

PARTNERING TO MAKE BUDGETS WORK FOR THE PEOPLE

Grupo FARO – Ecuador

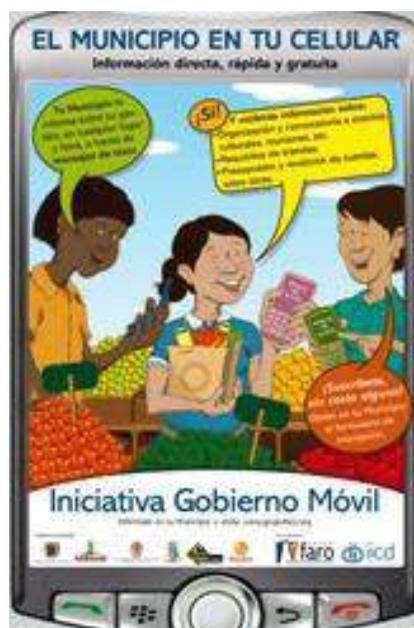
Fundación para el Avance de las Reformas y las Oportunidades (Grupo FARO, the Foundation for the Progress of Reforms and Opportunities) is a civil society organization in Ecuador created in 2004 to promote informed dialogue and alliances among government, private enterprise, and civil society. Grupo FARO conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy to encourage the implementation of progressive policies that expand civil society and public participation in policy making and oversight and contribute to a more efficient, equal, inclusive, and democratic state. Following the passage of Ecuador's Organic Law of Transparency and Access to Public Information (LOTAIP), Grupo FARO has focused on increasing government transparency and accountability.

Grupo FARO Pioneers Mobile Government Initiative

In 2010 Grupo FARO launched the Open Municipalities and Mobile Government Initiative (Municipalidades Transparentes y Gobierno Móvil) to expand access to public information and create space for citizen participation in municipal government processes. This initiative was a direct response to increasing public demand for ways to engage with the government and was informed by a survey showing that citizens in some communities faced obstacles in obtaining public information.

Municipal governments in Ecuador had experimented with publishing information on the Internet, but Grupo FARO's survey showed that only 13 percent of Ecuador's total population had reliable Internet access. However, the survey also found that a high proportion of people living in both urban and rural areas, nearly 15 million total subscribers, were active mobile phone users. Envisioning a system through which people have comprehensive, timely, and free access to information, this discovery led Grupo FARO to the idea that municipal governments could use text messages (SMS) to disseminate public information.

The initiative was piloted over the past year in the municipalities of Ibarra, Azogues, Sigsig, Isabela, and Oreallana – chosen for their geographic, demographic, and ethnic diversity. Citizens are able to sign up for the service free of charge and submit their mobile phone numbers to a central database. The municipal authorities manage an electronic platform that allows an operator to send SMS texts to thousands of subscribers at a time. The messages can include information about a variety of public issues, such as cultural events, public meetings, government planning proposals, public works projects, bureaucratic procedures, emergencies,



Ecuador
Open Budget Index 2010
Overall Score: 31
Government provides minimal information to the public on how it manages public resources

Availability of budget documents critical for effective public input:	
Pre-Budget Statement	No
Executive's Budget Proposal	Yes
Citizens Budget	No
Enacted Budget	Yes
In-Year Reports	Yes
Mid-Year Review	No
Year-End Report	Yes
Audit Report	No
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microcredit opportunities, and, most important, the municipal budget.

Grupo FARO supported the implementation of these platforms by working with municipal governments to install the necessary technology and train local authorities to use the system. In addition to providing them with targeted technical assistance during the implementation stage, Grupo FARO worked with relevant officials to prepare SMS content and establish a strategic public communications strategy.

The Mobile Government Initiative shows great promise and has drawn the attention of national authorities. In Orellana, for example, the government has institutionalized the SMS platform

as an official channel of communication with citizens. Grupo FARO was contacted recently by the Office of the President and the Ministry of Telecommunications, which are keen to learn more about the initiative with an eye to potentially implementing a similar system at the national level.

Over the past year, approximately 13,000 citizens in participating municipalities registered to receive messages from the Mobile Government database. While Grupo FARO initially planned for a one-way transfer of information from the government to the citizens, the initiative has expanded to consider communication from citizens to the government, as well. Participants in the program would like to give feedback to the municipal authorities, demonstrating the capacity and desire of

communities to participate proactively in local-level decision making.

Grupo FARO will advance its goals by implementing the second phase of the Mobile Government Initiative. This phase will reinforce two-way communications between citizens and government and will pressure participating municipalities to improve the quantity and quality of information they share with the public. By using mobile technology to disseminate public information, Grupo FARO has changed the relationship between citizens and their government and has created new opportunities for active participation in more transparent and accountable government systems and processes.

Grupo FARO's Participation in the Partnership Initiative

With the support of the Partnership Initiative, Grupo FARO will analyze the implications of recent reforms in Ecuador's public health system and will advocate for specific policy solutions to expand access to and increase the quality of healthcare services in the country. While Ecuador ratified a new Constitution in 2008 that guarantees the right to healthcare and mandates annual budget allocations to the government health system, many challenges remain. Seventy percent of the population still lacks health insurance, and one in four people have no access to any kind of healthcare services. Public investment in Ecuador's social infrastructure increased steadily in recent years, especially as revenues from extractive industries have risen, but there have not been corresponding improvements in accessibility and quality of public health services.

Grupo FARO identified fragmentation of healthcare provider systems as one of the primary reasons the sector has not performed up to its potential in recent years. There is little integration among providers, and information about the healthcare market is scarce and unreliable. These problems are exacerbated by the Ministry of Public Health's limited capacity to change the system, and by a general lack of transparency and accountability in the public health sector. Grupo FARO will address these issues by building a Citizens' Health Information System, an online platform that will spur competition in the marketplace and assemble fragmented public information into a resource for citizens to make better decisions when purchasing healthcare.

Grupo FARO

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The IBP's Partnership Initiative is a collaborative effort that seeks to enhance the impact of civil society budget work in selected countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The initiative strives to contribute to the development of sustainable institutions; to increase public access to timely, reliable, and useful information; to enhance the effective participation of civil society in policy and budget processes; and to establish a platform of good practices on which future generations of civil society can build.