



**Evidence in
Practice**

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MEXICO | ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Progresas | Oportunidades

A pioneering national program incentivizing school attendance and healthcare through conditional cash transfers.

By Victor Cervantes and María del Mar Gutiérrez





**Progresa | Oportunidades
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The **Evidence In Practice research project at the Yale School of Management**, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, was conducted from January 2016 to January 2018 in order to better understand the conditions under which rigorous evidence can be effectively integrated into public policies and non-governmental organization (NGO) practices in the field of international development.

The Evidence in Practice project followed a rigorous methodology comprised of three broad elements: First we conducted an initial round of expert interviews with individuals who have spent a significant portion of their professional lives attempting, researching, or promoting the integration of evidence into development practice, including academics, government officials, foundation program officers, NGO practitioners, and think-tank

directors. Second, we conducted a matched comparison of eight cases of development programs or interventions where rigorous evidence was integrated with varying degrees of effectiveness. This case study is one of the eight produced by the project. The third component, conducted in parallel to the eight case studies, consisted of interviews with prototypical representatives of each of the stakeholder groups, or individuals who could clearly describe the typical experience of enacting a particular stakeholder role. Our synthesis analysis is presented in the accompanying report.¹

Stakeholder Characterization

Based on our research, we have found it useful to think of the flow of evidence into policy and practice as an “ecosystem” in which a set of archetypical stakeholder groups interact. This set of stakeholder categories was described and reinforced by our interviewees throughout the project. While this is not a perfect description (e.g., some organizations fall within more than one stakeholder group and individuals often shift across stakeholder groups or play roles that effectively span categories), it can help frame the conversation to identify the critical roles, incentives, and relationships that animate

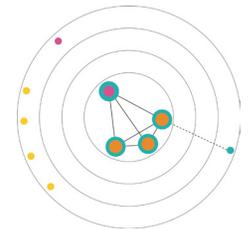
the complex relationship between “evidence” and “practice.” These representative stakeholder groups are: **Researchers, Funders, Influencers², Intermediaries, Policymakers, Implementers, and Beneficiaries³**.

Each of the cases thus contains a map of the specific organizations (and individuals) that defined its evolution, their structural affiliation to a stakeholder category (in some cases, organizations played more than one formal, structural role), the informal roles that certain individual actors played, as well as the key relationships between these individuals and organizations.

¹ Please see the appendix for a detailed description on Data and Methods.

² While some of our interviewees identified “Influencers” (such as the media, the general public, lobbyists, and influential individuals) as playing an important role in the evidence-to-practice eco-system, this group did not play an explicit role in the narrative of any of the case studies. So we have included the category here, though it does not appear in the stakeholder maps of the individual case studies.

³ We use the term “beneficiaries” to indicate those whom a specific policy or program is intended to help. Different analytic frameworks use various terms to describe this group, including clients, users, recipients, etc.



See the relationship between the stakeholders in this project in the stakeholder map.



Part I: **The Progresas Story**

In 1994, presidential elections were held in Mexico. That year, Mexico experienced its highest level of income inequality in the past 30 years.⁴ Shortly after the winner of the elections, Dr. Ernesto Zedillo, assumed office, a profound economic crisis struck the Mexican economy. The crisis had an especially large impact on the poor. The extreme poverty rate grew from 21.4 percent to 37.4 percent between 1994 and 1996.⁵

At that time, most poverty alleviation programs consisted of food subsidies. In 1996, roughly two thirds of the subsidies were untargeted, generalized price subsidies and more than three fourths of the subsidies went to urban areas, leaving rural areas—where extreme poverty was more prevalent—underserved.⁶ Food subsidies were expensive, did not reach the poor, and were routinely abused as tools of political manipulation—for example, exchanging subsidies for votes. The crisis prompted the urgency of supporting the poor more effectively within the added constraints of a reduced budget. A body of academic literature had been generated before 1995 advocating for a paradigm shift in anti-poverty policy. Building on this literature, Progresas (“Prosperous”) marked a notable departure from existing social policy in Mexico, developing a groundbreaking program based on targeted, conditional cash transfers. Progresas (later renamed Oportunidades, or “Opportunities”) illustrates several key ways

in which barriers that tend to inhibit the integration of evidence into practice can be overcome. First, it demonstrates the ways in which embedding evidence into the fabric of a program from the beginning can align the (often conflicting) incentives of different stakeholders and overcome issues related to discordant decision-making timelines. Second, it shows that developing deep relationships with, and engaging a diverse group of stakeholders can be critical to developing trust—necessary to implement a rigorous evidence-based program.

⁴ Esquivel, Gerardo, Nora Lustig, and John Scott, (2010). “A decade of falling inequality in Mexico: market forces or state action?” Declining inequality in Latin America: A decade of progress.

⁵ Cortés, Fernando, and Rosa María Rubalcava, (2012) *El PROGRESA como Respuesta a la Crisis de 1994*. International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth, No. 169.

The Story of Progresas: The Program and its Objectives

The program's main objective was to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty by encouraging and supporting household investments in child education. In particular, the program combined health, education, and nutrition elements into a single intervention, creating reinforcing effects between the three. In essence, the program consisted of a cash transfer to eligible households conditioned on continued and demonstrable school attendance by the family's children, coupled with routine health and nutrition checkups for all household members. During the checkups, nutritional supplements were provided for children under the age of five and pregnant or nursing women.⁷ The cash transfer was given to the female head of the household, seeking to improve the allocation of resources within the family.



Dr. Ernesto Zedillo

⁶ Levy, Santiago. “Progress against poverty.” Washington DC: Brookings Institute (2006).

⁷ *Ibid.*



Progresa marked a dramatic departure from existing social policy in Mexico. It was the first program in Mexico to explicitly combine the three elements of healthcare, nutrition, and education. Progresa was targeted to specific families according to their needs and characteristics, which were clearly articulated in advance through clear rules that were defined by rigorous statistical models. That meant not only that the beneficiaries were likely to be those most in need of the subsidy, but also that once the criteria were established, eligibility would not be manipulated by policymakers, implementers, or beneficiaries. This shielded the program from political abuse, as discussed below.

While the program's main objective was to limit the inter-generational transfer of poverty, the intervention also alleviated current poverty. Initially, the larger component of the cash transfer was calibrated to offset the household opportunity costs of keeping children in school, according to their age and gender (accordingly, the amount transferred varied by family size and composition). As the program evolved, the alleviation of current poverty became an increasingly important objective. Based on its impact, the program has been the most effective instrument in Mexican social policy for redistributing income to the poor.⁸



Initial Design, Pilot Project, + Poverty Measurement

After assuming Mexico's Presidency, Mr. Zedillo⁹ appointed Dr. Santiago Levy to be the Deputy Minister of Finance, whose portfolio would include preparing the budget and approving funding for federal programs. Dr. José Gómez de León was appointed to chair the National Council of Population (CONAPO). At that time, Levy and Gómez de León were public officials with considerable academic backgrounds. Levy had obtained a Ph. D. in Economics in 1980 and had been a faculty member at Boston University. His research focused on macroeconomics, international

trade, and development. In the early 90's, he was hired as a consultant for the World Bank to evaluate anti-poverty programs in Mexico. In his work, he questioned the effectiveness of traditional programs, such as the tortilla subsidy.¹⁰ In 1992, he joined the Mexican government as the first President of the Federal Commission for Competition. Gómez de León started his career at the Mexican Central Bank, where he and Mr. Zedillo met. He obtained a Ph.D. in Demography and was a faculty member at El Colegio de México, researching the intergenerational transmission of poverty before joining the Mexican government as the Chief Advisor to Zedillo at the Ministry of Budget and

⁸ Scott et al., 2010

⁹ In 1974, President Zedillo pursued a Master's degree and a PhD at Yale University. He worked at the Mexican Central Bank and served in two Ministries (Finance and Education).

¹⁰ One of the programs started in 1986 as a generalized subsidy in urban areas that gave the right to buy tortillas at a subsidized price. In 1990, Fidelist emerged, a new directed scheme that granted the right to obtain a free kilo of tortilla every day. These two programs coexisted until October of 1998, when the generalized subsidy was eliminated. In November of 2000 Fidelist was phased out. [Levy, Santiago; Evelyne Rodríguez. *Sin Herencia de Pobreza*. Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo – Planeta. 2005. Pages 119-121.]



“Within Progresa, we never thought about the development of the structural aspects of the program without always thinking of the operational aspects as well.”

RESEARCHER

Programming. He later served as Director of the National Institute of Public Health. Gómez de León was very close to Zedillo, as they were longtime collaborators.

In late 1994, Zedillo, based on a set of recent publications that extensively and rigorously analyzed the shortcomings of existing paradigms for poverty alleviation, asked Gómez de León to design a program to fight poverty based on conditional cash transfers. Early on, Gómez de León and his team¹¹ proposed a rough design of the program, based on the evidence available to them, including a rich body of literature. The team paid particular attention to recent work by the World Bank discussing the diverse qualities,

problems, and benefits that different types of policies had shown, and different alternatives for fighting poverty.

Gómez de León and his team had been researchers, and they collected additional quantitative data to inform the design of the program. In particular, a critical initial challenge was identifying the target population, as Mexico lacked an official measure of poverty, and existing data was insufficient to target at the household level. In 1995, using their previous work on marginalization indexes at the municipal level, they created tools to estimate poverty at a more granular level. In particular, the team began to roll out a national survey that

would allow the federal government to create a more rigorous measurement of household-level poverty to effectively target eligible program recipients. The survey sampled communities where poverty was expected to be more prevalent according to the general marginalization indexes. The instrument, named “ENCASEH” (Survey of Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Households) sought to collect granular, household-level baseline data on health, education, and consumption habits. These data were designed to allow for the precise targeting of an intervention and would become instrumental for the randomized controlled trial that later served as the initial pilot for the program. The team also gathered information on the school drop-out rate by gender. The survey was designed to estimate the size of the subsidy required to offset a family’s opportunity costs of keeping children in school, a cost that increased with a child’s age. Additionally, information on the local supply of education and health services had to be gathered, as it was necessary to ensure local capacity to absorb the increased demand for health services that would be generated by the program.

11 Mr. Gómez de León’s team included Rodolfo Tuiran, Daniel Hernández, and Monica Orozco.



In parallel, the Deputy Ministry of Finance, Mr. Levy, and his team¹² had been working independently on the design of a similar program, seeking to address the inter-generational transmission of poverty. An initial design of the program—one that captured the essence of what became the final design—was presented in March of 1995. Levy and his team were strong proponents of the program, had control over the budget, and understood the broader political and financial situation of the Federal government. To test the initial program design, Levy's team conducted a pilot of 31,000 households in the state of Campeche along with the Ministry of Social Development during the first half of 1996. The pilot was designed to generate evidence to analyze the conditional cash transfer scheme. The name of the pilot was “Basic Food Basket Program for the Wellbeing of the Family”. The pilot was externally evaluated by the Autonomous Technology Institute of Mexico (ITAM) and by the National Institute of Nutrition Salvador Zubirán.

The initial pilot showed that, as hypothesized by the program's designers, directing the subsidies towards women enhanced the effects of the program, as it led to a more judicious use of the transfers within the households and did not create feared secondary consequences, such as domestic violence. The pilot thus demonstrated



that a targeted cash transfer was much more efficient and effective than traditional untargeted subsidies. It also revealed that building some sort of conditionality into the program, as the program designers had long believed, was important to further amplify positive effects by, for example, linking cash transfers to useful behavioral changes within the household. Finally, the pilot showed that household members preferred cash to in-kind transfers and that they valued the healthcare component.¹³

After two of his trusted collaborators independently developed similar program proposals, President Zedillo instructed them to join efforts and became particularly invested in the success of the unified program, turning it into his flagship social policy. The teams divided the next phase of work: Levy and his team created technical papers documenting the Campeche pilot to support the claims made; Gómez de León's

One of the programs started in 1986 as a generalized subsidy in urban areas that provided the right to buy tortillas at a subsidized price. 1990 saw the emergence of Fidelist—A new directed scheme that granted the right to obtain a free kilo of tortilla every day. These two programs coexisted until October of 1998, when the generalized subsidy was finally eliminated.

¹² Mr. Levy's team included Evelyn Rodriguez, Antonio Alvarado and Enrique Davila.

¹³ Levy, 2006



team continued collecting rigorous, granular data to target households for the next iteration of the program. Several elements of the pilot in Campeche were modified in further refinements of the program, including the addition of a conditionality on child education, which was not present in the pilot, and providing the transfers in cash instead of doing it through electronic cards. The electronic cards were dropped as the media and program detractors had criticized them, making them politically toxic. The pilot had enabled the team to convince the President and most of the Cabinet that the program was both viable and effective, which supported them in the face of stiff political opposition: based on longstanding tradition, the Ministry of Social Development opposed targeted or conditioned cash transfers and strongly favored generalized subsidies.

Levy was respected among academics, but he also demonstrated managerial and political skills. In parallel, Gómez de León was in charge of demographic information and policy, and had the skills and a team capable of gathering, creating and analyzing a wide range of data. Both Levy and Gómez de León were technocrats but showed sensitivity towards political and operational constraints. They were technically strong and committed to sound policymaking. They both had strong personalities, but did not let their

Against government tradition, Zedillo decided to wait for a thorough and tested design, instead of launching—with typical fanfare—an ambitious program at the beginning of his administration.

egos come in the way of the program. Rather, contemporaries describe them as recognizing each other's complementary skills and establishing a productive partnership. Gómez de León is regarded as leading the implementation and having a great deal of influence on program design. Mr. Levy, also influential in program design, is regarded as an agile leader who oversaw the necessary political negotiations. President Zedillo's leadership was also a necessary condition for the success of the program,

as he was directly involved with Gómez de León and Levy reporting directly to him. The accompaniment, encouragement, and ownership by Zedillo was key. The leadership that Gómez de León, Levy, and Zedillo showed, as well as their background as researchers who had become policymakers, proved to be very powerful.

Against government tradition, Zedillo decided to wait for a thorough and tested design, instead of launching—with typical fanfare—an ambitious program at the beginning of his administration. In August of 1996, two years into an administration under enormous political strain from the 1995 crisis, but not until the results of the pilot project had been presented, the President authorized an expanded intervention named Program of Nutrition, Health and Education (PASE).

Launching the Program

Before August of 1996, the participation of other government agencies in the program had been minimal. At that point, given the decision to incorporate a behavioral conditionality into the program—school attendance and visits to physicians—the involvement of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education became crucial. While in the pilot, for example, the health interventions were monitored by a group of



doctors hired specifically for this purpose, a larger roll-out would require using the public health system. Given its federal structure, health and education services in Mexico are decentralized and managed by each state government. Thus, certifying the fulfillment of the behavioral commitments on education and healthcare by the beneficiaries required coordination with state governments, including negotiations on how to launch and monitor operations in each state. This was not a trivial issue, as the new program design identified target households ex-ante based on technical factors, removing the local government's long-held control over the distribution of government subsidies.

Levy took the leadership in engaging these two key ministries as well as state governments. Zedillo provided top-level support (and often pressure) to create political goodwill among other government stakeholders. An inter-ministry group, with the Chair of CONAPO and the Deputy Ministers of Finance, Education, and Health, was created to refine the operational aspects of the program. Zedillo's involvement was particularly important to enable the coordination between ministries and with state governments. Although the path to implementation was not without resistance,

government stakeholders showed the will to collaborate and commit to the program as a result of the leadership, support, and pressure from President Zedillo.

During that time, weekly discussions were held among the inter-ministry group¹⁴ on the operating and technical aspects of the program. Questions ranged from the amount of the transfers to the specific formula of child nutritional supplements. Gómez de León and his team built a database with the geo-location of the communities and households intended for the program in order to draw the routes to go to the field and disburse the cash. Also, negotiations with the local authorities to help with the logistics started. This level of inter-governmental coordination proved instrumental to the success of the program. Mr. Levy and his team played a central role in conducting negotiations and securing federal funding for the program, most of which came from shifting funds previously used for the generalized subsidies. The pushback from the proponents of generalized subsidies was relentless, partly because this had been the prevailing paradigm, but also because of the room this approach provided for political manipulation. Such opposition only increased the team's commitment to rigorously and transparently evaluate the new program's impact.



¹⁴ Group with the Deputy Ministers of Finance, Education, and Health, and the Chair of CONAPO.



The program was ready to launch in December of 1996— and its funding was approved in the Federal budget of 1997. However, Mr. Zedillo’s administration decided against launching before the midterm elections to be held in July of 1997, to avoid suspicion of political use of the program and again departing from traditional electoral norms in Mexico. The name of the program was changed to Program of Education, Health, and Nutrition (Progresa). It was the first social program to carefully and transparently define operating rules and principles. The rules were intended to increase transparency and shield the program from political interference. (Based on this program’s experience, explicit rules of operation subsequently became a standard practice for all social programs in Mexico.)

Implementing the Program

Zedillo delegated program implementation to Gómez de León and created the National Coordination of Progresa as a decentralized body inside the Ministry of Social Development (which was the ministry that had traditionally managed the generalized subsidies and thus was the most ardent opponent of Progresa). To maintain appropriate inter-ministry coordination, an oversight board was created, with permanent seats for the Ministers of Health, Education, Finance, and Social Development. In June of

1997, Gómez de León and his team moved from CONAPO to the National Coordination of Progresa. At that time, Progresa’s National Coordination was a young and small organization of no more than 30 people. The team was led by Gómez de León, and received support from Levy and his team.

The roll-out of the program, which had to be gradual given resource and operational constraints, was designed as a randomized control trial (RCT) to create rigorous evidence for subsequent program refinement and growth. Out of the group of potential beneficiary communities, a total of 300,000 households were selected as the treatment group and the rest were assigned to the control group, producing an experimental design that allowed for the rigorous testing of several hypotheses about the program’s effects.

This experimental approach had its critics. There was a vocal group, including some in the press, who thought it was outrageous for the government to conduct experiments with social programs, as they thought it was unethical to arbitrarily deny access to some households. Two factors made the randomized control trial socially and politically viable. First, the randomization was made with the community, not the household, as the treatment unit. If a household was

in the program, its neighbors would also be in the program. That eased suspicions that some households would be arbitrarily (or politically) excluded from the program. It also simplified program operations. While choosing the community as the unit instead of the household reduced the inference power of the RCT, the program was big enough to cover a large number of communities and draw statistically reliable conclusions. Second, all the households in the control group would eventually added be to the program. More importantly, a large number of household would have to be excluded in the beginning, even in the absence of the RCT, for purely operational and financial considerations. Random assignment to the treatment or the control groups was, in fact, an arguably fairer decision than one made based on political or operational considerations.

Evaluating the Program

During 1997, Levy and Gómez de León had explored alternatives for a rigorous, transparent, and external evaluation of Progresa. Although there were costs associated with having a robust evaluation, the benefits far outweighed them. Progresa was a departure from traditional policy in several respects. First, it was targeted and based on objective, verifiable rules of operation. Second, the program was



explicitly forbidden from being used for political objectives, and beneficiaries were systematically informed of this. Third, the program explicitly forbade adding beneficiaries during political campaign seasons. Finally, the program was organizationally shielded from political influence: program officers were, by mandate, selected based solely on their technical merit and were non-partisan. Furthermore, no career politician was allowed to participate. As a result, there was enormous political pressure to change or scrap the program. Only evidence of its effectiveness, validated by a legitimate, external institution could provide political cover. The evaluation would thus have to be performed by an institution that was viewed as independent from the Mexican government or other political actors in Mexico, and that had reputable evaluation experience.

The program designers did not want a visible organization, such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) or the World Bank, to be involved in the initial evaluation in order to avoid suspicions of foreign financial institutions influencing the program. Nora Lustig, who was then a researcher at the Brookings Institution, had mentioned the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to Levy in 1995. Additionally, some



economists at the World Bank encouraged Evelyn Rodriguez, who worked with Levy, to consider IFPRI during a visit to Washington D.C. in 1997. Levy and Daniel Hernández Franco, who was part of Gómez de León's team, were aware of the work by IFPRI on the effect of nutrition programs on poverty. Levy and Gómez de León decided to hire IFPRI to conduct the evaluation, but they thought that

it would be desirable to have some senior participants beyond IFPRI staff to give it greater visibility and credibility.

Gómez de León asked Lustig, who had been recently appointed at a senior position at the IDB, to organize a small workshop, and gave her a set of names of people whom the team wanted to get involved. The workshop took



place in December of 1997 at the IDB, with IFPRI representatives and some potential senior external advisors, including Jere Behrman from University of Pennsylvania, Paul Schultz from Yale, and James Heckman from University of Chicago (who could not attend but invited Petra Todd instead). Paul Gertler, from UC Berkeley, later became part of the team, as he learned from Hernández about the project and asked to be involved. As the program was to be expanded very rapidly from the initial experimental rollout, data collection and evaluation was integrated into program operations from the beginning. The IFPRI team, the four external advisors, and the Progresa staff worked out the details of designing the questionnaires used in the evaluation. The contract with IFPRI lasted for three years, after which it was thought that the credibility of the evaluation would have been established and a strong domestic institution could continue the evaluation. There was a contract with the National Institute of Public Health¹⁵ (INSP) to continue the evaluation.

The IFPRI evaluation found that Progresa had positive effects on the majority of the intermediate targets. There was no evidence of the effects on cognitive skills, but what was clear was that the behavioral conditions in the program had significantly impacted household habits around nutrition and child education.

The original program provided cash transfers to mothers who could demonstrate continued enrollment of their children in school up to 9th grade. The evaluation, in particular the work by Paul Schultz, found that the conditional cash transfer had the strongest impact on the enrollment in secondary school (grades 7 to 9). Based on this, the leadership of the program decided to extend program eligibility for households with children enrolled up to 12th grade. In contrast, the impact evaluation showed that the nutritional supplements had a negligible impact on anemia, due to a mistake in the iron formula that caused low absorption. Some operational evaluations showed that this was compounded by a lack of household education and monitoring, which translated to low intake of the nutritional supplement, and that appropriate “consumption declined as indicators of poverty increased.”¹⁶ Even though the evaluations detected the problem as early as 2001, the iron formula was not changed until 2005. This was partly because, while the supplements did not have a measurable impact, they certainly posed no harm and were popular among beneficiaries, so they helped improve compliance with other program conditions.

¹⁵ Mr. Gómez de León was the director of the INSP before being invited to lead the CONAPO.

¹⁶ Levy, 2006, p. 55



In addition, there were other, more critical, adjustments to the program that were prioritized, such as expanding the program to urban populations (discussed below).

After launching, the National Coordination of Progresa committed to a fast scale-up, with the support of Levy and Zedillo. Beneficiary households increased five-fold by the end of 1998 and by the end of the year 2000 the program reached almost 2.5 million households.

The New Federal Administration: 2000-2006

In April of 2000, José Gómez de León passed away and Daniel Hernández assumed the leadership of the National Coordination by presidential appointment. In July of 2000, Mr. Vicente Fox won the Presidential election. That was the first time in more than seven decades that a political party other than the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had won a presidential election.

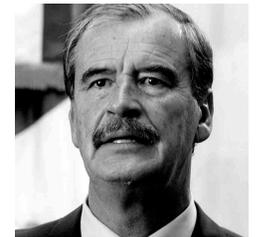
Levy shared the program's impact evidence with Mr. Fox as President Elect. Also, Hernández talked to Fox and Vázquez Mota, who was appointed as the Social Development Secretary, about keeping and strengthening the program. The body of evidence that had been produced was key

As the program was to be expanded very rapidly from the initial experimental rollout, data collection and evaluation was integrated into program operations from the beginning.

during that process. The President Elect asked specifically about the results and rigor of the evaluations. Because of the program's performance evidence and IDB's and the World Bank's positive opinions of the program, President Fox decided to maintain the program. Under the new administration, the program's core design and components were maintained, with some adjustments, including changing its name to "Oportunidades" in

2002. President Fox decided to increase the coverage from 3 million families to 5 million in the first years of his administration. That required extending the coverage to urban areas, as almost total coverage of the poor in rural areas had been already achieved.

The first director of Progresa to be appointed by the new administration, in January of 2001, was Vicente Arredondo. He was replaced by Rogelio Gómez Hermosillo in August of 2001. Mr. Gómez Hermosillo came from the NGO sector and did not have experience with conditional cash transfers. However, he maintained key people in operations who had worked from the beginning and reappointed others who had left during Mr. Arredondo's brief tenure. He later became an expert on conditional cash transfer programs. The program was rigorously audited by the Fox administration under the suspicion that the program could have been misused or that money could have been diverted from its intended purposes. This placed a burden on the operational teams and created stress for the public officials who had been in the program during the previous presidential term. The audit found that no misuse had taken place, which strengthened the legitimacy of the program and the Fox administration's respect for what had been done.



Vicente Fox



The National Coordination faced the challenge to develop the technical tools to increase the scale and scope of the program. During the initial years of Fox's tenure, Progresa/Oportunidades had clear operational rules and was well established in the budgeting process, so the Fox administration simply kept the program running based on its previous design and specifications. In order to scale the program, however, Mr. Gómez Hermsillo and his team had to redesign the targeting systems and to recalibrate the parameters of the cash transfer, as the mechanisms designed for rural areas were not directly applicable to urban areas. They spent 2001 and 2002 on this endeavor, and in 2003, the strategy for the urban expansion was finalized. Unlike the rollout in rural communities, there was no pilot or RCT for the urban expansion. The operation of the transfers, control systems, planning systems, communication with families, and co-responsibility review systems were improved, but important opportunities to strengthen evaluation were missed, including designing an evaluation for the urban rollout. At the end of Mr. Fox's term in 2006, the program reached 5 million households.

During Ms. Vázquez Mota's tenure as Secretary of Social Development under President Fox, and based on the Progresa/

Oportunidades experience with rigorous evaluation, the National Council of Evaluation (CONEVAL) was created with the mandate to evaluate the government's social programs. The systems for monitoring and evaluation fostered by CONEVAL took important lessons from Progresa, and in fact all the members of CONEVAL's first advisory board had been evaluators of that program.

In 2001, the Office of Public Debt at the Ministry of Finance brought a team from the IDB to explore giving a loan to Mexico, tied to the maintenance of Progresa. The program was fully funded through the federal budget, so it did not require additional resources. Rather, the loan was negotiated as a strategic protection so the program would continue under its core operating rules and guardrails. In fact, the loan agreement gave the federal government ample discretion on the use of the loan proceeds. Changes in core elements of the Progresa program, however, would trigger the immediate payment of the principal plus some termination fees. The goal of the loan, then, was to shield the program from political cycles or temptations at manipulation. In 2002, the IDB granted a US \$1 billion loan to the Mexican government, which was renewed in 2005 for US \$1.2 billion. While this was not sizable compared to the program's, let alone to Mexico's, overall

budget, the loan was large relative to the IDB's lending history. Rather, the partnership with the IDB, which included technical assistance and monitoring, as well as contractual obligations that contained automatic repayment triggers following alterations to the program's operating rules, provided firm technical and political guardrails.



Part II: Evidence in Practice: Key Themes + Insights

This section discusses the Evidence in Practice themes as they pertain to Progresá | Oportunidades and summarizes key insights and implications for thinking about the translation of evidence to policy and practice more generally.

Evidence Definition, Creation, + Use

There are varying definitions and understandings of what constitutes “evidence,” dependent especially on the perspectives of each stakeholder group. For example, the framing, language, and limited accessibility of academic evidence can render it less useful to other stakeholders. These diverging views of evidence create barriers across stakeholder groups, as what constitutes valid evidence for each exists in different realms and in different forms that are challenging to reconcile.

Definition of Evidence

As described in the case study narrative, Progresá was conceived based on the most rigorous academic evidence available at the time. Designers centered their work on a rich body of literature, paying particular attention to the work of the World Bank on social policy and on the discussion of in-kind vs. monetary transfers. As Progresá developed, the continued common thread was the

importance and use of rigorous evidence both to make programmatic decisions and to provide strong political support, rooted in the randomized control trial (RCT) that was embedded in the rollout of the program. The conceptualization of evidence, the definition of program objectives, and the philosophy for policy design brought in by Progresá were diametrically opposed to the traditional incentives and philosophies for policymaking in Mexico. While Progresá was always defined by the demonstrable impact it could have on its beneficiaries, policymaking in Mexico had traditionally focused solely on political dimensions and implications. Progresá, therefore, brought in a radically different definition both of what category of evidence was most relevant for policymaking and what actually constituted reliable, actionable evidence.

This new approach to integrating evidence into policymaking was so influential that it not only informed the evolution of Progresá but also led to the creation of the National

Council of Evaluation (CONEVAL), which now brings in rigorous methodologies to the evaluation of all social programs in Mexico, illustrating how the effective integration of evidence into practice can translate to new structures for routinely integrating evidence into practice in other areas.

Evidence Creation

Progresá/Oportunidades was a departure from the traditional design of social policy in Mexico. The case narrative shows the important role evidence plays: from committing to generating it, to collecting and using evidence; while also being flexible enough to take the risk of a new idea for which the evidence was not all in hand. The conditional cash transfer model had not been empirically tested at the time. What had been demonstrated, however, was that generalized and in-kind subsidies—which had dictated the paradigm of social policy in Mexico up until that moment—were grossly ineffective. The decision to launch the program came before there was a randomized controlled trial to prove the effectiveness of the model. The team, partly because of its background in academia and also because of the humbling wave of evidence that had just been produced regarding existing social programs, knew



the importance of designing policy based on evidence, and the importance of generating new evidence both to evaluate progress and to inform future policy. The Progresá team thus made it a priority not only to research the best available evidence, but also to generate new data and evidence when necessary to inform their policy decisions.

The decision to pilot and evaluate before fully launching the program was crucial, allowing policymakers to use the data to understand the impacts of the program and the components that needed to be improved. Also, precisely because of the rigor and transparency with which they were generated, these data provided critical political strength to carry on with the rollout and scale-up of the program against enormous political resistance. The information produced was essential not only for conceptual policymaking, but for successfully translating the theory of change into a feasible and actionable large-scale program.

Another key factor the case study illuminates is the importance of not limiting the use of evidence to the design phase, but integrating the generation and use of evidence into every phase of the program so its quality and effectiveness can be assessed and adjusted based on the findings of the ongoing

The Progresá team made it a priority not only to research the best available evidence, but also to generate new data and evidence when necessary to inform their policy decisions.

evidence created by the program. It is also worth considering that, throughout the design and rollout, the program retained significant flexibility to incorporate lessons from any new findings that emerged from program operations. Evidence and practice were thus integrated fully throughout design and ongoing implementation—with a natural evolution on both the scale and type of decisions that were made and the most relevant evidence to be generated. Put differently, the best lesson to learn from Progresá as a policy success is the process that led to its creation much more than the specific characteristics of its conditional cash

transfer policy. Ironically, this lesson was often lost, even on those with experience with the program who decided to scale it into urban areas (where it proved less successful).

Uses of Evidence

The paradigm shift sought by Progresá implied not only a different conceptualization of social policy, but also and more importantly, the loss of a powerful and effective tool for political mobilization. Accordingly, one of the key motivations to document and produce evidence from the very beginning was to provide powerful elements to face and overcome relentless political pushback



from different actors, including from the proponents of generalized subsidies, members of Congress, and influential members of the governing political party.

Another key lesson from Progresa is how a program that generates and adapts to rigorous ongoing evidence can increase its own probability of survival across political cycles. The year 2000 marked a watershed moment in Mexico's democracy. For the first time in 70 years the PRI lost the presidential elections to the National Action Party (PAN). As mentioned above, designers and implementers of Progresa shared the program's impact evidence with Vicente Fox as President Elect and Vazquez Mota, who was appointed as the Social Development Secretary. The program's positive results, the rigor of the evaluations, the fact that the evaluations were performed by external trustworthy institutions, and the large body of evidence that was produced and widely disseminated were key to what seemed impossible: maintaining the flagship social program of the previous administration and its now maligned party.

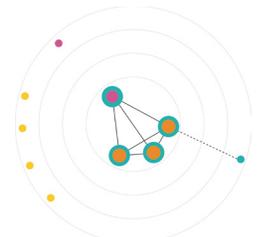
The evidence generated by Progresa also shaped policy making in other countries around the world that adapted the conditional cash transfer program. In 2009, the World

Bank published a volume on conditional cash transfers, counting around 30 programs similar to Progresa around the world. Informing policymaking was a two-way street for the program and its implementers, where the delegations the World Bank sent helped the Mexican team learn the strengths and weaknesses of the program through the questions and discussions with the international visitors.

Incentive Alignment Among Actors

Throughout the ecosystem, within and across stakeholder groups, formal and informal incentive structures are frequently not conducive – and are often in contradiction—to the integration of evidence into practice. Typically, organizational incentives are defined around an insular view of the organization (e.g., academics publish in academic journals, policymakers must exercise their budgets according to program and budgetary rules, NGOs must operationalize their programs as stated in their budgets and proposals to funders). Usually, these organizational incentives have no mandate or room for the explicit search of external evidence, much less for the generation of internal evidence that would then lead to continuous adaptation of programs and policies as new learning emerges.

As researchers who had become policymakers, President Zedillo and the team of designers and implementers shared the vision of integrating rigorous evidence into policy and practice. Although they had all been researchers, they also had plenty of experience as public officials, and were well aware of the political landscape and operational realities. They did not produce original research to inform the program, but rather used the best available research to design the first pilot of the program, and then generated the evidence needed to evaluate its implementation and design the program at scale. No decision was made without gathering data and documenting it. Second, the idea of a robust external evaluation was of crucial importance. The program not only generated quantitative and qualitative information, but also made it public. Levy and Gómez the León were pragmatic about the quality of the information, especially the need for rigor and objectivity. This resulted in spending time and resources finding the best available external partners, as well as engraining evidence generation deep into the program's structural design. Finally, the commitment to ongoing learning within the design and implementation of Progresa can be seen throughout the decisions made and the organizational structure for operating the program. Learning from the evidence



See the relationship between the stakeholders in this project in the stakeholder map.



generated was central to Progresa, providing an operational structure with the capacity to make decisions and incorporate emerging evidence so the program could have more impact.

The Role of Timing in the Incorporation of Evidence into Practice

The different and often discordant timeframes within which researchers, policymakers, and implementers operate often hobble efforts to coordinate, let alone collaborate, on evidence-informed approaches. Electoral cycles and political windows differ from NGO funding cycles and from academic publishing rhythms. Yet each actor is bound by the timeframes of her formal stakeholder group.

The three main actors behind the design of the program (Zedillo, Levy and Gómez de León) had a good understanding of the time horizons of research. Also, their public policy experience provided them with the knowledge of the “traditional” timeframe of public policy design and implementation both in Mexico and in global best practices. Due to this shared experience, they were able to go against the political pressure of quick timing to maximize public “splash” with constituents, sacrificing the launch of the program at the beginning Zedillo’s presidential tenure, and develop and test a solid program. Put differently, there is a clear and substantial



political trade-off in the integration of evidence as demonstrated by Progresa. From a traditional policymaking perspective, the rollout of Progresa was unusually slow. The program was officially launched two years into the Zedillo administration—and even then the program’s initial scale was modest by the standards of its predecessors. This was an administration under enormous political pressure to have a visible policy accomplishment in the wake of the 1995 financial crisis. The design team nonetheless chose a gradual, evidence-informed design and rollout of its flagship social program.

While Progresa ultimately became Mexico’s most successful social policy, it is important not to lose sight of the enormous trade-offs involved in its design.

Need to Devote Exclusive Time and Resources to Learn About and Operationalize Evidence

Few organizations provide incentives or carve out explicit time for managers to devote to learning about emerging evidence in their field of endeavor, and even fewer have staff explicitly devoted to learning about evidence and translating it into forms relevant for the organization. Even organizations with strong



monitoring and evaluation departments often do not transform the operational data into formats that could be widely used within the organization, or beyond, to expand actors' understanding about what has been learned from past or existing programs. Data is thus used to evaluate retrospective operations, but not to improve the prospective design of new initiatives. Discovering, incorporating and translating evidence requires time, energy and funding.

President Zedillo, Santiago Levy and José Gómez de León were well positioned to become champions of evidence uptake. Progresá helps us understand five successful paths to guide evidence uptake. These paths are: 1) recognizing the crucial value of gathering, analyzing, and integrating emerging evidence, 2) commitment of resources to constant learning, 3) structural flexibility so a program can adapt to learning, 4) transparency, objectivity, and rigor in evidence generation, including through external partnerships, and 5) building decision structures for ongoing collaboration and negotiation among the key players. First, the designers of Progresá incorporated a long-term focus on demonstrable impacts for program beneficiaries, which translated to an understanding that gathering, analyzing, and evaluating its impact was not a luxury, but a necessity. Second, throughout the case

The designers of Progresá incorporated a long-term focus on demonstrable impacts for program beneficiaries, which translated to an understanding that gathering, analyzing, and evaluating its impact was not a luxury, but a necessity.

narrative we observe a constant commitment to ongoing learning, from designing better questionnaires, to obtaining better information about the needs of intended beneficiaries through the pilot, to constantly evaluating results to learn and modify the program and its theory of change based on emerging evidence. Third, the realization that, although there were costs and enormous

tradeoffs associated with the commitment to a robust evaluation, the benefits far outweighed these costs. Every evaluation was done by reputable external actors that ensured the objectivity, transparency and rigor of the program. This delayed the launch of the program for the Zedillo administration—much in need of an early policy success—but created a powerful political platform, built on legitimate evidence, that armored the program against opposition throughout its incorporation and allowed it to survive through four different presidential terms and two transitions between opposing political parties.

Finally, weekly discussions were held among the key players, in this case an inter-ministry group that met to discuss the operation and technical aspects of the program, which illustrates the strong commitment to fostering ongoing collaboration among the key players. Progresá integrated school attendance and visits to physicians, which meant the participation of other government agencies like the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. Cooperation was crucial to the success of the program and fostering open dialogue and inclusion could make or break it.



Importance of Building Trust and Forging Relationships Among Stakeholders

The cross-stakeholder collaborations required for evidence-informed policies and practices are often difficult to initiate, develop, and sustain. Particularly when institutional incentives are lacking, personal trust, respect, and buy-in between individuals across stakeholder groups become critical to fostering the effective flow of evidence into practice.

Progresa's narrative highlights two very important relationships based on trust, without which success would have been impossible. The first component of forged relationships was the trust among Zedillo, Gómez de León, and Levy. President Zedillo appointed them based on the personal affinity and trust he had for them, as he had an academic background himself, but not explicitly because he was trying to staff the government with researchers. However, that affinity put the right people in the right places. Gómez de León and Levy trusted each other based on their shared goals, their common understanding of the overarching objective (demonstrable impact for beneficiaries), and the professional respect they had for each other. This trust was also infused into their teams.

Once all the design details were fleshed out, the inter-ministry group (with the Deputy Ministers of Finance, Education, and Health, and the Chair of CONAPO) was created to finalize the operational aspects of the program. This shows the commitment to ongoing collaboration, trust-building and negotiation among the key players from early on. A key element to enable the weekly discussions to develop the operating and technical aspects was President Zedillo's involvement to enable the coordination between ministries. Government stakeholders showed the will to collaborate and commit to the program as a result of the leadership, support, and pressure from Mr. Zedillo. Fostering inter-governmental coordination through strong leadership was key to the success of the program.

The Role of Funders | Shielding the Program

Funders have levers to support evidence-informed policy and practice. Progresa sheds light on a very interesting angle, using an international loan agreement to maintain the continuity of the program under its core operating rules based on rigorous evidence. The goal of the loan agreement was to shield the program from political cycles or temptations to manipulate it for electoral

purposes. The guardrails created by the IDB loan indeed protected the core of the program and strengthened its structural commitment to evidence integration.

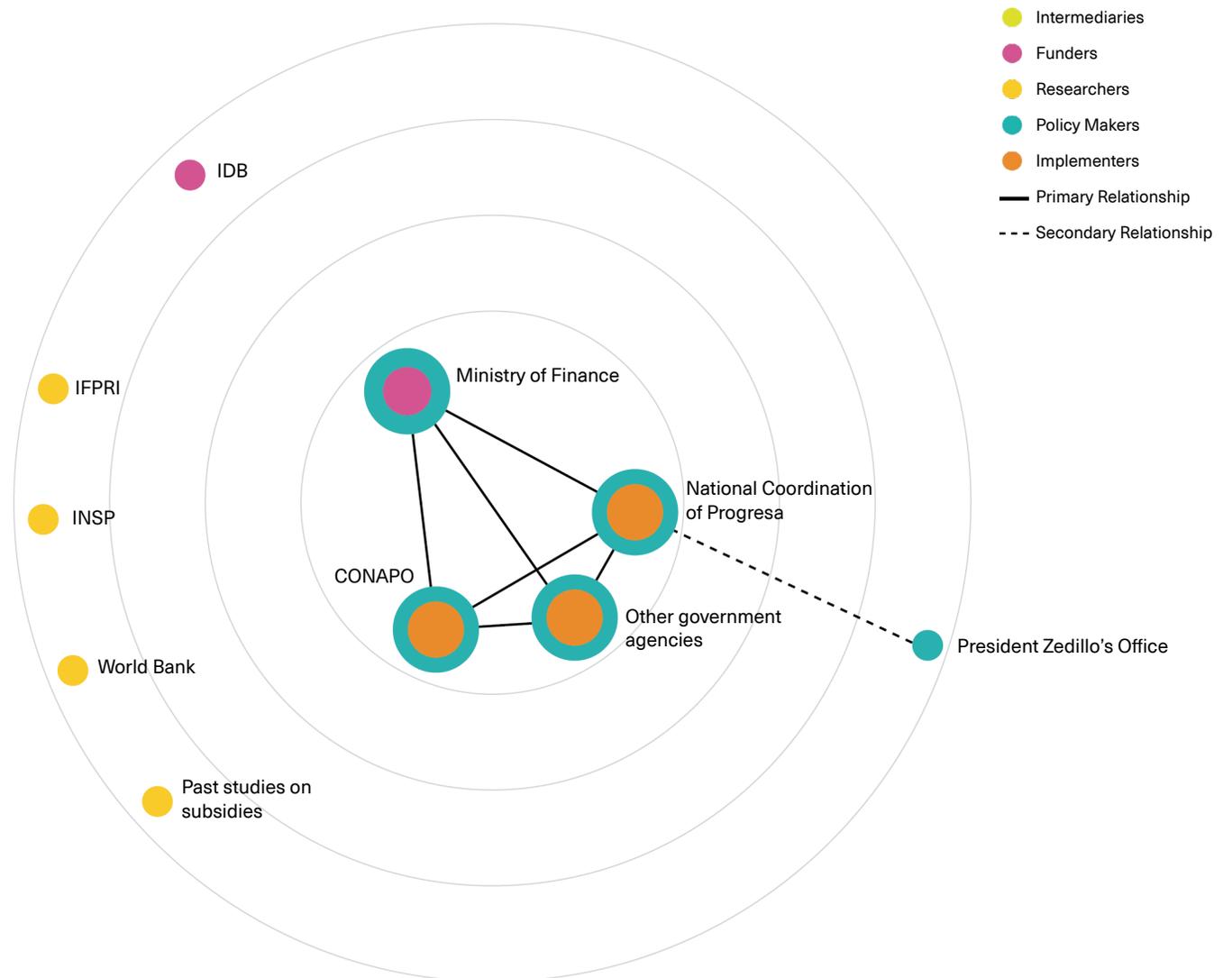
Conclusion

Progresa established a new standard for social programs in Mexico. Its insistence on generating and using rigorous evidence to inform its design and ongoing implementation challenged the prevailing political norms, in terms of both content of social programs (previously centered on unsuccessful price subsidies) and process (where programs tended to be subject to political manipulation). Progresa's evidence-driven approach led to the creation of an extremely successful program on multiple levels: Progresa has reached massive scale in Mexico; the concept of conditional cash transfer programs has spread to dozens of countries around the world; and the establishment of CONEVAL, to assess the effectiveness of all the country's social programs based on rigorous evaluation of evidence, has transformed the structure of how Mexico integrates evidence-based practice into public policy.



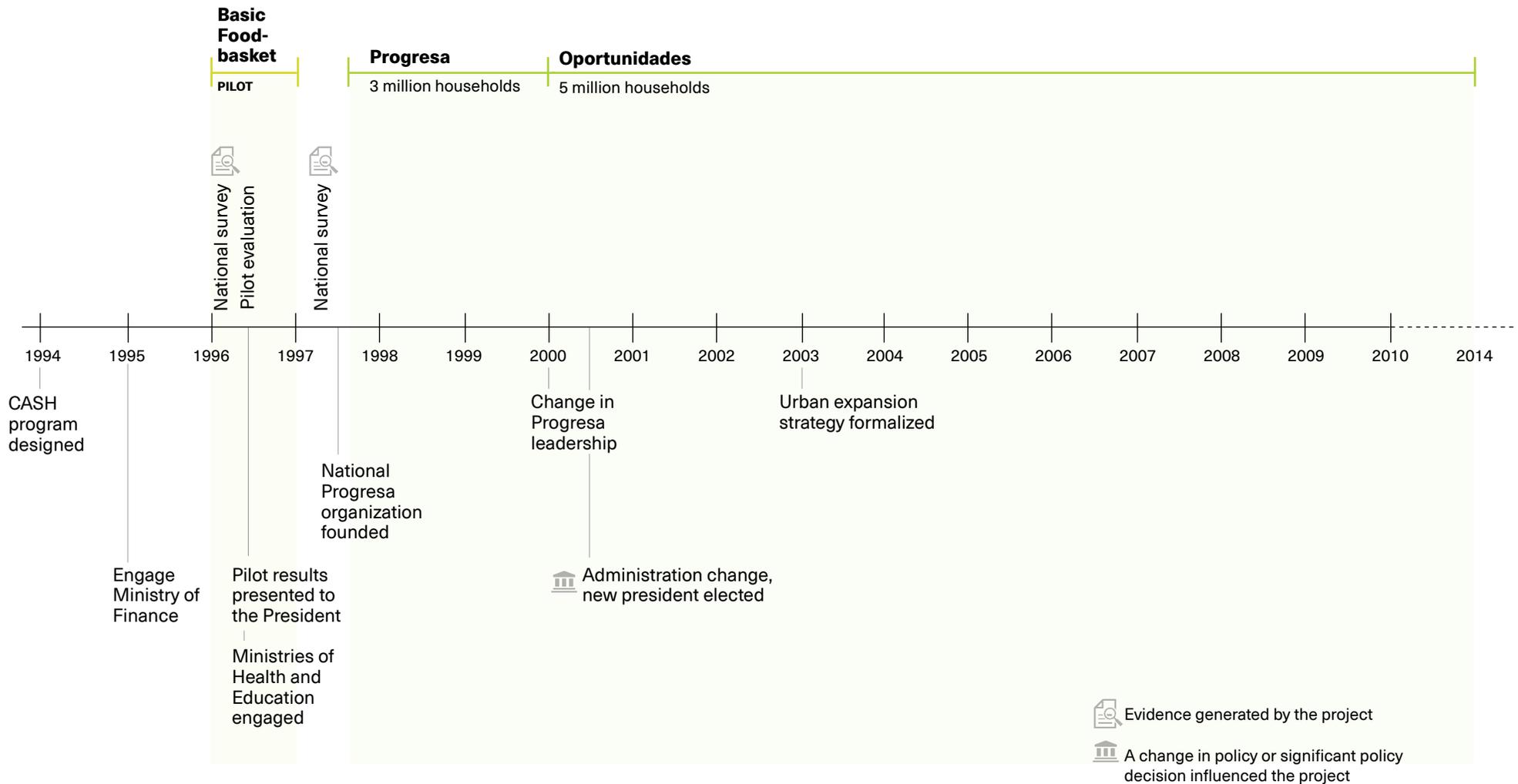
Stakeholder Map

This stakeholder map is a visual representation of the major stakeholders involved with this project. The importance of each of the actors is defined by their relative size, and their proximity to the center of the project. Their role is defined by the color; multiple colors indicate multiple roles. Primary relationships, denoted by solid lines, indicate the most directly significant relationships while secondary relationships, denoted by dashed lines, indicate indirect, but influential relationships. Actors not connected by lines are still involved with the project, but less directly.





Timeline



Evidence generated by the project

A change in policy or significant policy decision influenced the project

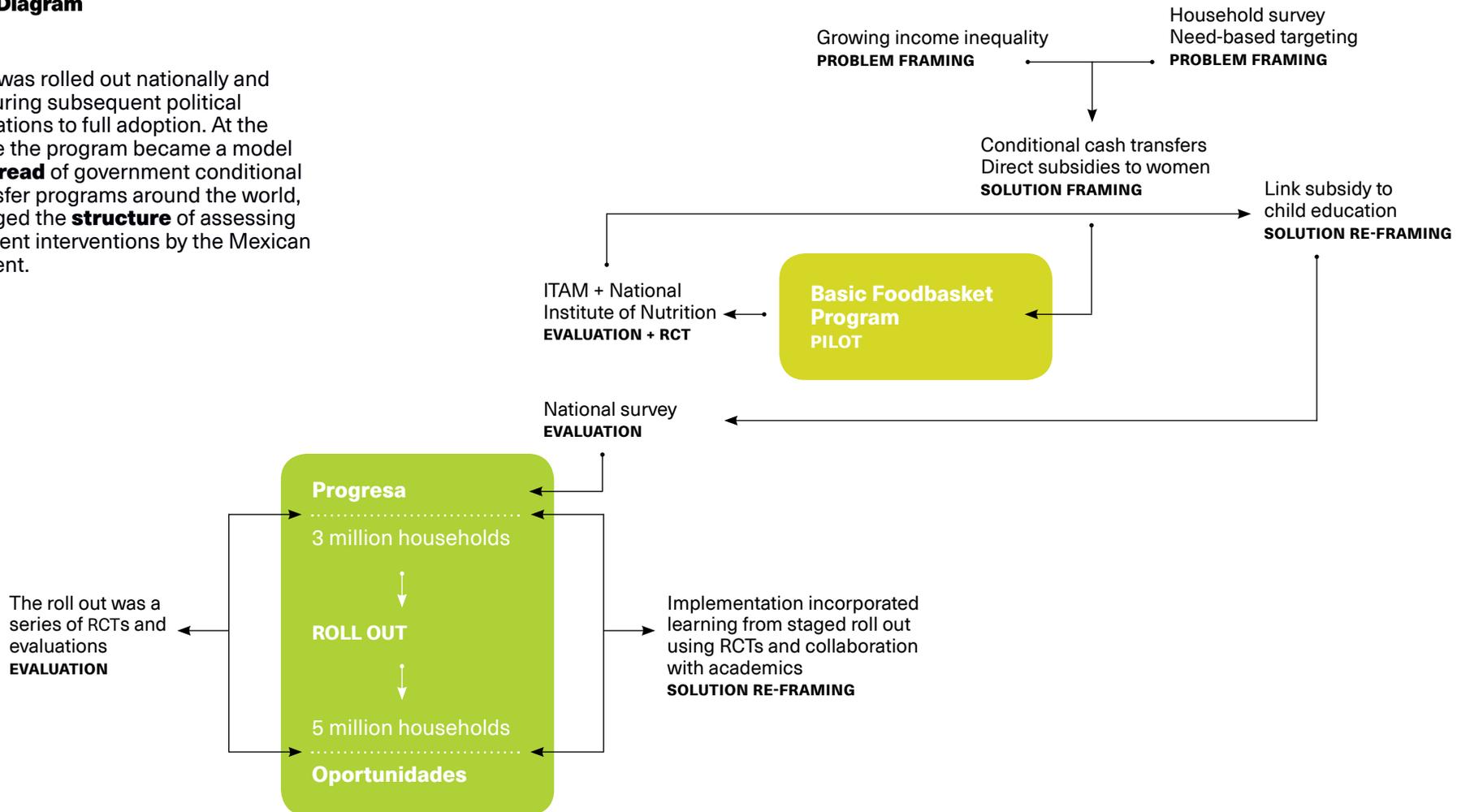


- Stakeholder Map
- Timeline
- Process Diagram
- Appendices
- Print

- View Alphabetically
- View Geographically
- View by Discipline

Process Diagram

Progresa was rolled out nationally and **scaled** during subsequent political administrations to full adoption. At the same time the program became a model for the **spread** of government conditional cash transfer programs around the world, and changed the **structure** of assessing development interventions by the Mexican Government.





Appendix: Data + Methods

The research design for the Evidence in Practice project consisted of three broad components. First, we conducted expert interviews (31) with individuals who had spent a significant portion of their professional lives attempting, researching, or promoting the integration of evidence into development practice.^{A1} This included academics, government officials, foundation program officers, NGO practitioners, and think-tank directors. To identify these experts, we first contacted individuals who had either published extensively and prominently on the topic or who had actively funded research or programs with the explicit goal of integrating evidence into practice. From this first set of experts we conducted snowball sampling until we reached a saturation point.^{A2} This initial set of interviews informed and directed the next two components, as they resulted in an initial map of the relevant stakeholders in the “evidence-to-practice ecosystem” and the hypothesized and actual paths that seemed to link them together.

Second, we conducted a matched comparison of eight cases of development programs or interventions where rigorous evidence was integrated with varying degrees of effectiveness. These cases were matched on structural, geographic, and programmatic characteristics—as well as on the extent to which evidence had informed practices—to better identify the critical factors that allowed actors in certain cases, and not others, to integrate rigorous evidence into practice.^{A3} This matching process led us to identify pairs of cases across four different countries, leveraging temporal and cross-sectional variation between them as seen in table A2.

A1 By development practice, we mean the work of government actors, NGOs, and others who are responsible for designing and executing development projects and programs.

A2 Data saturation is difficult to define and is dependent on the field of study. In this case, we defined saturation as the moment when, in a sequence of several expert interviews, no interviewee gave us information that we had not encountered before.

A3 George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). Case studies and theory development in the social sciences. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. Chapter 5.



Table A1. Expert Interviews

	Researchers	Funders	Intermediaries	Policymakers	Implementers	Total
Phase 1: February 2015 – May 2016	10	8	6	2	5	31
Phase 2: September 2016 – June 2017	10	7	6	3	8	34

For each case, we first identified, through existing literature and interviews with subject experts, a series of key informants who had detailed knowledge of the case’s history and protagonists. These initial interviews with case experts led to the creation of a detailed actor/stakeholder map for each case, where we identified the key stakeholder groups that either participated in or were affected by the program, as well as the specific individuals who played an active role in the program’s evolution.^{A4} These stakeholder maps were validated with several informants for each of the cases. We then conducted interviews with each of the key individuals across stakeholder groups. Interviewees were asked to relate chronologies of objective events, behaviors, choices at critical junctures, and facts of the processes described.^{A5} In every instance, the goal was to identify the individuals responsible for the particular evolution of a case, as well as the specific

tactics they employed throughout the process, to better understand the rationale behind their decisions as well as the factors that led them to succeed or fail. In total, we conducted 161 interviews across the eight cases. Interviews were complemented with a wealth of archival information including media articles, private documents (donor reports, internal presentations and communications, etc.), and public documents (announcements, academic articles, editorial pieces). These data were used to trace the chronological list of events for the overall development of each case. Each storyline was developed in an extensive document that established the causal links described by the subjects and ensuring a balanced consideration of different stakeholders.^{A6}

The third component, conducted in parallel to the eight case studies, consisted of interviews with prototypical representatives of each of

the stakeholder groups, or individuals who would clearly describe the typical experience of enacting a particular stakeholder role. Using the stakeholder map and initial hypotheses as starting points, this stage focused on the dynamics that shape the interactions between stakeholder categories. The work consisted of 34 in-depth interviews with representative actors from each stakeholder group. The interviews focused on each individual’s needs, assumptions, operational constraints, main concerns, professional and ideological backgrounds, timelines, and aspirations—especially concerning the development, dissemination, and use of novel evidence in development practice. This in-depth analysis resulted in a more nuanced and detailed stakeholder and system map that more clearly identified both breakdown points and paths of connection that hinder and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and information across stakeholder groups, as well as a refined

^{A4} See Canales, R. (2016). *From ideals to institutions: Institutional entrepreneurship and the growth of Mexican small business finance*. *Organization Science*, 27(6), 1548-1573.

^{A5} Davis, J. P., & Eisenhardt, K. M. (2011). *Rotating leadership and collaborative innovation: Recombination processes in symbiotic relationships*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 56(2), 159-201.

^{A6} *Ibid.*



Table A2: Case Studies

Country/Program	Description	Dates of Intervention	Number of Interviews	Primary Stakeholders
South Africa				
Collaborative Analysis of Labor Intervention Effectiveness	Employment program introducing new elements to vocational training	2011 – 2016	42	Government, Researchers
FUEL: Feed, Uplift, Educate, Love	School nutrition program	2007 – present		NGO
Ghana				
Teacher Community Assistant Initiative	Remedial education program for primary school children in reading and math through teaching assistants from local communities	2010 – 2013	30	Researchers, Government
Graduating the Ultra Poor	Poverty alleviation program integrating elements of social protection, livelihoods development, and financial services	2010 – 2013		Researchers, NGO
India				
Teaching at the Right Level	Remedial education program for primary school children in reading and math	2001 – present	51	NGO, Researchers, Government
AQUA+	Water purification drops for retail sale	2010 – present		NGO
Mexico				
Progresa Oportunidades	Poverty alleviation program using conditional cash transfers	1997 – present	38	Government
Programa Primer Empleo	Employment program using government incentives for the private sector	2007 – 2012		Government



set of hypotheses about the breakdown of communication and about possible interventions to solve it.

Across the three components, we conducted a total of 226 interviews. All interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, with an average length of around 90 minutes (minimum of 60, maximum of over 120). Around two-thirds of them were done in person and the rest were conducted remotely. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. Each of the 226 interview transcripts was coded extensively to identify first-order concepts related to the integration of evidence into development practice. First-order concepts include “concerns about reputation” or “short-term decision-making”. This required multiple readings of interview transcripts, field notes, and archival data to associate nearly every passage of text with one or more codes. These codes were then grouped into second-order themes,^{A7} always contrasting them with current research on the integration of evidence into practice. Second order themes included “incentive structures” or “timing misalignments”, each of which was developed extensively in a memo that explored the characteristics, tensions, and contradictions of each theme. In stage

three, we mapped the codes to each of our case narratives to detect patterns of activities, constraints, and decisions that defined the evolution of each case at critical junctures. This allowed us to identify similarities and discrepancies across cases, as well as to create comparable counterfactuals that could account for differing outcomes.^{A8}

In stage four, we created process maps, concept maps, data tables, and detailed case synopses that linked key challenges, events, and decisions to the specific alternative tactics employed by actors and then to their subsequent consequences for the development program or intervention in question. This final set of analyses revealed a somewhat consistent set of factors faced at comparable stages by actors across our different settings. Throughout our analysis, we iterated between emerging insights, existing theory, and matched comparisons across cases to identify the mechanisms that operated at critical junctures.

It is worth mentioning that, at two moments of the project (the first after our first set of expert interviews was over and the second after the completion of our initial case narratives) we hosted a workshop with two different groups of highly experienced representatives from each of the stakeholder groups. During these

workshops, we discussed our emerging findings and we gathered additional, essential insights from participants. The workshops served to validate and deepen our understanding of emerging insights.

A7 Glaser BG, Strauss AL (1980) The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (Aldine Publishers, Hawthorne, NY).

A8 We ensured consistency in coding across the different cases and authors through several mechanisms, including: a) a selection of interviews was coded by two or more coders, after which they reviewed discrepancies and agreed on their resolution, b) a common project book where all the codes were collectively kept, aggregated, and analyzed, c) a weekly meeting to review coding process and to develop a joint coding standard, d) memos were developed jointly, with contribution from and verification by the different team members, among others. [Access here.](#)