
INTRODUCTION

ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION: A USEFUL INSTRUMENT FOR AN ORGANIZED SOCIETY

By: María Marván Laborde
President Commissioner
Federal Institute of Access to Public Information

Since its origins, the Federal Institute of Access to Public Information responded to a rightful claim from Mexican society, who demanded to guarantee a transparent office from the government, subject to social supervision, open to accountability and allowing public issues to be publicly available.

In this sense, the more than 40 thousand information petitions processed in only one year can prove that the creation of mechanisms and institutions intended to protect the right of access to government public information has been an accomplishment, a positive response to an authentic social need.

This is a double need: on one hand, it is intended that the information flows “downstream” so that the citizens can know, evaluate, and supervise all actions taken by officers and rulers so that some sort of social control is daily exercised “upstream” towards every single location of the Federal Public Administration. But in the other hand, it is intended that the information provided by the government is also useful and meaningful for society itself; that all data, figures, and accessible documents result in an increased capacity of action and proposal by individuals and social organizations.

More information means more capacity, more consistency in arguments and better instruments for criticism and proposals. Those social actors who had been able to translate their demands into legal amendments, public policies, and paths for citizen participation are those who have had enough capacity and knowledge to access the information in possession of the government.

As a result of their actions, we have been able to witness multiple changes and a significant invigoration of social demands: defense of human rights, social development and assistance programs, support to handicapped people, promotion of environmental care and regeneration, activities in favor of equity of genders, autonomy of electoral organizations, just to mention a few of the topics in which the usefulness of the right of access to information can be seen with more clarity, thereby showing the influence of an organized society.

In the origin of the Federal Law of Transparency and Access to Public Government Information (LFTAIPG, acronym in Spanish) it is possible to witness the convergence of citizen and government initiatives. Almost simultaneously with the Law initiative that the Executive Power sent to the Congress of the Union, an active group of scholars, journalists and members of civil organizations, presented their own proposals and from that venturous convergence, the Law was born, a powerful civil action instrument that we recognize today.

Therefore, social organizations are the natural and compelled users of the LFTAIPG. Academic, civil, entrepreneurial, political, environmental and gender-oriented organizations are the entities with the best capability to read the pulse of the way in which agencies and departments have responded to the information requirements. This is due to the fact that the use of this information is not bureaucratic or academic, because they question the government over concrete topics and needs, which are directly linked to the action.

This volume deals precisely with this issue: to know about the first practical experiences of Mexican society in the exercise of its right of access to information. How was it? Which were the outcomes? How did they deal with complex matters?

Which obstacles did they face? In brief, has it been worthwhile to implement mechanisms for access to information in our country?

This volume is the product rendered by the day-to-day work with civil organizations. Herein, six well-known organizations with a lengthy tradition in Mexico – Alianza Cívica; Fundar; Equidad de Género, Ciudadanía, Trabajo y Familia; Centro de Servicios Municipales “Heriberto Jara”; Iniciativa de Acceso-México and Red Ciudadana – tell us the story of their experience with access to information. Their texts refer to local processes in which the citizens have given an impulse to transparency laws; to civil initiatives to create or improve citizen participation and accountability mechanisms; to the exercise of a detailed and timely supervision of the performance of government bodies.

Participant organizations offer their opinion regarding critical zones in the exercise of this right as, for example, the usefulness level of the information served by the agencies; how quickly is the response served, which benefits are provided by the access to information to the activities of those organizations; how do the mechanisms and systems operate when requesting information; what is the difference in quality between the responses provided by Federal Public Administration agencies and departments and from other subjects that are compelled by the Law; and how government accountability and transparency have changed by the enactment of the Law. These features make out of this publication an extraordinarily interesting and extremely useful material to understand the status of the exercise of the right of access to information in Mexico.

IFAI General Directorate of Attention to Society and Institutional Relations was in charge of calling on these organizations, proposing a systematic discussion of their own experience as well as from the rest of the organizations, and to present their results in a public event intended for evaluation, criticism and proposal, with no restriction whatsoever, other than properly documented information and a constructive attitude.

Consequently, these materials were publicly disclosed for the first time during the National Week of Transparency, within a session with a meaningful name: “The right of access to information: A diagnosis by society”.

We hope that this joint initiative between civil organizations and the Federal Institute of Access to Public Information, results in the integration of new civil organizations to this effort of turning this right into an effective reality and an appropriate instrument used by thousands; in summary, a substantial tool for the construction of a more democratic and efficient government, more attentive to social demands.