

Ensuring gender equity and transparency in resource delivery: the Mexican anti-poverty strategy

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,

I want to thank the organizers of this 10th International Anti-Corruption Conference for inviting me to talk about women and corruption within a context of poverty. I must start from the Mexican experience in order to set out some reflections.

Today, in Mexico, we are living a historical period: the transition from an authoritarian and centralized regime to a democratic and legitimate government, in a deep process of political, economic, social and demographic transformations. Consequently, we are facing huge social challenges, such as the consolidation of a participative society and the promotion of growth opportunities for all Mexicans, with fairness and equality.

Notwithstanding the remarkable advances that our democracy has undergone, we still can say metaphorically that there are ignominious barriers to be demolished: poverty, ignorance, lack of opportunities and deeply rooted paradigms and behaviours belonging to the past, unwilling to disappear, that are preventing the birth of a new social culture.

Our presence here is not by chance. Social development is a challenge that goes beyond modernity. The industrialization era, along with its outstanding achievements, failed to solve the problems of misery, ignorance and marginalization. Those who thought that economic

growth alone would prompt a better distribution of wealth and opportunities were quite wrong. And those who believed in the distribution of wealth before creating it did also fail.

Yet, we still have the challenge to profit from the market and its undeniable potential, so as to implement governmental social policies triggering an effective social justice. This is the question that currently faces the Ministry of Social Development in Mexico, as the institution constitutionally in charge of coordinating social policy within the Mexican government.

Strategically, we are responsible for the design and implementation of a Social Policy of State, agreed by the different social and political forces, and that can be able to overcome current difficulties in order to define a long-term obligatory direction for the government and an inductive path for society. This will prompt synergies of great impact on target populations benefiting from social actions and programmes. Currently, we are working on the development of an integral social network to improve capabilities, create opportunities, and allow the expansion of the patrimony of the people who have been isolated from growth processes.

Designing that social policy is not a task for a single Ministry like the one I represent, but for the government of Mexico as a whole, along with the cooperation of all federal institutions, municipalities and civil society. I am not talking about an isolated action, but one to be undertaken, hand in hand with economic policy, both with the same hierarchy. Congruency must prevail between those policies so as to reach an integral development of all Mexicans. This is the reason why the Ministry of Social Development is part of President Fox's Economic Cabinet, in order to translate social reality to the economic world.

The magnitude of this process will be understood only if we consider that 40 million Mexicans are suffering from poverty. Most of them are women from vulnerable indigenous groups isolated and scattered in rough and non-communicated territory. Moreover, those Mexicans show high rates of illiteracy, malnutrition and morbidity.

During several decades, the government of Mexico has implemented different social programmes to fight poverty. However, they have not

been enough to revert effectively such a phenomenon, due to recurrent economic crises and their aftermaths.

One of the programmes coordinated by the Ministry I represent is especially crucial for the subject we are discussing today. This is the Programme for Education, Health and Nutrition, known as *Progresa*, and I want to explain its design and illustrate the problematic around that subject.

Progresa is a programme of human capital social investment granting economic support for 3.2 million poverty-stricken families. Its main goal is to foster human capital by means of the following three actions:

- Fostering children school attendance, through scholarships and monetary aid to buy school gears. Its objective is to reduce the number of school dropouts whose economic situation forces them to start working to support their family.
- Granting medical assistance for all family members, paying special attention to pregnant women and children younger than five years of age.
- And supporting family nutrition, through food complements, free of charge, for pregnant women, children still on a milk diet, and children younger than five years of age; as well as a monetary aid for the family to buy their own food.

Monetary aid for families, as part of this programme, can only be granted if their children attend school, if all the family members have medical examinations, and if pregnant women and children still on milk consume highly nutritional complements.

In operative terms, this programme is based on a gender approach. On the one hand, support is given to mothers; and, on the other hand, thicker scholarships are offered to girls, considering that they are traditionally marginalized from education. Furthermore, there is a general trend that parents choose boys to send them to school, while girls must stay home, because they cannot send all of them.

Figures in those regions show a high rate of girl dropouts, particularly in high schools. This is the result of a cultural tradition, according to which formal education for women is regarded as a secondary need.

This situation forces girls to follow their mother's pattern, educated in an environment of submissiveness and passivity. By granting higher economic support for girls, it has been possible to balance the number of boys and girls attending school, breaking the vicious circle of intergenerational transmission of poverty. And we started from women, since mothers have great influence on the communication of cultural values.

Yet, the role of women is not limited to that point within the *Progresas*, and this is not the only reason to have these two women at the centre of this image. Women are an essential part of the *Progresas* because apart from receiving and administering supports granted to families, they also become community promoters of this programme. Chosen by the community, those women are in charge of overseeing the correct destination of resources, validating women beneficiary lists. It is also their responsibility to make sure that no corruption practices take place when economic support is delivered to beneficiaries.

Mexican women have demonstrated their leadership and capacity to play a principal role, even in conditions of extreme social vulnerability. Nevertheless, we cannot content ourselves with the current outcomes. In general terms, women are still very susceptible to the limitations of their social milieu. They have been victims of ancestral undervaluation. Victims of political habits and customs that made governmental programmes and their operators a tool for political and electoral manipulation, using discretionary and conditional criteria for the allocation of resources.

In the hard struggle of society and political parties to create a free and transparent electoral environment, we have faced the poor management of governmental structures, programmes and social support to control the casting of votes in benefit of the ruling party. The cultural effect was so deeply rooted that even with a new legislation and adequate conditions for free voting, many isolated and disadvantaged communities suffered from political pressure as a consequence of ignorance and misinformation prevalent in many regions in the country.

Therefore, within the context of the political reform that allowed the alternation of power, it was necessary to prescribe in the Penal Code

the crimes and sanctions to punish people who conditioned the rendering of public services, the operation of programmes, and the performance of public works; as well as the penalties to those authorities who illegally directed funds, assets or services in support of a political party or candidate.

Moreover, crimes from party officials or political campaign organizers were also prescribed to sanction those people using illegally federal assets, funds or services for partisan purposes, or those who during electoral campaigns asked for votes with promises of getting some benefits from social programmes.

There were government practices rewarding the promoters of governmental programmes who could organize the largest mobilization of voters during electoral processes, or restricting public resources to those communities where the opposition had won an election. Women promoters of Progresá and other social programmes also faced that sort of pressure.

That situation conveyed political co-optation and pressure from groups who tried to influence public opinion and benefit from programmes without fulfilling the necessary requirements, in exchange for assumed adhesion or social peace. In order to counteract such phenomena, we clearly defined several public rules of operation determining the characteristics of beneficiary communities and families.

Thus, applicants are investigated and evaluated before becoming beneficiaries, protecting women promoters from manipulation, for there is a clear, objective and public norm, which endorse them. This legal instrument allows the identification and exclusion of illegal beneficiaries receiving governmental support.

Besides those transparency actions, there is a process to integrate beneficiary lists from the different programmes of this Ministry into a single list, preventing the duplication of benefits for a given group that affects people living in worst conditions. We need to be aware that resources are limited and needy people abound.

One of the priorities of the current government is to eliminate those schemes I have already mentioned. We have committed ourselves to

undertake unprecedented actions regarding transparency, accountability and a direct fight against corruption, based on axiological principles and a new relationship between government and society. We are also certain that honesty, translated into transparency and accountability, will prompt a greater social consensus and civilian confidence on programmes co-participation, as well as more and better resources to foster social development.

There is a long and sometimes rough way to go through, but we are in the right direction and will spare no efforts to reach our goals. That is why all beneficiaries and the civil society as a whole have been informed that *Progresa* and every social programme do not belong to a political party or group, and that public resources for their operation come from taxpayers.

Likewise, organized civil society nationwide is now involved in the effort to make governmental work transparent by monitoring and assessing the use and operation of programmes and public resources. In particular, I would like to highlight the starting of a training process for women promoters of *Progresa*, culminating in their commitment not to make use of their responsibilities in favour of a political party or candidate. Social response has been enthusiastic and women promoters have freely accepted training. For us, this new relationship constitutes a core element of the new government social policy for different reasons:

First of all, without civilian participation in social development assignments our effort could be incomplete and unsuccessful. Civil society organizations have been paramount in the transformation process towards a renewed political reality in our country, thanks to their compromise with democracy and vote respect.

We have authorized 124 Mexican Civil Society Organizations to be our inspectors. They are being trained to become social comptrollers, and their number is rising. Now, our main challenge is to broaden trained organizations inspection nationwide by the year 2003, when the complete re-staffing of the Chamber of Deputies takes place. Those organizations will supervise and certify that this Ministry is working in a transparent manner and that our programmes operate according to the criteria of social development.

Furthermore, academicians and entrepreneurs assistance has become a complement to social participation. They are our allies in the big effort to stop discretionary practices and deviation of public resources. Academicians are offering their time and technical knowledge to dictate main tender processes, adding decision autonomy and technical capacity, and guaranteeing a real moral authority for the evaluation of proposals.

Another factor affecting women beneficiaries of governmental programmes –in this case women in *Progresa*– is a set of external elements influencing the operation of the programme. One of those elements could be the behaviour of suppliers of goods and services, or the people in charge of carrying out public works. Cost-benefit is not determined solely by economic processes involved in the development of programmes, but also by any alterations caused by any acts of corruption in the government-supplier relation, changing the quantity or quality of the benefits.

Aware of that situation, this Ministry started to sign agreements of integrity with suppliers –big or small, national or foreign. Thus, formalizing a commitment to offer high quality products, fair prices, not promoting nor allowing their employees to promote corruption with their governmental counterparts, and adopting a code of ethics.

Finally, we signed several agreements with public institutions responsible for the enforcement of the law, in order to find a solution to the demands of those citizens who currently complain with greater freedom and confidence. For instance, we can mention a civilian report against a mayor who used the beneficiary's network of the *Progresa* with partisan purposes. The appropriate investigations into this case have been opened, and it will definitively set a significant precedent.

All efforts and actions I have mentioned here, with respect to the essential elements for women beneficiaries or communities to eliminate corruption, have been led by the Unit for Transparency and Fight Against Corruption of this Ministry. This Unit was created recently and is working together with the Federation Comptrollership, with an integral approach to prevent and eliminate corruption.

I take this opportunity to inform you about the forthcoming publication of a Civilian Manual containing all the information necessary to prevent the illegal use of programmes. This Manual is part of a training process in this field and a major effort to endorse women beneficiaries from social programmes, as well as promoters and society.

Distinguished participants in this 10th International Anti-Corruption Conference,

I want to highlight that the Mexican experience shows that despite problems and obstacles, and although poverty has had a feminine face, women constitute a moral reserve of infinite value. Focalisation of social benefit programmes has proved to be successful, not only to foster gender equality for women.

Mexican women are, in many dimensions, the core of their families, and therefore they are our real guarantee. That is why Mexican women have become the supervisor of the right and ethical administration and usage of programmes and resources. They have demonstrated with actions that the impact of the programmes they promote is real. Hence, considering women as the central point is a powerful strategy of increasing importance.

This experience highlights that even though material, physical and sometimes intellectual poverty –owing to the lack of opportunities– has had feminine characteristics in our country, there is an enormous wealth around women, along with their values, prevailing over material poverty. I refer to women empowerment as a deep cultural value, as a firm foundation, as an ideal support to avoid with efficiency the corruption obstacles for future social programmes promoted –not exclusively, but preferably– by women, so that we can count them among our allies.

In Mexico, there is a beautiful and impressive volcano called “la Mujer Dormida” (Sleeping Woman). From there you can look out over the whole Mexico’s valley. Like the volcano, many women remained socially asleep during several generations, and as a consequence we missed their contributions. But now, I can assure you that this volcano of women is waking up with great strength, full of virtue and honesty,

and that we will make the best use of it in order to fulfil our mission: achieving an integral, inclusive and mutually responsible human development to guaranty the adequate level of welfare with equity for all Mexicans.

Thank you very much.