

Why look a gift horse in the mouth?

Beneficiary perceptions of the Procampo program

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This study presents the findings of a pilot survey, designed to see how participants in Procampo perceive the program, with an emphasis on transparency and accountability issues. This agenda includes understanding the determinants of access to the program, perceived transaction costs involved in dealing with the program, the degree to which program operations are transparent to participants, as well as the availability and use of formal accountability processes. The survey involved extensive interviews with more than 100 smallholders in five states, including Jalisco, Guerrero, Chiapas, Oaxaca and Puebla. Within a universe that included both members and non-members of producer organizations, surveyed individuals were selected from different strata at random from Procampo beneficiary lists. Regional peasant organization leaders were also interviewed, as well a small sample of non-participants. Official program evaluations provided useful background, and surveyed very large samples of participants, but the evaluation agenda did not focus on program transparency and accountability issues. While this survey's sample is not large enough to be representative, the findings nevertheless raise issues that more ambitious surveys might take into account.

Most producers surveyed see Procampo payments as a discretionary offering by the government, not linked to participation or co-responsibility. The term most widely used to refer to the subsidy was “a support” (*un apoyo*). Producers knew just the basics about program operations, often responding that they had to “present their election registration card and copies of their land documents.” In the absence of a consistent flow of information from the agency, producers only see the final link in the chain of program decisions, and the rest is left to their imagination. In this context, most program participants were either unaware of or did not engage with its official transparency and accountability processes, and in practice they addressed their concerns with program performance through pre-existing channels, such as their producer organization or their *ejido* leadership. The main exception to this pattern is found in indigenous regions, where Procampo's main official channel for beneficiary representation and program oversight, the spokesperson (*vocal*), has been incorporated into existing community service structures.

1. PROGRAM ACCESS

Most producers did recall the original signup process, and their testimonies help to account for Procampo's uneven coverage of ostensibly eligible producers. At the time, few had a clear sense of the program or its goals; the information that reached potential beneficiaries was at the discretion of the government outreach officials. In some regions, such as the municipality of La Unión, Guerrero, the program provoked mistrust at first: “at first, many thought it was a program to support the PRI, but even though it wasn't many did not agree to sign up...” Another producer reported “Lots of folks didn't sign up because they thought they were going to take away their land.” At minimum, there was a high degree of disinformation about the program, its requirements and its goals.

Many reported that Procampo did not do its own community outreach when creating the original registry. Instead, *ejido* leaders were called to meetings, and they in turn encouraged producers to sign up, but without informing them about the program, which created mistrust and led many to not believe that it would work. According to producers in La Union, Guerrero, some *ejido* leaders reportedly signed up lands that were not in production, and other signed up many relatives. Producers surveyed did not report widespread open electoral use of the program in its early years, but they did report that access was at the discretion of *ejido* leaders and Agriculture Secretariat regional staff. Because access to Procampo registration was soon frozen, this discretionary access at first ended up having long term impacts.

Producers often mentioned that many people enrolled plots in Procampo that were not theirs and they received checks for years without working the land. In some regions, this later changed. As some mentioned “Now they check and this situation was put in order.” In other regions, however, the issue persists.² As one campesina in Nochixtlan, Oaxaca put it:

They list whoever they want... There are people who don't even plant, I went to the meetings, I know, I know them. How is it possible that they give them a pile of money? Only to their friends! That's why I don't get involved, I'm so old now, it's better not to... Those crooks have so much land...

In Chiapas, some of those who did sign up reported that the original measurements of plot size were too small, sometimes 30% less than their actual holdings, but they have accepted the situation.

² As one of the Guerrero producers put it “even the dead get their cash... the family keeps getting the check with a copy of his voting card.” However, since Procampo payments are tied to the plot and not the person, inheritance is allowed. Yet the comment suggested both a lack of familiarity with this basic principle of Procampo, as well as a more general perception that anything was possible in the program.

In Cuetzalan, in the Sierra Norte of Puebla, the process of initial incorporation into the program differed in important ways, according to a producer who served as a *vocal* for almost six years. He reported that the registration process took place in two ways simultaneously. Up in the mountains, the indigenous peasant producers came down to the county seat to register their plots, including some who were signed up “on the recommendation of the CNC,” some of whom claim that deals were made in the state capital to sign up certain lists of people, including some who farmed little of their land but got paid for all of it. In the lower areas, the registration process was more precise, and the agricultural technicians went directly to the communities.

Thanks to support from the “Tosepan Titataniske” cooperative, the peasants learned about the program and followed the registration procedures, to the point where almost all the farmers, whether landowners or renters, signed up plots. According to the former *vocal*, “there was social justice, the whole hectare was registered and no one was excluded, everyone got it, there were even *compañeros* who said “you’re an idiot” if you didn’t go in...”. But the following year “recriminations” began, and they caught people who had signed up to 24 hectares but really only had 13, so there were cuts – though no sanctions...” These recriminations can mainly from the peasant communities themselves, since they detected these plots and the producers who were being paid for more land than they had, or worked. Their sense of injustice led to pressure on the *vocales*, who reported the charges to the Agriculture Secretariat’s local offices.

An advisor to the Tosepan cooperative, who worked for years to support producer access to the Procampo program, explained that it made sense for producers to sign up, even if they were renters, because in their view, the subsidy was supposed to benefit those who produced: “we used to say if there are going to be subsidies, they should be for those who work...” But this access didn’t last, because as of the second year they program began to require documents that proved either ownership or use-rights to the land, and since many renters didn’t have them (especially the small-scale producers who were coop members). They were gradually dropped from the rolls, a process described locally as being “delisted.” This was widely seen as unjust, to be cut off for administrative reasons. According to the advisor, today less than 30% of Tosepan coop members are included in the program; “so now, [Procampo] supports the *haves*, and the *have-nots* are marginalized... For coop members, Procampo raised expectations, but as they got pushed out over time, seeing how it worked, they got demoralized.” Yet this increased enforcement of administrative requirements was very unevenly applied, since “even today there are folks with 20 hectares who already sold their land and they still get paid. There are cases where houses have been built on the land and the current owners don’t have any idea that their lands are still drawing Procampo checks.” Producers in the Frailesca region of Chiapas reported a similar situation.

In Guerrero, a representative of the UNORCA explained that in order to help their members to deal with Procampo, they “have organized regional training events for our 90 member groups, to explain the rules of operation.” In their view, the Agriculture Secretariat staff at the local level “doesn’t give out information, they just announce the opening and closing dates of the agricultural season, and when the checks are ready.” He reported some political conditionality of access to the program in its early years, but not any more. Indeed, the survey found no reports of recent electoral conditioning of access to Procampo payments. In addition, hardly any of the producers interviewed reported direct corruption in accessing their payments, though some make voluntary contributions to local agricultural officials: “whatever one feels like for their expenses, because they have to come all the way out here...,” according to a producer from Atengo, Jalisco.

2. PRODUCER-PROCAMPO INTERACTIONS

There is a general sense that “whatever comes is good.” Yet dealing with the agricultural bureaucracy produces mixed feelings among Procampo participants. Even producers in Tuxpan, Jalisco who have a great deal of experience with and knowledge of the program report: “you have to wait for the CADER [agricultural officials], they decide when to see you...” For the members of the Tosepan cooperative in Puebla, “the problems are at the level of the Rural Development District [local offices of the Agriculture Secretariat], because they have a different mentality... It’s our impression that they feel that it’s their money and they have to control.” They feel a distance because “for an [nonpartisan] organization like Tosepan, if you don’t have party colors, then each party treats you like you’re with the other one.” Vegetable growers in Texmelucan also have problems with treatment by agricultural officials: “we’re in their hands... there is an implicit understanding: they act like they are providing services to us and we act like we are filling out the paperwork.” In Guerrero, a CNC representative reported that they “have not received any benefit as an organization [from Procampo],” agricultural officials “don’t provide any information to the organization, it’s an operation of the bureaucracy.” Indeed, the program was designed to reach individual producers directly, and local agricultural officials often do not approve of producer organizations helping their members deal with administrative issues; their

contribution is limited to providing information to their members. Nevertheless, some organizations are interested in promoting alternative approaches. In the case of UNORCA – Guerrero, for example, “the program’s main benefit would be for producers to appropriate it to capitalize themselves, to increase productive capacity and yields with more integrated projects.”

Procampo imposes costs on participants, such as transportation, food and the travel time involved in going back and forth from government agencies. Yet most producers did not experience these transaction costs as onerous, regardless of the amount they received from Procampo. At the same time, less than half reported that it was “easy” to deal with the program, a plurality reported dealings as “so-so” (“regular”) and a small minority considered it “difficult.” When asked whether program benefits were worth the time and energy involved, a majority reported “more or less” (“regular”). An indigenous producer from Majosik, Chiapas put it this way: “I think that the program requires a lot of paperwork, but I think it’s fair for the government to ask for it. They ask for 5 documents. Maybe the only change there should be is for the support to come down in March or April.” Indeed, the issue of delayed payments came up often. As a producer in San Martín Texmelun, Puebla observed “before they gave the support in April, now in October or November... By that time it’s only good for a few beers, instead of a bag of fertilizer... The payment should arrive in time, or it gets diverted.” The ex-vocal from Cuetzalan, Puebla noted that “before, a lot of the money ended up in the bars, but not any more. Sometimes it’s late, though it comes quickly in election years... Sometimes you get it in May, sometimes in October. It’s great when it comes at the beginning of the harvest. It’s a matter of planning.”

Another producer from Tenejapa, Chiapas added “In spite of the lateness and so much red tape, we expect it because it’s income for the family. We’re worried because we don’t have much income. Something is something.” Yet for some families, fulfilling the Procampo requirement to keep the plot in production is a losing proposition. As one producer from San José del Progreso, Oaxaca, put it: “You have to put so much in, and we don’t get back even a quarter of what the crop cost to produce.” As a producer in Atengo Jalisco, put it, “damn it, the payments they give us are so tiny, just enough to not get too depressed, only a consolation prize.”

Almost 90% of those interviewed expressed interest in the program’s operations, but the vast majority of those interviewed did not know their official Procampo producer number, nor the number of their plot. Most recalled how much they received in the past, but not how much or when their next payment was coming. More than 40% reported that they only learn about changes in the amount of their payment when the check comes. Only 40% reported having received official communications from the program, what information they receive is usually verbal or from the *ejido* leader or agriculture ministry staff. Lower-income producers were more likely to receive only verbal information. Indigenous producers were more likely to receive information from their *vocalías*. When asked whether they knew how to request information about how program resources are handled, 82% said no. When asked whether they considered program operations to be transparent and accountable, only 30% said yes, 60% said no, and the rest didn’t know.

In Guerrero, the UNORCA representative reported that Procampo participants “have not had access to information about Procampo operations... [the program] is not very transparent. We know about it from magazines or publications; one finds a “patrimonial” attitude toward program information.” The Guerrero CNC leader agreed: “the program is carried out only by officials, they don’t provide information about how it operates in Guerrero. They just inform when the payments are ready, nothing else.”

3. COMMUNITY OVERSIGHT: VOCALES

In principle, Procampo’s system of community oversight committees and producer liaisons is supposed to encourage both transparency and accountability in program operations. However, official Procampo program evaluations have not addressed the question of to what degree the *vocalías* actually exist in practice, nor the degree to which they are able to comply with their mandate.³ The results of this survey indicate that in practice, the system has fallen far short of its potential.

In many areas the community oversight body, represented by the *vocal*, did not exist in practice, especially in areas with predominantly private property. Producers there had little community involvement, and did not recall ever having discussed program changes with other program participants. If they wanted program information, they went personally to the regional office of the Agriculture Secretariat, or asked *ejido* or municipal leaders. Some mentioned that Procampo *vocales*

³ Officially, ASERCA defines “*vocalías*” as having apparently extensive power: “The producers are involved in the definition and implementation of the program’s substantive activities and oversee the allocation of resources through control and oversight committees and Procampo’s social control *vocalía*. These representatives ratify the destination of the payments after confirming that the authorized applications comply with the requirements stipulated in the Procampo regulations.” *Claridades Agropecuarias*, No. 121, Sept. 2003, p. 20. See also Hevia (this volume)

were named at first, in the *ejidos*, but that the position was generally assigned to existing *ejido* and private farmer leaders, who handled the program at their discretion without informing participants.

In indigenous communities, in contrast, all of the producers interviewed knew who their *vocal* was and knew something of their mission. This pattern was found in indigenous regions of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Jalisco, and had been the case in indigenous region of Puebla until the *vocales*' lack of efficacy led organized producers to lose faith in them. Yet producers' willingness to serve in this program oversight and liaison role does not mean that they have the information and power necessary to exercise an oversight role effectively. One Procampo *vocal* from an *ejido* in Chiapas reported:

As a *vocal* of my committee I attend meetings frequently in the Tenejapa county seat, but they give us little information about the procedures. Afterwards we meet as a committee with all the members here in the community.

Participants complaints, which are sometimes channeled through *vocales*, tend to involve the delayed delivery of payments.

In Puebla, an ex-*vocal* reported that the initial selection process worked democratically, at least in the indigenous region of Cuetzalan. The program oversight process was incorporated into the pre-existing participatory sub-municipal village governance structure, the municipal "auxiliary boards." Both *ejido* members and small farmers proposed candidates, voted and named the *vocales*. The representative of the Tosepan cooperative recalled that "the *vocales* were chosen in an assembly, and in some ways Tosepan contributed to this.... Over time, though, they began to irritate the Agriculture Secretariat, and those who had vested interests." For example, in the early years Tosepan organizers and *vocales* reviewed the large private plots that were signed up, even though they were not in production. "When we delivered the results, in the Rural Development District offices they looked the other way."

In the experience of the vegetable producers in Oaxaca, their *vocales* were also named "in front of the community," but they added that "they never rotated, nobody should be in a position permanently, only Porfirio Díaz, and then they never call a meeting." At the same time, they admitted "sometimes producers are apathetic, and that is convenient for the government." A member of this organization added that the *vocales* "are no more than formalities... nothing happens with the official channels, just with one's buddies... [that's why] we have had to get mobilized, we've achieved the supports we've gotten through [state level] mobilizations" (though they clarify that they neither blockade nor occupy government offices. The CNC leader in Guerrero made a similar point: "as an organization we are pluralistic, there are groups from all the political parties, and we have to support them so that they get attention from the Agriculture Secretariat... [what we have to do is] to pressure the officials so that they deliver the resources on time."

4. PERCEPTIONS OF INEQUALITY

The unequal distribution of Procampo's benefits is very transparent to participants. This is logical, given the nature of the program's per hectare payments, but many producers also gave the impression that they perceived a certain injustice, insofar as large landowners received large checks, while smallholders had to make do with payments that were too small to change their structural condition. From their perspective, Procampo did not contribute to addressing their poverty, while it helped those who already had resources to concentrate even more capital. As a producer in San Martín Texmelucan, Puebla, put it:

it's good for the landowner, for those who have as much as 200 hectares, just imagine how much they get. They'll say 'with my Procampo payment I'll get me a tractor' and will still have some left over. And the guy who's screwed, when? He stays screwed.

This perspective was shared by the representatives of producer organizations. In the case of UNORCA-Guerrero, they mentioned Procampo's goals, observing that the program "meets its goal of supporting the production of corn, but the peasants aren't able to reach the program's other objectives." The CNC representative in Guerrero noted that

Procampo is good, but it has not met its goals, above all those involving the organization of production and marketing... The extra money from Procampo helps with subsistence, but doesn't influence production, changing crops, or organizational development... it's a minimal support for the peasants' basic needs, but it's not enough to get beyond subsistence.

The representative of the Unión Nacional de Fomento, Producción y Comercialización added that Procampo "doesn't benefit the small producer who has one or two hectares, it doesn't pull them out of the hole, and doesn't improve their way of life... for the small producer it's a lot of red tape for very little money."

BOX 8:**THE EXPERIENCE OF WIXARITARI (HUICHOL) INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN JALISCO WITH PROCAMPO****Mauricio Maldonado (ITESU)**

Three Huichol communities in Jalisco have engaged with the Procampo program in their own way. They registered for the Procampo as a group, received a block payment and then distribute the funds among members of their agrarian communities. These indigenous communities hold group land rights, and the members (“comuneros”) are not individual owners of specific parcels. Members do hold individual private property, however, and in practice each family’s plots are clearly assigned, often with fences.

These communities share more than land rights, they also share a broader sense of community membership (communality) in an ancestral domain. Land is not seen only as a factor of production. Their idea of shared territoriality is captured in the Huichol term *ta kiekari*, meaning our home, our home for everyone.

Members meet every three months in general assemblies to discuss shared concerns, especially those related to land tenure and government programs. In this context, the Procampo payment becomes a public issue for community discussion. Participation in the program is therefore registered either under the name of the entire agrarian community or under the name of the elected agrarian commissioner at the time. For example, the Procampo registry lists 843 hectares under “Indigenous Community of San Andres Cohamiata.” This is just as legal as the registration of private firms under Procampo, though less common. Their own name for their community is “Tatei-Kie” (which means “la casa de nuestra madre”).

The commissioner, together with the rest of the agrarian community leadership, is responsible for convening the assembly in which the resources are shared among community members. This assembly is one of the most celebratory and well-attended of the year. Resources are distributed equally to members in good standing, without the conventional verification of whether each plot had been planted that year. In the days before the assembly, local merchants stock up, in preparation for increase consumer demand for beer and food.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Producers tend to have a very pragmatic attitude toward the program. It is seen as beneficial, small but useful. Rather than being seen as a compensatory entitlement, the payments are seen as depending on the discretionary goodwill of the government. This generates a pattern of dependence on government, agricultural agency staff in particular, most often delinked from shared processes that could bolster producer participation and co-responsibility. In many regions, “beneficiaries” did not see value in the official channels for transparency and accountability. As long as their checks kept coming, few producers were interested in these formal procedures. They did express interest in being “up to date” on the program, at least in terms of dates and amounts of payments. In practice, for these practical reasons, they did express interest in transparency and accountability – but primarily understood in terms of their own informal practices or pre-existing channels for representation. Notably, where producer organizations represent their members, they also transmit not only information, but also provide advice, explain the context and encourage producer discussion about Procampo.

The main official channel for producer voice in issues of program transparency and accountability, the *vocalía*, was often either ineffective or non-existent. Instead, *ejido* leaders were often charged with dealing with Procampo follow-up on behalf of their constituencies. In several indigenous regions, in contrast, engagement with the program was incorporated into pre-existing institutions of community self-governance, most notably through their active appropriation of the *vocalía* as a producer interface with the program. In these communities, where the role of the *vocalía* was widely-understood, producers also knew more about program operations, suggesting greater access to information than in communities without active *vocalías*.

These findings show that the program does not strengthen citizenship, in the sense of exercising rights through participation in or oversight of the use of public resources. Instead, the program tends to weaken social capital, encouraging each individual to focus on their small individual annual check rather than on how to bolster the program's accountability and transparency more generally. This leads producers to look the other way, tolerating certain irregularities in order to avoid jeopardizing their access to the payment. Indeed, in the process of interviewing Procampo participants, they often expressed fear that expressing themselves could lead their payments to be reduced or even cut off.

Procampo is often referred to as “a support,” or “a help,” in the sense of a gift from the government. Notions of how gifts are received, inherited from Mexico's cultural legacy, are associated with dependence on the goodwill of elites and a lack of rights. This context helps to explain why, in many different regions, Procampo was described in terms of widely-used folk proverbs, such as “*¿A quién le dan pan, que llore?*,” [Who cries for being give bread?] or “*a caballo regalado no se le ve el colmillo*” [don't look a gift horse in the mouth]. These phrases reflect attitudes directly related to accountability and transparency – that one should thank the government for doing the favor rather than complain. As one Agriculture Secretariat advisor put it, “we are creating a culture of beggars.”

The field research did not find any evidence of institutional interest in encouraging greater transparency or accountability. Officials use these terms, but they do not emphasize actions on the ground, such as encouraging the filing of complaints. The closest agricultural program link to producers is the CADER, and staff are very pragmatic, complying with minimum program rules.

These producer interviews indicate that Procampo has only partially met some of its goals. It has delivered direct payments, decoupled from the volume of production and type of crop, but many plots were left out, and most importantly, many producers. For many participants, the resources are insufficient to support the program's other goals. The program contributed to family income, but did not change their situation of poverty. Moreover, landless farmworkers and many small-scale renters were not included. Only in a few cases did the program encourage rural organization, and then only because pre-existing representative groups engaged, often in spite of the opposition or indifference of the regional representatives of the Agriculture Secretariat.

The findings of this pilot survey suggest at least two main issues for future research, in order to inform a more strategic approach to transparency and accountability.

- 1 Study ways of revitalizing and strengthening the role of the *vocalía*, throughout the country, not only in its current official role in terms of social oversight, but also, following the model from indigenous communities, as a formal liaison between organized producers and the agency responsible. This would open up two-way channels of communication, information and dialogue, and in the process could change everyday practices so that transparency and accountability would make sense to producers. This would involve a change in the government's approach, since currently the *vocalías* exist mainly only on paper.
- 2 Analyze ways to encourage agency collaboration with regional organizations to design and launch alternative approaches to promote both information flow and more effective investment of program resources. The current program design channels resources primarily to individuals. Yet social organizations could be encouraged to generate proposals for social oversight, transparency, or more effective use of the resources, adapted to the specifics of each region in order to build on existing social capital.

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