accountability, they must change the balance of power between state and society.