‘Oportunidades’ Programme in Mexico: Handout

(based on Molyneux M. Forthcoming. “Maternalism and the New Poverty Agenda in Latin America: The ‘Oportunidades’ Programme in Mexico” in Razavi S & Hassim S. *Gender and Social Policy in a Development Context: Mothers, workers and citizens*)

In 2000 PAN leader Vicente Fox in 2000 came to power after 71 years of effective one-party rule. Fox pledged to make social justice a priority, and to raise social expenditure by approximately 10% per annum. The existing programme, PROGRESA was relaunched in 2002 under the name of Human Development Opportunities (*Desarrollo Humano Oportunidades*). Coverage of the programme, which was previously restricted to the rural poor, was extended to include urban and semi-urban areas. The number enrolled increased from 2.6 million families in 1999 to 5 million families in 2005.

Some people describe Opportunidades as a World Bank programme. However, it was not imposed by the World Bank. It enjoys a very high degree of presidential support and inter-ministerial collaboration, an annual budget in 2004 of 25 billion pesos and a recent loan of $1billion from the IDB. It is subject to regular evaluations and has been responsive to suggestions for modifications.

Opportunidades aims to tackle poverty through helping the poor to ‘cope, mitigate or reduce’ their risk of falling into or being trapped in poverty. It aims to improve human development by focusing on children’s education, nutrition and health. It is based on the assumption that poor households do not invest enough in their human capital, and are thus caught in a vicious circle of intergenerational transmission of poverty. Families are therefore helped, through cash transfers, to deal with the financial and opportunity costs of having children in school. They receive ‘scholarships’ for children to attend school, supplemented by additional cash to improve nutrition where required.

Implementation is done through mothers. The programme seeks to strengthen, through workshops and monitoring, the mothers’ responsibilities for children’s health and education and to improve the nutritional status of their children (and of themselves, if they are pregnant or breastfeeding). Secondary outcomes such as building the mothers’ capacities, empowerment, citizen participation and strengthening community ties are part of the programme goals, but how these are interpreted has varied over time.

In effect the responsibility of the ‘community’ is devolved to mothers, who are primarily responsible for securing the Programme’s outcomes. Assistance is conditional on taking children for regular health checks, meeting targets for children’s attendance at school, attending workshops on health, and contributing a set amount of hours of work to the community, typically for cleaning buildings or clearing rubbish.

Evaluations show that stipends have reduced household poverty, and have improved school attendance of children, as well as the health and nutritional levels of all those inscribed in the programmes.

Participants have two main criticisms. Firstly, there are criticisms of the way targeting is applied. There is a general sense that more information should be made available on the programme and on the means testing mechanism itself. Selection is also felt to be arbitrary, excluding people whose needs are considered just as pressing as those included in the programme. Means testing is felt to generate distrust and envy.

Secondly, participants feel 'discriminated against' by the programme's demands on their time. They believe that the tasks they are asked to do offend their dignity. These tasks are seen as 'obligations' rather than real 'co-responsibility'. Women complain that teachers' salaries are not reduced if they miss classes.

Some people claim that *Oportunidades* has helped to empower the mothers and daughters who are its beneficiaries. There are four main aspects to Opportunidas' gender sensitivity:

- It is one of the earliest in Latin America to give the financial transfers to the female head of participating households
- The transfers associated with children's school attendance involve an element of affirmative action: stipends are 10% higher for girls than for boys at the onset of secondary school which is when the risk of female drop-out is highest
- The programme's health care benefits for children are supplemented by a scheme which monitors the health and provides support for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and children under two years of age
- There is a goal to promote the leadership and citizenship of the women involved.

Women surveyed felt that their self-esteem was enhanced as a result of the stipends. They also appreciated the programme's education and training projects where these were well organised. But critics feel that the programme does not take sufficient account of women's income generating and other activities such as collective community work (*faenas)* and that as a consequence women can be overloaded with competing demands on their time. Training for the job market is very limited, and there is scant if any, childcare provision for those women who want or need it because they work, train or study.

Critics also say that *Oportunidades* creates a dependency on a subsidy which confirms mothering as women's primary social role, one which may enhance their social status and self respect, but nonetheless puts them at risk of remaining in poverty for the rest of their lives. The programme depends on women fulfilling their 'traditional' social roles and responsibilities, in effect making transfers conditional on 'good motherhood'. Men are not incorporated in any serious way, and no effort is made to promote the principle that men and women might share responsibility for meeting project goals.