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**From Law to Practice: Exploring the Implementation Gap of Access to Information in  
Córdoba, Argentina**

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## Abbreviations

FOI	Freedom of Information
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
ICT	Information and communication technology
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OAS	Organization of American States
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OGP	Open Government Partnership
RTI	Right to Information
UN	United Nations

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation

Although over 115 countries around the world have adopted some form of freedom of information (FOI) regime (Freedominfo.org, n.d.), numerous studies have shown that the existence of such laws does not guarantee their effective implementation (World Bank Group, 2020; Hazell & Worthy, 2010). These challenges are particularly pronounced in federal systems, where subnational governments exercise varying levels of autonomy over implementation (Kassen, 2018; Ramos, 2021). In Argentina, for example, the national legal framework has advanced significantly since 2016, while provincial efforts remain inconsistent. The province of Córdoba stands out as a relevant case: despite recognizing the right to public information in Law No. 8803, enacted in 1999, it lacks a standardized digital procedure for filing requests and has faced judicial intervention to enforce disclosure (Córdoba Province, 1999; OGP, 2024). This study examines the factors underlying this gap.

The relevance of FOIA extends beyond national contexts. As a fundamental right, the right of access to public information is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 1948), Article 19(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (United Nations, 1966), and Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR) (OAS, 1969). They guarantee everyone the right and freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas by any means of their choice. Accordingly, this right constitutes a set of rules, mechanisms, and procedures that allow citizens to access information held within the public domain. It encompasses both a passive dimension—the right to be informed—and an active one, namely the right to request data relevant to citizen participation in the management of the state (Liambomba, 2023). This human rights framework provides a legal mechanism through which citizens can proactively access government information, rather than passively waiting for authorities to disclose it at their discretion (Stein & Camaj, 2018).

Accessing public information is considered an essential element of good governance and openness to society to citizen participation, which allows citizens to evaluate the actions of their institutions and governments, being the basis of an informed debate (Liambomba, 2023). It also enables accountability, another component of good governance through which members of society engage in civic oversight and elected political leaders answer for their political decisions, creating conditions for greater legitimacy of public authorities (Cahlikova & Mabillard, 2020). Consequently, since transparency and accountability are

fundamental elements for citizen participation in public policy matters, an access law that allows citizens to request and use data is necessary (Morales et al., 2020). Moreover, FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) laws provide a foundation for institutionalization of transparency and support for anti-corruption efforts (World Bank Group, 2020). This becomes particularly relevant in Latin America, where access to information laws are closely tied to persistent concerns about corruption, institutional opacity, and impunity (Gill & Hughes, 2005). Argentina, like many countries in the region, has experienced recurring governance crises marked by scandals involving a lack of transparency in decision-making (Balan, 2011). According to Transparency International (2023), several Latin American countries, including Argentina, continue to score poorly on global corruption perception indices. In this context, FOIA laws are often seen not only as transparency tools, but also as instruments to enhance oversight and rebuild trust in public institutions (World Bank Group, 2020). By enabling citizens, journalists, and civil society actors to scrutinize government actions, such laws contribute to a more accountable and responsive public sector (Morales et al., 2020).

Additionally, technological advancements and the decreasing cost of digital infrastructure have created an environment where public demand for information has grown exponentially (Millward, 2014). This demand extends beyond governments to businesses and civil society organizations, reflecting a collective acknowledgment of information as a public good. In this respect, OECD (2014) highlighted the transformative potential of ICTs in making public sector information (PSI) accessible, emphasizing that Freedom of Information (FOI) can empower citizens, foster trust, and enhance policy outcomes when implemented in an inclusive manner. For instance, access mechanisms that combine digital platforms with traditional methods, such as in-person or telephone requests, ensure that FOI reaches all population sectors.

Historically, the formal recognition of FOIA began in Sweden in 1766 (Holsen & Pasquier, 2011), and several other countries gradually followed suit. Many nations have since incorporated Freedom of Information Acts into their legal frameworks to uphold this right. However, the passage of such laws is only a first step toward making government-held data genuinely accessible to the public. While legislative frameworks lay the foundation for transparency, their effectiveness ultimately depends on how they are implemented in practice (Mendel, 2014). Legal recognition alone does not ensure meaningful access to information. The effective implementation of a FOIA requires that public agencies take additional steps to put laws into practice and overcome recurring implementation challenges that may undermine the effectiveness of FOIA laws (World Bank Group, 2020). For instance, Barry and Bannister (2014) identified six interrelated categories of obstacles that obstruct the release of open data in Ireland. These include



economic barriers, such as inadequate funding models and limited resources; legal constraints, involving legislation, licensing issues, and regulatory ambiguity; technical challenges, related to insufficient capacity and lack of data standards; administrative factors, including security concerns, weak leadership, and bureaucratic inertia; cultural barriers, rooted in organizational resistance and a reluctance to relinquish control over data; and finally, risk-related concerns, particularly those involving data protection, potential misuse, and the threat of fraud.

Additionally, structural barriers, such as limited technical capacity and resources, exacerbate the challenges governments face in ensuring effective FOI implementation (Cahlikova & Mabillard, 2020). In line with this, findings have shown existing disparities in the implementation of FOI laws between more affluent and established democracies and poorer and developing democracies (Mason, 2010; Open Society Justice Initiative, 2006). Affluent countries often experience resistance in the form of high appeal rates and limited political support, while in developing contexts, weak administrative capacity, low public awareness, and socio-economic inequalities further hamper progress. Even countries like Mexico, with well-designed FOI frameworks, deal with entrenched cultural resistance and insufficient adherence to legal provisions, often exacerbated by limited financial and human resources. Similarly, Peru's FOI law has not overcome a persistent culture of secrecy among government agencies, emphasizing that FOI effectiveness depends as much on political will and capacity as on legal mandates (Stein and Camaj, 2018).

Furthermore, while Freedom of Information Acts (FOIA) have been widely adopted and extensively studied at the national level, considerably less attention has been paid to how these laws are implemented at the subnational level, particularly in federal systems. In such systems, subnational units (e.g., states, provinces, cantons) often possess significant political and administrative autonomy, which can lead to fragmented or inconsistent FOIA practices across regions (Kassen, 2018; Cahlikova & Mabillard, 2020). This decentralization presents both opportunities and challenges: while it allows for locally tailored solutions, it also complicates the harmonization of standards and procedures, especially in the absence of strong intergovernmental coordination mechanisms (Ramos, 2021).

Existing studies on FOIA in federal states, such as Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and Mexico, have highlighted stark disparities in how access to information is operationalized at different levels of government (Holsen & Pasquier, 2011; Kassen, 2018; OECD, 2014). These variations are often attributed to differences in institutional capacity, political will, budgetary constraints, and legal alignment between federal and

subnational frameworks. Despite these known challenges, comparative and context-specific research on FOIA implementation at the subnational level remains limited.

Argentina provides a relevant context for examining these dynamics. While the country updated its national legal framework in 2016 with Law No. 27,275 on Access to Public Information, most of its provinces still lack equivalent legislation or have outdated and poorly implemented frameworks. As early as 2015, a study by Farioli had already shown that in most Argentine provinces, the legal norms on access to information deviated significantly from internationally recommended minimum standards. The study also found that provincial government websites often lacked sufficient information about official acts to enable meaningful public oversight (Farioli, 2015). The province of Córdoba exemplifies this scenario: Law No. 8803, passed in 1999, remains the governing statute on access to information, yet it fails to meet current transparency standards and does not provide for a standardized procedure. Furthermore, the province has faced judicial interventions to enforce disclosure, underscoring the limitations of its current system (La Voz del Interior, 2025). These conditions make Córdoba a timely and relevant case through which to explore FOIA implementation in subnational jurisdictions within federal systems.

At the same time, recent institutional developments suggest a renewed momentum for reform. The province of Córdoba has recently taken a significant step by participating in the local chapter of the Open Government Partnership (OGP). As part of this initiative, Córdoba submitted its 2024–2027 Action Plan, which includes a formal commitment to co-create a revised Public Access to Information Bill by July 2027 (OGP, 2024). The plan outlines a collaborative process involving identified stakeholders to draft the new legislation and lay the groundwork for improved access procedures. This institutional milestone presents a window of opportunity to inform the development of a more effective and user-centered access to information system. In this context, the present study aims to contribute to the co-creation process by engaging relevant actors and assessing their perspectives to support the improvement of the request mechanism aligned with transparency goals and local implementation capacities. By providing evidence-based input grounded in stakeholder experiences, it seeks to inform reform efforts with contextual knowledge that reflects local implementation realities.

## **1.2 Research questions**

Building on this context, the present study seeks to examine how access to public information is currently experienced and perceived by key societal actors in the province

of Córdoba. The objective is twofold: first, to explore the main barriers and limitations identified by these actors in the existing request process; and second, to identify concrete, context-sensitive avenues for improvement that could inform the forthcoming legislative and procedural reforms. By engaging stakeholders across sectors—including public officials, journalists, civil society representatives, academics, and students—this research aims to generate empirical insights that can support the design of a more inclusive and operational online request mechanism.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How do key societal actors in Córdoba perceive and experience the current process for requesting public information?
- (2) What potential avenues for improvement can be identified through the analysis of these actors' perceptions and experiences?

### **1.3 Structure of the thesis**

The remainder of this thesis is structured in five chapters. Chapter 2 presents the literature review, which outlines the normative foundations and global diffusion of FOIA laws, emphasizing the role of international actors, regional frameworks like the Inter-American Model Law 2.0, and the recognition of access to information as a human right. It also examines key implementation challenges, particularly in federal systems, such as administrative capacity, public awareness, and information quality. The chapter concludes by identifying research gaps related to subnational dynamics and the practical use of FOIA mechanisms in underexplored contexts.

Following the literature review, Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework that underpins the empirical analysis. This section introduces the conceptual model developed by Lemieux and Trapnell (2016), which identifies four key drivers of FOIA effectiveness: enabling conditions, demand for information, institutional capacity, and oversight. These dimensions serve as analytical categories that guide the formulation of the research instrument and the interpretation of empirical findings.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological design of the research, which adopts a qualitative approach. It describes the two-phase empirical strategy, consisting of a Likert-scale survey targeting relevant stakeholder groups and a series of semi-structured interviews conducted to deepen and contextualize the findings. The chapter also details the sampling criteria, analytical procedures, and the limitations associated with the chosen approach.

Chapter 5 presents the results of the empirical study. The first part offers a descriptive analysis of the survey data, identifying trends in stakeholder perceptions and variations across groups. The second part examines the qualitative data obtained through interviews, organized by thematic categories derived from both the theoretical framework and the fieldwork.

Chapter 6 engages in a critical discussion of the findings in light of the research questions and the broader scholarly debate. It reflects on the main challenges perceived by stakeholders, the legal and institutional limitations of the current FOIA system in Córdoba, and the prospects for reform. The chapter also considers the extent to which the study's insights may be analytically transferable to other subnational contexts and includes a reflexive note on the research process itself.

Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the main contributions of the study, revisits the research questions, and reflects on the practical, theoretical, and methodological implications of the findings. The conclusion also identifies areas for future research and reform.

## 2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews the academic and policy literature relevant to the implementation of access to information laws, with particular attention to subnational contexts in Latin America. It begins by outlining the historical and normative foundations of the right to information, including the role of international organizations, legal frameworks, and regional instruments such as the Inter-American Model Law 2.0. Subsequent sections examine how FOIA is shaped by institutional contexts, including challenges in federal governance structures, gaps between legal design and administrative practice, and the influence of public awareness and civic demand. The chapter also explores the role of information quality, accessibility, and open government principles in reinforcing transparency efforts. Finally, it identifies key research gaps in the existing literature, particularly the lack of empirical studies focused on FOIA implementation at the subnational level and from the perspective of societal actors.

### 2.1 Normative foundations of FOIA: an overview

An overview of the historical trajectory of right to information (RTI) legislation offers a necessary foundation for understanding the contemporary challenges associated with its implementation. The earliest known instance of RTI being formally recognized dates back to Sweden, where the 1766 Freedom of the Press Act was embedded within the national constitution, establishing not only a general public right to access official information but also specific provisions for the press (Holsen & Pasquier, 2012).

This pioneering initiative remained unique for nearly two centuries. It was not until the mid-20th century that other countries began adopting similar legal frameworks. Finland followed in 1951, and the United States enacted its Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 1966. These early adopters were later joined by Denmark and Norway in 1970, France and the Netherlands in 1978, Australia and New Zealand in 1982, and Canada in 1983 (Lemieux & Trapnell, 2016). Today, more than 115 countries have adopted RTI laws, reflecting a significant global expansion (Freedominfo.org, n.d.). The literature has identified a wide range of factors, both internal and external, that have contributed to this spread.

Among the exogenous drivers, the role of international organizations has been particularly influential. These actors have promoted the adoption of RTI laws by applying political pressure or by shaping transnational legal norms (Lemieux & Trapnell, 2016). In Europe, for example, the prospect of joining the European Union motivated several

countries to pass RTI legislation as part of the accession requirements (Mendel, 2014). Similarly, international policy networks—notably the Open Government Partnership (OGP)—have reinforced the adoption of such laws by tying membership eligibility to the existence of transparency frameworks (OGP, 2015). International development agencies have also contributed to this process, especially in the Latin American region, where institutions like the Organization of American States (OAS) have supported legal reform efforts and provided technical assistance (Mendel, 2014). In parallel, a growing and increasingly coordinated global civil society movement has amplified public demand for information rights through campaigns such as International Right to Know Day, adding social pressure to legal advocacy (Lemieux & Trapnell, 2016).

Moreover, the recognition of access to information as a fundamental human right has served as a powerful normative force, especially in regions such as Latin America and Africa (Lemieux & Trapnell, 2016). This evolving human rights framework has contributed to the legal entrenchment of RTI at the international level. Landmark judicial decisions, such as the 2006 ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in *Claude Reyes v. Chile*, and the 2009 decision by the European Court of Human Rights, have affirmed this right as legally enforceable. The UN Human Rights Committee further reinforced this position in its 2011 General Comment No. 34 on Article 19 of the ICCPR, formally recognizing access to information as a component of the right to freedom of expression (Mendel, 2014).

Lemieux and Trapnell (2016) argue that the growing demand for information is closely tied to a global trend toward broader access enabled by internet-based technologies and mobile platforms. In parallel, Liambomba (2023) observes that technological advancements and the decreasing cost of digital infrastructure have fostered an environment in which public demand for information has expanded rapidly. This demand extends beyond governments to include businesses and civil society organizations, reflecting a broader recognition of information as a public good. The OECD (2014) similarly highlights the transformative role of ICTs in enhancing access to public sector information (PSI), noting that Freedom of Information (FOI) can empower citizens, foster trust, and improve policy outcomes when implemented inclusively. In this regard, mechanisms that combine digital platforms with traditional access channels, such as in-person or telephone requests, help ensure that FOI reaches all segments of the population.

In terms of endogenous factors, although Dokeniya (2013) notes that in several countries civil society organizations and the media helped reduce resistance to the adoption of RTI laws, in others—such as Brazil, Indonesia, and Nigeria—legislation was significantly delayed despite strong advocacy efforts by civil society (Mendel, 2014). This highlights

that civil society advocacy, while important, is not sufficient on its own to guarantee the adoption of RTI legislation. Political will is also necessary. In several countries, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, it was reform-oriented political leaders who played a central role in advancing democratization and promoting transparency reforms (Lemieux & Trapnell, 2016).

Additionally, several scholars have emphasized that the nature of a country's political system can shape the likelihood of adopting RTI legislation. McClean (2011), for example, argues that nations with well-established democratic institutions, competitive political environments, or presidential systems are more inclined to promote transparency measures such as RTI laws. Similarly, Levy (2014) suggests that transparency is a type of governance intervention that is best suited to more competitive political systems.

## **2.2 Regional normative frameworks for FOIA: The Inter-American Model Law 2.0**

Although transparency is globally acknowledged as essential for both private and public organizations, the adoption of a universally applicable framework remains a significant challenge. Focusing on public authorities, FOIA regulations or more generally the FOI Laws are the main regulatory tool in the sphere of free access to information (Bisio, 2017). Model laws are a prototype of legal text prepared for legislators to consider the advisability of incorporating it into their domestic legislation (UNCITRAL, n.d.). They offer structured templates for drafting new legislation or amending existing frameworks, and are often used by lawmakers, civil society, and international organizations to promote consistent legal standards on issues of regional relevance. In the Americas, the Organization of American States (OAS) has played a central role in the formulation and dissemination of model laws in various domains, including access to public information. It has also shown a strong interest in promoting the right of access to public information among member states (Altavilla, 2018).

Since 2003, the OAS General Assembly has issued a series of key resolutions on access to public information, which have shaped the normative and political landscape for subsequent reforms in the region. Notably, in 2008, the Inter-American Juridical Committee (CJI) adopted the Principles on the Right of Access to Public Information, which laid the groundwork for the development of more comprehensive legal instruments. This effort culminated in the adoption of the Inter-American Model Law on Access to Public Information in 2010, which served for over a decade as the benchmark

for FOIA-related legislative and institutional reforms in numerous OAS member states (OAS, n.d.).

Model Law 2.0 represents the most advanced regional legal framework for promoting access to public information as a human right and governance tool. It provides updated standards to enhance transparency, fight corruption, encourage open competition and investment, and strengthen trust in democratic institutions. It explicitly incorporates provisions on gender equity, digitalization, and the empowerment of vulnerable populations. Importantly, it calls on national and subnational governments to ensure uniformity in access standards across jurisdictions, while respecting local autonomy (OAS, 2020).

Upon its adoption, the OAS General Assembly urged member states to:

1. Support national and subnational agencies responsible for access to information and consolidate public policies that enhance participatory democracy.
2. Harmonize FOIA standards across territorial levels to ensure equal rights regardless of local administrative boundaries.
3. Uphold the right of access to public information even during public health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Use Model Law 2.0 as a reference in revising or adopting national and local legislation.

In this regard, Iñiguez (2023) highlighted that the new model law showed that technological advances in recent years made a difference in terms of the different types of records that public institutions can make available for citizens for easy access, and reflects the evolution of citizens' needs and the outcomes achieved in recent years regarding access to information. In addition, Andía et al. (2022) pointed out that although it is not a binding instrument, it was successful in that it served as a source of inspiration for laws in countries in the region, including Argentina. The Inter-American Model Law 2.0 thus serves not only as a technical and legal guide, but also as a normative expression of the region's collective commitment to promoting transparency and democratic governance. However, Altavilla (2018) observed that, among the 15 provinces that appropriately regulate this right through specific legislation, several design shortcomings persist. Based on a sample of seven principles drawn from the OAS Model Law, he found that the vast majority of provincial laws fail to fully comply with them.



### 2.3 FOIA and the governance challenges of federalism

While FOIA frameworks are primarily associated with reactive transparency, granting individuals the right to request information from public authorities, many also include provisions for active transparency, requiring institutions to proactively publish key data. Building on this distinction, Kassen (2018) has studied how the instrumentation of open data is a context-dependable endeavor, indirectly shaped by surrounding institutional contexts. Within those contexts, the type system of a state (federal vs. unitary) has appeared as an influencing factor (Cahlikova & Mabillard, 2020; Kassen, 2018; OECD, 2014; Ramos, 2021). Kassen (2018) emphasizes that in federal systems, the autonomous development of open data platforms at the local level is a prevalent phenomenon, owing to traditions of self-governance and political decentralization. In countries such as the United States, Canada, Germany, and Australia, regional and municipal authorities often develop subnational open data platforms independently of nationally promoted initiatives. For instance, in the U.S., three distinct ecosystems—federal, state, and municipal—have emerged, each promoting their unique platforms and local projects independently of one another. This reflects what Kassen (2015) describes as e-federalism: an e-Government model shaped by multilevel power relations, where the wide discretion and political autonomy of local authorities result in highly diverse implementation strategies and policy outcomes across jurisdictions.

In that sense, the OECD (2014) argues that FOI provisions should be observed at both central and subnational levels. In federal systems, policy implementation and regulatory enforcement are often delegated to local governments, creating a decentralized framework that contrasts with the centralized approach typically seen in unitary states. This decentralization can present unique challenges. For example, in Mexico, local governments have been tasked not only with implementing central FOI policies but also with amending their legal frameworks to ensure coordination with federal standards. Despite constitutional reforms aimed at strengthening the right to access information, the lack of legislative harmonization has resulted in uneven FOI practices across regions (Ramos, 2021).

Moreover, Cahlikova and Mabillard (2020) have argued that in federal systems with autonomous local units, external drivers often play a pivotal role in motivating open data initiatives. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends on the alignment and coordination between central and local governments. Ramos (2021) illustrates this through the Mexican case, where reforms introduced in 2007 aimed to establish common FOI principles. Yet, the absence of harmonized legislation led to disparate practices nationwide. Additionally, the complexity of the National Transparency Platform (SIPOT)

poses additional obstacles for users, as it requires navigating nearly 8,000 obligated entities across different federal and state jurisdictions to access relevant information.

Kassen (2018) also notes that e-federalism carries both political and economic implications. Politically, it enables considerable autonomy for local governments, resulting in diverse approaches to policy realization depending on local priorities and resources. Economically, it entails decentralized funding structures, with subnational governments responsible for financing open data initiatives. As a result, disparities often emerge in financial and technical resources available for such projects, both across states and even among counties within the same state.

## **2.4 Implementation gap: legal design vs. administrative practice**

Evidence demonstrates that the adoption of a FOIA law does not guarantee the effective implementation or exercise of the right to access public information. This gap is evident in the fact that, although over 75% of the world's population live in countries with right to information (RTI) laws, fewer than half of all countries have actually enacted such legislation (Mendel, 2014), reflecting an uneven global landscape in both adoption and enforcement. This was the case, for instance, in Germany and Switzerland, where, despite having enacted FOIA laws with features comparable to those of other countries, the number of information requests remained very low after their adoption (Holsen & Pasquier, 2011). Research indicates that both supply-side factors, such as inadequately trained staff and lack of infrastructure, and demand-side limitations, including low levels of public awareness, constrain the effective implementation of FOIA laws (Bashir & Nisar, 2020).

Additionally, Burt and Taylor (2009) argue that FOI implementation is particularly susceptible to failure in contexts where local governments lack the internal capacity to efficiently retrieve dispersed information. When information is fragmented across departments, and there is no robust records management system or integrated ICT infrastructure in place, handling complex requests becomes significantly more difficult. Also, studies from African contexts reveal that FOIA provisions often remain unimplemented due to a combination of factors: limited financial and human resources, weak political commitment, and the lack of independent oversight mechanisms beyond the judiciary, which may not always offer impartial or accessible remedies (Asogwa & Ezema, 2017). Beyond these structural challenges, Mendel (2014) highlights how outdated information systems and poor archival practices, combined with entrenched bureaucratic opacity, often further obstruct the realization of access rights. In many

countries, either progress toward adopting RTI legislation is slow or, where such laws do exist, insufficient institutional effort is made to ensure their enforcement and operationalization.

Even in countries with longstanding FOIA regimes, such as the United States, implementation challenges persist. Empirical research has pointed to a range of obstacles faced by requesters, including high costs, overly complex application procedures, inconsistent redaction practices, and inefficiencies in the municipal and local offices tasked with managing the process. Moreover, federal agencies often display uneven levels of compliance with transparency regulations, further complicating access and undermining trust in the system (Mihailidis & Gamwell, 2022).

## **2.5 Citizen awareness and the demand for public information**

Holsen and Pasquier (2011), who analyzed the low number of public information requests in Germany and Switzerland after the adoption of ATI laws, identified low public awareness of the topic as one of the explanatory factors. According to the authors, two likely explanations for this phenomenon are the absence of legal provisions requiring active promotion of the policy, and the lack of campaigns and limited efforts by interest groups or the media to raise public awareness. In line with this, the World Bank Group (2020) stated that the public demand for information is a critical factor in the effectiveness of FOIA systems, since underutilized systems tend to be underdeveloped and exhibit poor performance. Their study showed that in countries where civil society has not been engaged in the debate, the right to information has atrophied and the law has never been fully implemented. That was the case, for instance, in Punjab, Pakistan, where Bashir and Nisar (2020) identified limited public awareness of the law's content as one of the demand-side issues affecting implementation. Due to budgetary constraints, the Punjab Information Commission was unable to conduct a mass awareness campaign for citizens through electronic and print media.

Borges et al. (2020) provide complementary insights from Brazil. Although the approval of the FOIA law prompted a significant transformation in public institutions, leading them to restructure their interactive capacity and invest in new technologies to modernize information channels, access to information remains inherently tied to citizens' digital literacy and ability to effectively engage with available data. As the authors explain, the mere availability of information does not ensure its appropriation or meaningful understanding by citizens. They also highlight that, even seven years after the enactment of the FOIA, Brazil's federal executive branch still required training and capacity-

building efforts to foster a transparency culture. Moreover, shortcomings persisted among the authorities responsible for implementation, who often lack a clear and consistent understanding of their roles in implementing FOI policies.

Further evidence from Chile underscores the relational nature of FOIA use, showing that both institutional capacity and civil society engagement play a decisive role in the volume and dynamics of information requests. On the one hand, municipalities with greater autonomy and administrative strength tend to proactively disseminate information, reducing the need for formal requests. On the other, robust civil society organizations can strategically employ FOIA mechanisms to demand accountability, access relevant data, and exert pressure on local authorities. These findings suggest a dual-track strategy to foster openness at the local level: strengthening institutional capacity to disclose information and empowering civil society to participate meaningfully. Enhancing either of these dimensions can reinforce the other, contributing to a more participatory and effective information ecosystem (Hernández-Bonivento & Moller, 2025).

Finally, economic barriers can also limit citizen engagement with FOI systems. In Ireland, a noticeable drop in the number of FOI requests followed the introduction of new request fees. Similarly, in both Switzerland and Germany, fees have been identified as a potential deterrents to public use of FOI mechanisms (Holsen & Pasquier, 2011).

## **2.6 The quality and accessibility of public information**

Research shows that mere disclosure does not guarantee meaningful transparency. For overseeing public processes and use of resources, public information must be complete, transparent, contextualized, verified, verifiable, and intelligible (Flores, 2020; Morales et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is necessary to advance in the standardization of quality, accessibility and easy-to-use publication formats for open data in order to generate value (Martínez et al., 2023).

As emphasized by Martínez et al. (2023), making open data available on government portals does not automatically ensure its quality. Governments must invest in improving data quality, particularly in terms of formats, metadata, and publication schedules. In parallel, technical and organizational transformations are necessary to support robust data management. This includes investments in hardware, software, technical standards, staff training, and internal decision-making processes. As user communities become more active and diverse, it becomes increasingly important to promote stakeholder participation in order to improve the integrity and accessibility of public data.

In this regard, Borges et al. (2020) noted that, in the case of Brazil, even after seven years after the adoption of the Access to Information Law, there was still a pressing need for further training and education within the Federal Executive. They emphasized that while the right to access information may be enshrined in law, this alone does not guarantee its effective appropriation by citizens. Access, they argue, is insufficient without a proper mediation process that offers accessible language and utilizes appropriate technologies to facilitate comprehension.

Similarly, the 2020 World Bank report, which reviewed FOIA reforms across several countries, found that records management consistently scored poorly, suggesting that this area remains overlooked and weakly functioning. The report emphasized that poor data and document management can undermine the impact of access-to-information reforms, and that a reliable, accessible evidence base is essential for delivering meaningful transparency (World Bank Group, 2020).

Collectively, these studies highlight the need for comprehensive and integrated approaches to ensuring the effectiveness of open data initiatives. Such approaches should include legal frameworks that are consistently implemented across levels of government, together with investments in both technical infrastructure and human capacity. However, as illustrated by the experiences of Brazil and Mexico, the decentralization of authority in federal systems can complicate the coordination of open data policies and practices and lead to uneven implementation across regions and jurisdictions (Ramos, 2021; Cahlikova & Mabillard, 2020).

## **2.7 Corruption perception in Latin America and open government principles**

The implementation of Freedom of Information Acts (FOIA) plays a central role in institutionalizing transparency and strengthening anti-corruption frameworks (World Bank Group, 2020). In this context, access to public information is not simply a legal entitlement, but a critical mechanism for exposing misconduct and promoting civic oversight. Transparency and accountability have thus emerged as key strategies for addressing democratic deficits, rooted in the belief that by strengthening accountability it is possible to "repair the leaky pipes" of corruption (McGee & Gaventa, 2011).

The relevance of these issues is particularly acute in Latin America, a region where corruption remains a persistent and systemic problem. As noted by Morales et al. (2019), corruption is a common factor across Latin American democracies and is not exclusive to developing nations. Empirical evidence also suggests that transparency mechanisms

can yield tangible results: after the adoption of open government legislation, public officials are more likely to be convicted for previously hidden acts of corruption, as greater openness increases the likelihood of detection (Cordis & Warren, 2014).

The latest Corruption Perceptions Index (2024) by Transparency International ranks Argentina 99th out of 180 countries, highlighting serious concerns about public sector integrity. This is especially relevant for a country that has gone through many long periods of military rule in which information was classified or secret (Farioli, 2015). Similarly, the broader regional picture is similarly troubling. Across the Americas, growing restrictions on access to public information and citizen participation represent one of the most significant setbacks in recent years. In Argentina specifically, a recent executive decree has narrowed the definitions of public and private information, restricting access and reducing the responsiveness of state institutions to information requests (Transparency International, 2024).

In response to these governance challenges, open government has emerged as a paradigm for reform. The term first emerged in the United States during the debates surrounding the passage of the Freedom of Information Act in 1966. It was used as a synonym for public accountability and referred primarily to the disclosure of politically sensitive government information (Yu & Robinson, 2011).

According to the OECD (2016), open government is understood as a culture of governance rooted in transparency, accountability, and participation, principles that are not only democratic in nature, but also instrumental in achieving broader goals such as inclusive growth and the fight against corruption. Indeed, open government strategies should not be pursued in isolation, as they intersect with multiple policy domains and contribute to systemic integrity (OECD, 2016). A central initiative promoting these values is the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a global platform comprising 77 countries, 150 local governments, and thousands of civil society organizations. The OGP is grounded in the notion that governments become more accountable, accessible, and responsive when they collaborate with citizens in the design of public policies. Members co-create two-year action plans that translate open government principles into concrete policy commitments, addressing a wide range of governance issues. According to Bellix et al. (2016), a foundational pillar of open government is the circulation and reuse of public information, which must be made accessible without restrictive licenses to ensure its full democratic potential.

In this regional and global context, advancing access to public information in Argentina is not only a legal obligation derived from its FOIA framework and international commitments, but also a necessary step toward improving democratic quality and public

sector integrity. As outlined by the OECD (2016), open government principles, particularly transparency and participation, are closely linked to the promotion of institutional trust and the fight against corruption. Similarly, initiatives such as the OGP emphasize that meaningful access to public information fosters accountability and improves the relationship between governments and citizens. In a setting marked by concerns over opacity and declining responsiveness, aligning FOIA implementation with open government standards becomes a key strategy to strengthen legitimacy and reinforce public oversight.

## **2.8 Research gaps**

Although FOIA laws have been widely adopted across countries, existing research offers limited insight into the reasons why these frameworks often fall short in practice. Much of the literature has focused on legal design or institutional models, while fewer studies have explored the practical challenges and informal factors that affect implementation. In particular, recent, grounded, and stakeholder-based qualitative research remains scarce, especially studies that examine how FOIA mechanisms operate on a day-to-day basis.

Moreover, most of the existing literature is geographically concentrated, with a strong emphasis on the United States and Western European countries. Research on access to information in other regions, particularly Latin America, has been comparatively limited, and even more so when it comes to subnational levels of government. This is especially relevant in federal systems, where responsibilities are frequently decentralized and local implementation dynamics can vary widely. While a few regional studies have addressed national-level experiences in Latin America, subnational implementation—at the provincial or municipal level—remains largely underexplored.

Additionally, the role of public awareness in FOIA effectiveness has not been widely studied, even though a lack of citizen knowledge is often identified as a limiting factor in actual usage. These gaps suggest a need for more context-specific, empirically grounded research that captures the realities of implementation beyond legal texts, particularly in underrepresented regions and levels of government.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

The analysis of FOIA implementation in this study is guided by the conceptual framework developed by Lemieux and Trapnell (2016) in their World Bank Guide to Implementing FOI Laws. This framework identifies four domains of effectiveness—enabling conditions, demand for information, institutional capacity, and oversight—which provide a structured lens for assessing the functioning of FOIA systems, as shown in Table 1.

<b>Driver</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<i>Enabling Conditions</i>	They include a well-designed legal framework, as well as a functioning civil society with the capacity to engage with government and to advocate for reform. Also included are political stability and ongoing policy prioritization from executive or legislative leadership that signals the importance of RTI policies within government agencies.
<i>Demand for Information</i>	Demand for information is a critical factor in the effectiveness of RTI systems, because underutilized systems tend to be underdeveloped and exhibit poor performance. Knowledge, motivation, and accessibility are constraints on access to information. The accessibility of RTI systems is significantly influenced by the extent of public awareness about information rights and RTI processes. In turn, knowledge of RTI processes is enhanced through repeated interactions with agencies concerning information disclosure.
<i>Institutional Capacity</i>	Institutional capacity refers to both the specialist and nonspecialist functions of bureaucracies, including records management, strategic planning, personnel management, and monitoring progress toward institutional goals that are necessary for effective operation of RTI systems.
<i>Oversight</i>	Oversight consists of both monitoring tasks and enforcement responsibilities. Monitoring tasks include management of nationwide implementation and guidance on the design of policies at the national, subnational, and agency levels, while enforcement responsibilities include decision processes on appeals and complaints, and enforcement of appropriate sanctions for noncompliance.

**Table 1.** Domains of FOIA implementation.

In addition, Table 2 outlines the main challenges linked to each of the four domains of effectiveness, as identified by Lemieux and Trapnell (2016).

<b>Enabling Conditions</b>	<b>Demand for Information</b>	<b>Institutional capacity</b>	<b>Oversight</b>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal framework</li> <li>• Advocacy efforts</li> <li>• Policy prioritization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public Awareness</li> <li>• Accessibility of FOIA processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updated, formal practices (Request processing, Proactive disclosure, Records Management)</li> <li>• Staffing levels</li> <li>• Staff capacity</li> <li>• Staff incentives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring of institutional capacity</li> <li>• Enforcement of disclosure obligations (appeals, sanctions)</li> </ul>
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**Table 2.** Main challenges per domain.

## 4 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework adopted for the study. It begins by outlining the research design and its alignment with the study's objectives. It then details the two phases of data collection: an online survey targeting relevant stakeholders in the province of Córdoba, and a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews. The chapter proceeds to explain the analytical approaches used for both quantitative and qualitative data, including the coding strategy for interview transcripts. It concludes with a discussion of the main methodological limitations encountered during the research process.

### 4.1 Research design

To address the research questions “How do key societal actors in Córdoba perceive and experience the current process for requesting public information?” and “What potential avenues for improvement can be identified through the analysis of these actors’ perceptions and experiences?”, a qualitative approach is adopted. Qualitative research often seeks to answer “why” or “how” questions, as it enables the exploration of participants’ perspectives and the contextual factors that may shape human behavior and events (Yin, 2018). Building on this, the research process is structured in two main phases. The first involves a purposive sampling strategy through a targeted survey aimed at capturing the perceptions of selected stakeholder groups. The second phase consists of semi-structured interviews with representatives from the stakeholder groups, designed to complement and deepen the findings from the initial survey by providing more nuanced and contextual insights. The combination of these two data collection methods helps to mitigate the limitations inherent in each individual tool.

A stakeholder approach was chosen for the data collection. Considering their perceptions is important since they have the power to make an organization either succeed or fail, and a purposeful stakeholder engagement can reduce an organization's costs of operations by aligning preferences and reducing dissatisfaction, thus enhancing its long-term sustainability (Franklin, 2020). In line with this, Martínez et al. (2023) argue that countries of Latin America should make greater efforts to improve the participation of stakeholders in the quality and integrity of open data. Therefore, data both in the survey and interviews was collected through purposive sampling, based on predefined criteria. Purposive sampling refers to the intentional selection of participants based on specific characteristics or expertise relevant to the research objectives (Bernard, 2006; Patton, 2002; Cresswell & Clark, 2011). This method was employed to identify cases offering rich information while making optimal use of available resources.

Based on these criteria, the study targeted five stakeholder categories, each selected for their institutional role, experience, or engagement with the FOIA system in Córdoba. Table 3 outlines each stakeholder group and justifies their inclusion in the analysis.

<i>Journalists</i>	Journalists are frequent users of freedom of information (FOI) laws, often relying on them to access public records for investigative reporting. Also, journalists have historically played a key role in advocating for the adoption and strengthening of FOIA legislation (Gill & Hughes, 2005; Holsen & Pasquier, 2012; Wald, 1984). Their experience provides valuable insight into the practical functioning of information access systems and the broader implications of transparency for democratic accountability.
<i>Academics</i>	The academic sector was included as a relevant stakeholder given its dual role as both a user and generator of public knowledge. Researchers rely on access to government-held information for data-driven inquiry, while also contributing to the value of such information through analysis and dissemination. Also, in Latin America, academics are frequently engaged by governments in co-creation spaces, where they collaborate in the design of public policies and development programmes (OECD, 2016).
<i>Students</i>	University students, particularly in the social sciences, represent a key demographic in understanding emerging attitudes toward transparency and access to public information. As future professionals, policymakers, and members of civil society, their engagement with FOIA frameworks is crucial. In line with this, it has been argued that active citizenship requires not only access to information but also the promotion of civic education and the strengthening of citizens' skills and capacities, especially among younger populations (OECD, 2016).
<i>Public officials (national, provincial, and municipal level)</i>	Public officials are directly responsible for implementing FOI procedures and responding to requests (Lemieux & Trapnell, 2016). Thus, their perspective is essential to understanding institutional capacities and internal barriers.
<i>Civil society representatives</i>	Civil society organizations play a central role in demanding transparency and using FOI requests to hold governments accountable (McGee & Gaventa, 2011; Darch, 2016). Also, they have worked hard to construct enforceable laws in Latin America to guarantee maximum openness (Gill & Hughes, 2006).

**Table 3.** Selected stakeholder groups.

#### 4.1.1 First phase: online survey on stakeholders' perceptions

In the first stage, a targeted survey was designed to gather the perceptions of relevant stakeholders regarding the current procedure for requesting public information in the province of Córdoba, Argentina. Respondents were asked to indicate their sector of affiliation. The survey included predefined categories: provincial public administration; municipal public administration; national public administration; civil society organizations (NGOs, foundations, collectives); academia / research; student; journalism / media; other. Respondents who selected "Other" were excluded from the analysis. Additionally, only individuals who currently reside in or had previously resided in the province of Córdoba were included in order to ensure geographic proximity and relevance to the provincial access-to-information system.

To ascertain stakeholders' perceptions regarding the functioning of the access to information system in Córdoba, an online Likert-scale questionnaire was developed using the Google Forms platform. The survey was written in Spanish, the native language of the target respondents, and distributed through a snowball sampling method (Goodman, 1961), whereby initial participants were asked to forward the survey to others within their professional or social networks.

The structure of the questionnaire followed the analytical framework previously discussed, addressing three out of the four domains of FOIA implementation effectiveness identified by Trapnell and Lemieux (2016) in their World Bank report: enabling conditions, demand for information, and institutional capacity. Due to time constraints, the study excluded the 'oversight' domain.

The questionnaire was therefore organized into thematic blocks that align with these drivers, allowing the instrument to capture stakeholder perceptions across the different layers that shape the functioning of FOIA systems. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "strongly disagree", 2 "disagree", 3 "neither agree nor disagree", 4 "agree", and 5 "strongly agree".

- The first section, titled *Legal Framework and Institutional Commitment*, addressed the domain of enabling conditions. It included items assessing respondents' views on the adequacy of the legal framework in Córdoba, the clarity of procedural rules, and the extent to which public institutions demonstrate a commitment to transparency through policy prioritization.
- The second section, *Public Awareness and Access*, corresponded to the demand for information drivers. This block included statements related to public

knowledge about the right to request information, the simplicity and usability of the process, and perceptions of inclusiveness, particularly in terms of socioeconomic and geographic barriers.

- The third section, *Institutional Capacity and Responsiveness*, focused on the dimension of institutional capacity. It included questions that evaluate whether public officials are adequately trained, whether requests are processed in a timely and comprehensive manner, and whether institutions have the digital infrastructure to manage information requests efficiently.
- The fourth section, *Trust, Impact, and Civic Engagement*, bridges the demand-side and outcome-oriented aspects of transparency, capturing how FOIA is perceived to influence real-world civic engagement and government accountability. It assessed the perceived usefulness of FOIA for civic action, public debate, and holding the government accountable. It also included items on how frequently FOIA mechanisms are used in the respondent's field of activity.
- The fifth section, *Future Improvements*, captured respondents' views on institutional reform and policy enhancements, touching on the three dimensions covered by the study. This included preferences for legal modernization, digitalization, stakeholder participation in FOIA reform, and capacity-building initiatives.
- The sixth section, *Sensitive Thematic Areas*, explored which categories of public information are considered most important or sensitive by respondents. While not directly tied to a single driver, it relates to both demand and accountability, and can inform targeted transparency policies based on stakeholder expectations.
- Finally, the seventh section, *Self-Assessment*, served a transversal role by collecting information on respondents' familiarity with the FOIA system and their previous use of access to information tools. These items helped contextualizing the perceptions expressed throughout the questionnaire.

While the questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale for all closed-ended items, no additional response options such as "Not applicable" or "I don't know" were included. Although this might raise concerns about the risk of forcing responses from participants with insufficient knowledge, the scale was deliberately designed so that the midpoint (option 3) served as a neutral alternative, formulated as "Neither relevant nor irrelevant" in the case of the thematic sensitivity section. This allowed respondents to express uncertainty or neutrality without selecting a polarized answer. All questions were

mandatory in the Google Forms platform to ensure data completeness; however, care was taken to phrase the items in accessible language and avoid highly technical content in order to reduce the likelihood of uninformed responses.

To reduce the risk of response bias and to enhance the internal validity of the instrument, a set of control items was deliberately included in the questionnaire. These items were designed to test for acquiescence bias (the tendency to agree with all statements) and consistency in responses. Specifically, some statements were negatively phrased or presented in a way that contradicted the dominant normative framing of FOIA, requiring respondents to actively engage with the content and reflect critically on their answers. This approach is consistent with survey design best practices, which recommend the inclusion of reverse-coded or “control” items to detect inattentive or biased responding (Podsakoff et al., 2003). For example, while most items emphasized the utility and fairness of the access to information system, a few statements, such as “The right to access public information should be limited to professionals who need it for work purposes”, offered a contrasting viewpoint. The inclusion of these items allowed the researcher to identify response patterns that may suggest inattentiveness, contradiction, or social desirability effects.

The Likert-scale questionnaire was used to gather general perceptions that would serve as a preliminary diagnostic and provide a broad overview of the views held by relevant stakeholders.

#### **4.1.2 Second phase: semi-structured interviews**

The second phase of the research consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of the stakeholder groups previously identified. These interviews aimed to complement the questionnaire findings by providing deeper understanding of individual perceptions, lived experiences, and practical recommendations regarding the access to information process in Córdoba, and to uncover contextual factors that may influence its implementation.

The interviews followed a flexible guide organized around key themes derived from the literature review, theoretical framework, and survey results, allowing for consistency across interviews while leaving room for probing and clarification. Participants were selected purposely based on their role, expertise, and engagement with transparency-related matters. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. In total, 9 interviews were conducted in May of 2025. Prior to each interview,

participants were informed about the purpose of the research and gave their explicit consent to participate. Also, with the participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for thematic coding and analysis.

## 4.2 Data analysis

### 4.2.1 Analysis of Survey Results

The data collected through the Likert-scale questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to identify trends in stakeholder perceptions regarding the implementation and functioning of the access to information system in the province of Córdoba. The analysis was carried out using Microsoft Excel and consisted primarily of calculating the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for each survey item.

Each item followed a 5-point Likert scale, where respondents indicated their level of agreement with a given statement. The scale was interpreted as indicated in Table 4.

Likert Value	Interpretation	Assigned Meaning in Analysis
1	Strongly Disagree	Clear disagreement
2	Disagree	General disagreement
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Neutral / Uncertain
4	Agree	General agreement
5	Strongly Agree	Strong agreement

**Table 4.** Interpretation of Likert-scale values used in the analysis.

For the purposes of data aggregation and interpretation:

- Responses rated 4 or 5 were classified as agreement, signaling support or positive perception toward the statement.
- Responses rated 1 or 2 were classified as disagreement, indicating opposition or negative perception.

- A rating of 3 was treated as neutral, reflecting either indifference, lack of knowledge, or ambivalence.

This binary classification enabled clearer interpretation of stakeholder attitudes, particularly in identifying areas of consensus or divergence. Items were grouped according to three of the four analytical domains defined in the conceptual framework: Enabling Conditions, Demand for Information, and Institutional Capacity. The reverse-worded control items, strategically embedded within each thematic block to ensure internal consistency and attentiveness, were analyzed both independently and in relation to other items within the same domain to identify potential response bias or logical inconsistencies.

When relevant, results were further disaggregated by stakeholder profile (e.g., public officials, journalists, civil society, students, academics) to explore variations in perceptions across groups. Given the limited sample size, this disaggregation was used to generate qualitative insights rather than statistically generalizable conclusions.

#### **4.2.2 Analysis of Interview Data**

The semi-structured interviews conducted during the second phase of the research were analyzed through a thematic coding approach to extract recurring perceptions, narratives, and reform suggestions shared by stakeholders regarding the functioning and reform of the access to public information system in Córdoba.

The coding process combined both deductive and inductive elements. A set of preliminary codes was developed prior to the analysis based on the interview guide and the conceptual framework adopted in the study, the drivers of FOIA effectiveness proposed by Lemieux and Trapnell (2016). These initial codes were complemented by new categories that emerged during iterative transcript review, allowing for a more grounded and flexible interpretation of the data.

The interviews were transcribed and imported into Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis tool. Each transcript was coded manually. Relevant excerpts were tagged with one or more thematic codes, depending on the thematic relevance of the excerpt. This process enabled the identification of recurrent issues across stakeholder categories, as well as variations in perceptions linked to the roles, experiences, and institutional positions of the participants. Table 5 represents the codes used for the qualitative data analysis.



<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Effectiveness domain</b>	<b>Analytical relevance</b>
<i>perceived_importance</i>	Value assigned to the right of access to public information in Córdoba	Demand for information	RQ1
<i>citizen_awareness</i>	Perception of public awareness about the right to information and use of the request system	Demand for information	Both
<i>procedure_description</i>	General characterization of the information request process	Institutional capacity	RQ1
<i>personal_experience</i>	Cases in which the person or their organization submitted a request and how it was handled	Institutional capacity	RQ1
<i>legal_evaluation</i>	Opinions on the adequacy of Law 8.803	Enabling conditions	RQ1
<i>institutional_strengths</i>	Positive mentions about the institutions responsible for handling information requests	Institutional capacity	RQ1
<i>institutional_weaknesses</i>	Negative or critical mentions about the institutions involved	Institutional capacity	Both
<i>general_barriers</i>	General obstacles that impede citizens from exercising their right to access information	Not classified	Both
<i>geographic_barrier</i>	Specific difficulties faced by individuals outside the provincial capital	Institutional capacity	Both
<i>official_preparedness</i>	Opinions on whether public officials are properly trained to handle requests	Institutional capacity	RQ1
<i>information_usefulness</i>	Practical uses of the information obtained through access mechanisms	Demand for information	RQ1
<i>tangible_impact</i>	Cases in which access to information had concrete effects (e.g., media, justice, public debate)	Demand for information	RQ1
<i>suggested_improvements</i>	Specific proposals for improving the current request process	Not classified	RQ2
<i>ogp_reform_opinion</i>	Evaluations of the reform initiative under the Open Government Partnership (OGP) framework	Enabling conditions	Both
<i>political_will</i>	Perceptions of political will to advance transparency, including the degree of genuine commitment, continuity of efforts, and support from senior officials	Enabling conditions	Both

**Table 5.** Codes used for the interview data analysis.

The analysis focused on understanding how actors perceive the current legal and institutional framework, their practical experiences with information requests, perceived barriers and limitations, and suggestions for future reform. The resulting coded material was then grouped by theme to inform the structure of the findings chapter.

### **4.3 Limitations**

As is common in qualitative research, this study has methodological limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable, given its single-case design and reliance on non-probabilistic sampling. However, the study aims to provide analytically transferable insights that may be relevant for understanding similar challenges and institutional dynamics in other subnational contexts within Latin America, particularly those with comparable legal, administrative, and political characteristics. Furthermore, the research was conducted under constraints of time, resources, and researcher capacity.

Regarding the sampling strategy, purposive sampling, although widely used in exploratory research, introduces the possibility of selection bias, as participants were identified based on the researcher's judgment of their relevance to the study objectives. While this approach was necessary to target informed stakeholders, it inherently limits representativeness. Moreover, the snowball component of the recruitment process, which relied on participant referrals, may have reinforced certain networks or perspectives while excluding others, which may have limited the heterogeneity of perspectives represented in the data.

Another limitation relates to the structure of the Likert-scale questions. The inclusion of a "Not applicable" or "I don't know" response option was considered to avoid forcing answers from participants who might feel unqualified to respond to certain items. However, due to the constraints of the Google Forms platform, which does not allow combining Likert scales with optional skip logic or separate 'Don't know' choices, this feature was not implemented. To mitigate this, the midpoint of the scale (option 3) was deliberately framed as a neutral response (e.g., "Neither relevant nor irrelevant"), which allowed participants without a strong opinion or sufficient knowledge to indicate that position.

#### **4.4 AI-assisted processes in thesis preparation**

In accordance with KU Leuven's policy on the ethical use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), this thesis openly discloses the selective and limited use of AI tools throughout the research and writing process. ChatGPT was consulted during the initial planning stages to assist with outlining, organizing the structure of chapters, and clarifying the flow of ideas. Otter.ai was utilized exclusively for transcribing audio recordings from interviews, without being involved in any stage of data interpretation or analysis. For final language polishing, Grammarly was used to review grammar and spelling. These tools were not employed to produce original content, develop theoretical arguments, or generate empirical findings. Full authorship and academic responsibility for the content remain with the author, and all standards of academic integrity were strictly upheld.

## 5 Results

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical research, which was conducted in two consecutive phases: a Likert-scale survey targeting key stakeholder groups in the province of Córdoba, followed by semi-structured interviews with selected participants from those same groups. The purpose of this twofold approach was to capture both the general perceptions and more nuanced insights regarding the current access to public information process in the province.

The first part of the chapter offers a descriptive analysis of the survey results, organized thematically according to the questionnaire structure. It highlights trends in stakeholder perceptions, areas of consensus or divergence, and preliminary indications of implementation gaps or challenges. The second part focuses on the qualitative analysis of the interview data, identifying recurring themes, illustrative quotes, and contextual explanations that help interpret or expand upon the survey findings.

While the scope of this study does not allow for generalization beyond the specific case analyzed, the findings offer insights into the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the current system, as well as stakeholder-driven proposals for improvement. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative perspectives allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the FOIA framework functions in practice within a subnational context.

### 5.1 Overview of data collection

A total of 32 responses were initially collected through the online survey. However, one response corresponding to the private sector—an actor outside the scope of this study—was excluded from the analysis. The final sample thus comprises 31 valid responses. The vast majority of participants (30 out of 31) currently reside in the province of Córdoba, allowing for a territorially relevant but not geographically exhaustive sample.

In line with the research design, which identified key stakeholder groups in advance, the questionnaire targeted individuals affiliated with the public sector (at the national, provincial, or municipal level), academia, civil society organizations, journalism and the media, as well as university students. Responses were collected from all stakeholder groups, with some respondents belonging to more than one. Table 6 presents the number of respondents per stakeholder category.

Stakeholder Group	Number of respondents
National public administration	1
Provincial public administration	10
Municipal public administration	2
Academia	3
Students	14
Civil society	9
Journalism/Media	2

**Table 6.** Responses per stakeholder group.

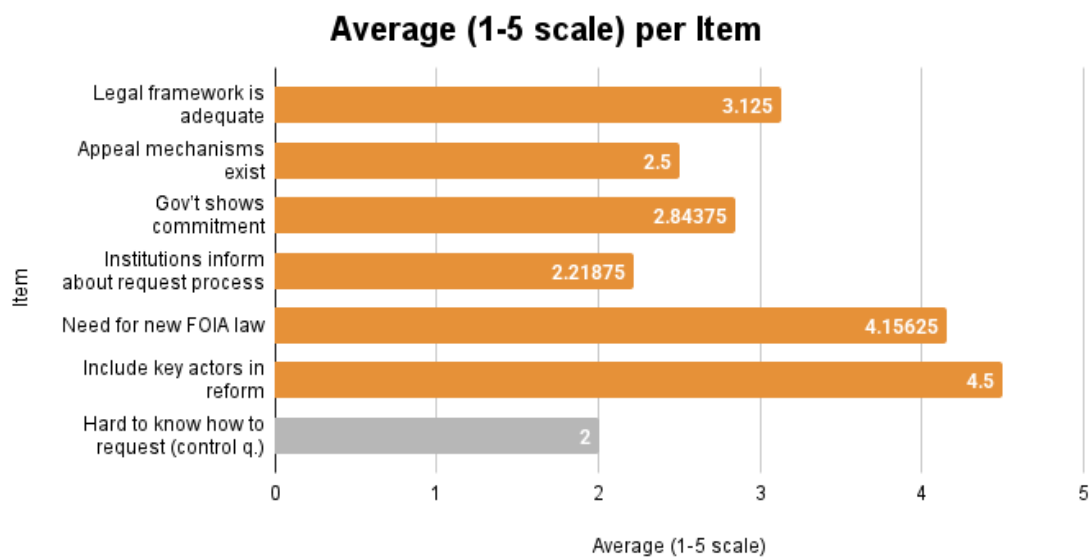
Approximately one-third of participants (9 individuals) initially reported having submitted a public information request within the past 12 months. However, subsequent clarification revealed that none of these respondents had used the formal mechanisms contemplated in the present study (i.e., submitting a request under the procedures established by Law 8803). This suggests a broader conceptual ambiguity regarding what constitutes a FOIA request among stakeholders, and it reinforces the need to interpret these responses with caution.

While the survey does not aim for statistical representativeness, it offers valuable exploratory data aligned with the study's qualitative and stakeholder-based approach.

## 5.2 Survey results

### 5.2.1 Enabling Conditions

This block explored respondents' perceptions of the legal and procedural foundations that shape access to public information in Córdoba. It included five items assessing the adequacy of the current legal framework, the clarity and accessibility of procedures, the presence of appeal mechanisms, the government's political commitment to transparency, and a reverse-worded control question regarding the difficulty of knowing how to submit a request. Figure 1 shows the average scores for survey items associated with the Institutional Capacity domain, based on a 1–5 Likert scale.



**Figure 1.** Average scores for items related to Enabling Conditions (1–5 Likert scale).

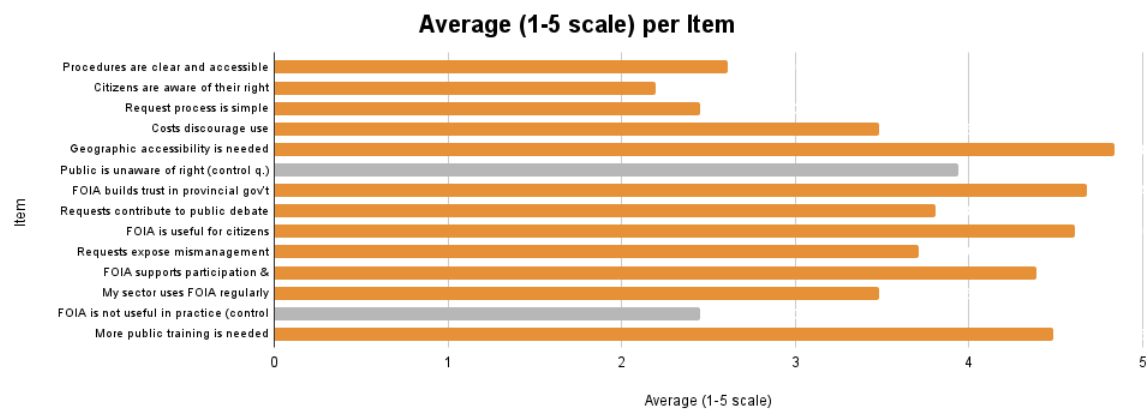
The results indicate a generally critical view of these enabling conditions. No item reached an average score above 3.13, meaning that respondents, on average, neither agreed nor strongly agreed with any of the statements. According to the interpretation criteria adopted in this study, scores close to or below 3 suggest a neutral to negative perception. The highest-rated item, "The current legal framework in Córdoba is adequate to guarantee the right of access to public information", received a mean of 3.13 ( $SD = 0.92$ ), reflecting a moderate level of agreement, but still falling short of clear support.

The two lowest-rated items highlight procedural barriers: "There are clear mechanisms to appeal denied or unanswered requests" ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ), and "Procedures for requesting information are clearly defined and accessible" ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). These were complemented by a control item phrased in the opposite direction: "It is difficult to know how to request public information", which received a high average score ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). The coherence between these responses strengthens the finding that procedural clarity is one of the most salient weaknesses in the current system.

The item assessing perceived political commitment to transparency also scored below the midpoint ( $M = 2.84$ ), indicating that skepticism among respondents extends beyond administrative procedures to the broader institutional environment surrounding FOIA implementation in Córdoba. Additionally, the relatively low standard deviations across all five items suggest a degree of consensus in these critical appraisals.

### 5.2.2 Demand for Information

This block explored respondents' perceptions of the public's awareness, ability, and motivation to exercise the right to access public information in the province of Córdoba. It included items addressing the clarity and accessibility of procedures, awareness of the right, perceived usefulness of the system, and barriers such as geographic or economic limitations. Two reverse-worded control items were included to assess internal consistency. Figure 2 shows the average scores for survey items associated with the Demand for Information domain, based on a 1–5 Likert scale.



**Figure 2.** Average scores for items related to Demand for Information (1–5 Likert scale).

The results suggest that the foundational conditions enabling public demand remain underdeveloped. The lowest-rated item was “Citizens in the province of Córdoba are aware of their right to access public information” ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), pointing to a widespread perception that this fundamental right is neither known nor sufficiently promoted. This perception is further supported by the reverse-worded item “The general public is unaware of their right to request public information”, which received one of the highest average scores ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ), confirming consistency across responses.

Perceptions of procedural simplicity were similarly unfavorable. “The information request process is simple and easy to use” scored only 2.45 ( $SD = 1.01$ ), while “The procedures for requesting information are clearly defined and accessible” scored marginally higher at 2.61 ( $SD = 0.94$ ). These results suggest a tendency toward disagreement with statements about procedural clarity and ease of use. A high score for the reverse-worded control item—“The procedure is complex and confusing” ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ )—suggests internal consistency and supports the interpretation that the process is widely perceived as confusing and not user-friendly.

Concerns about accessibility were not limited to legal or procedural clarity. “The existence of costs or request fees discourages the use of the FOIA system” received a moderately high score ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), suggesting that financial barriers may also contribute to low engagement with the request mechanism, although with greater variation among respondents.

Despite these perceived limitations, respondents generally acknowledged the potential value of FOIA. Statements such as “FOIA strengthens citizen trust in the provincial government” ( $M = 3.87$ ), “It contributes to public debates or decision-making processes” ( $M = 3.71$ ), and “The FOIA system has helped expose mismanagement or corruption” ( $M = 3.71$ ) demonstrate a belief in the instrument’s democratic utility, even if that utility is not fully realized in practice. Further optimism is reflected in strong agreement with items such as “More public training is needed on how to use the system” ( $M = 4.52$ ) and “The FOIA law is a useful tool for citizen participation and oversight” ( $M = 4.32$ ), highlighting a perceived need for institutional support and citizen empowerment.

When asked whether “The FOIA system in Córdoba is practically useful”, respondents offered a relatively high score ( $M = 3.74$ ), while the reverse-worded control “FOIA in Córdoba is practically not useful” received a notably lower score ( $M = 2.03$ ). This reinforces the interpretation that, despite operational shortcomings, the legitimacy and potential of the mechanism remain widely recognized.

Additional nuances emerged regarding the perceived inclusiveness and practical use of the FOIA system. The item “The procedure for requesting public information should be accessible to all citizens, regardless of where they live within the province” received a very high level of agreement ( $M = 4.48$ ), indicating a strong consensus that geographic disparities must be addressed. This reflects an awareness that residents outside the provincial capital may face additional hurdles, and suggests support for policies that ensure territorial equity in information access. In contrast, the item “My sector (e.g., journalism, civil society, public service) regularly uses information requests in its work” received a more moderate score ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ), with notable variability. This suggests that the regular use of FOIA mechanisms varies considerably across stakeholder groups, possibly due to differences in institutional culture, technical capacity, or perceived usefulness.

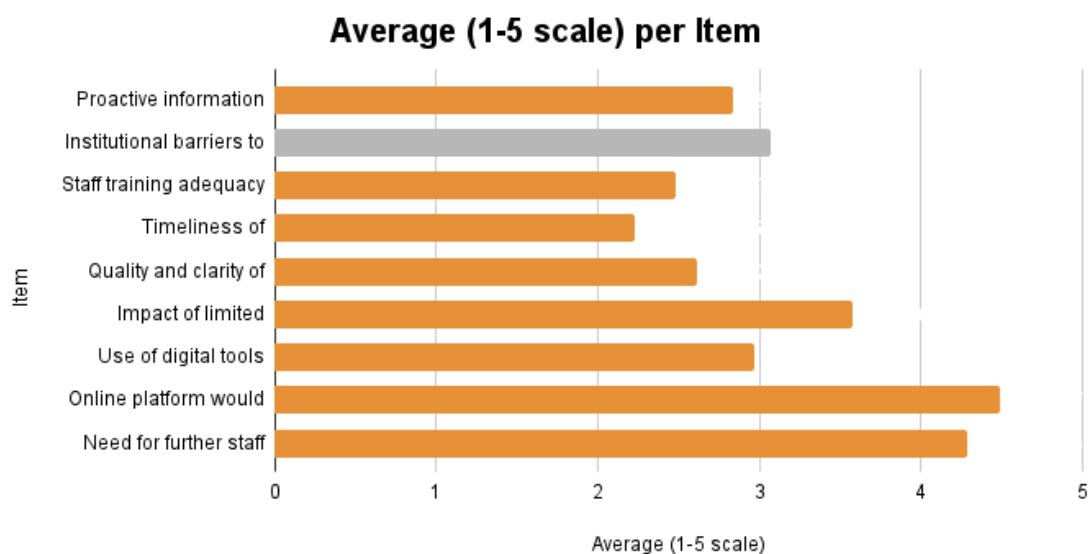
Among the 32 valid responses, a subset of 16 respondents identified as working in the national public administration or belonging to the academic or student sectors. Within this subgroup, average ratings were notably higher on key indicators such as FOIA's usefulness for citizen participation ( $M = 5.00$ ), its contribution to building trust in the provincial government ( $M = 5.00$ ), and its regular use in their respective fields ( $M = 4.75$ ).



While this does not allow for generalization, the consistency of high scores across these items suggests that individuals more engaged in policy, research, or governance-related domains tend to perceive FOIA as a relevant and actively used mechanism, particularly in professional contexts where information access is critical.

### 5.2.3 Institutional Capacity

This block assessed how respondents perceive the capacity of public institutions in Córdoba to implement the access to information system effectively. The items covered key dimensions such as proactive publication practices, staff training, timeliness and completeness of responses, digital tools, resource sufficiency, and institutional readiness. Figure 3 shows the average scores for survey items associated with the Institutional Capacity domain, based on a 1–5 Likert scale.



**Figure 3.** Average scores for items related to Institutional Capacity (1–5 Likert scale).

Overall, the results indicate a perception of widespread institutional limitations. No item reached the midpoint of the Likert scale, and most hovered around or below 2.5, suggesting that respondents tend to view the provincial government as lacking the capacity to fulfill FOIA obligations effectively.

The most positively rated item was “An online platform for submitting requests would improve access to information” ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), which—although hypothetical—reveals a widely shared belief in the importance of digital infrastructure to expand access. The only item approaching moderate agreement was “Public officials are adequately

trained to respond to information requests” ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ), suggesting some confidence in individual competencies despite institutional shortcomings.

By contrast, the lowest-rated items included “Public institutions in the province of Córdoba hinder access to public information” ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) and “The lack of personnel or resources affects the system’s effectiveness” ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ). These suggest that resource scarcity and administrative obstruction are seen as major constraints.

Other items such as “Public institutions proactively publish information without the need for formal requests” ( $M = 2.84$ ), “Requests are answered within a reasonable timeframe” ( $M = 2.74$ ), and “The information provided is complete and comprehensible” ( $M = 2.65$ ) reflect persistent doubts about institutional responsiveness and information quality. Similarly, “Public institutions use modern digital tools to manage and respond to requests efficiently” received a relatively low score ( $M = 2.71$ ), signaling that technological modernization is seen as insufficiently implemented.

Finally, the statement “More training is needed for public officials on how to use the system” was rated high ( $M = 4.29$ ), reinforcing the perception that while individual competencies may exist in part, systemic reinforcement and professional development remain urgent needs.

When disaggregating the results by stakeholder group, respondents from the national public administration and the academic or student sector again showed relatively higher average scores in areas such as staff training ( $M = 3.67$ ), clarity of responses ( $M = 3.50$ ), and the perceived usefulness of an online platform ( $M = 4.67$ ). These same groups, however, also strongly agreed on the need for improved training across the public sector ( $M = 5.00$ ), indicating that their more favorable scores do not imply complacency.

In contrast, participants from municipal administrations and civil society organizations rated almost all items significantly lower. For instance, municipal respondents gave particularly low ratings to proactive publication ( $M = 2.00$ ), digital infrastructure ( $M = 2.00$ ), and timeliness ( $M = 1.00$ ), suggesting a much more critical view rooted in closer interaction with local-level implementation challenges.

#### **5.2.4 Sensitive or high-interest information areas**

In addition to evaluating institutional and procedural aspects of the FOIA system, the survey included a dedicated question to identify the types of public information that

respondents considered most important to access. Participants were asked to rate the relevance of various information domains using the same five-point Likert scale.

The areas that received the highest average scores were:

- Public procurement and government contracting (M = 4.84),
- Environmental information (e.g., impact studies, waste management) (M = 4.84),
- Health system statistics (M = 4.84), and
- Social programs and subsidies (M = 4.81).

These results suggest a strong public demand for information that is directly linked to resource allocation, environmental oversight, and social welfare—domains traditionally associated with risks of opacity or mismanagement.

Slightly lower, though still high, scores were observed for:

- Police performance and public safety statistics (M = 4.74),
- Lobbying and records of meetings between public officials and third parties (M = 4.61).

The open-ended follow-up question allowed respondents to mention additional areas of concern. Examples included gender-based violence statistics, travel expenses of public officials, and information about public infrastructure projects. These responses reinforce the broader finding that transparency is most demanded in areas where public trust, accountability, and social equity are at stake.

### **5.2.5 Low conceptual clarity regarding FOIA requests**

Although approximately one-third of respondents initially indicated that they had submitted a public information request within the past year, follow-up clarification revealed that only one of them had done so using the formal channels established by Córdoba's Law 8803. Instead, the other participants referred to informal consultations, general inquiries submitted via institutional websites, or direct communications with public officials, none of which align with the legal definition of a FOIA request as used in this study.

This confusion highlights a significant cognitive gap regarding what constitutes a legitimate information request and how to activate the right to access public records through institutional procedures. Such ambiguity is consistent with broader findings in the region (e.g., Borges et al., 2020), where the lack of dissemination, training, and clear entry points results in low demand for information, even among engaged or professional stakeholders. In this sense, the finding reinforces the need for targeted awareness efforts and capacity-building initiatives as part of any FOIA reform process.

### 5.2.6 Aggregated perceptions across FOIA implementation domains

While item-level results suggest specific areas of concern—such as procedural complexity, low citizen awareness, or inconsistent institutional responsiveness—the aggregated domain averages indicate a more nuanced picture. All three domains scored close to the neutral midpoint of the scale, as shown in Table 7.

Domain	Average (1-5 scale)
Enabling Conditions	3.04
Demand for Information	3.65
Institutional Capacity	3.17

**Table 7.** Mean score by effectiveness domain (Likert scale 1-5).

Given that a value of 3 on the Likert scale was treated as neutral—potentially reflecting indifference, lack of knowledge, or ambivalence—these averages suggest that stakeholder perceptions are not uniformly critical nor affirmatively positive. Instead, they point to a landscape of moderate or uncertain evaluations, which may reflect limited engagement with the system or insufficient visibility of its functioning. The absence of strong agreement or disagreement across domains may indicate that the FOIA system in Córdoba lacks robust legitimacy or visibility among key stakeholders, reinforcing the importance of broader institutional and communicational efforts to strengthen its public presence and performance.

### 5.3 Interview results

To complement the survey findings and gain deeper insights into stakeholder perspectives, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors involved in or affected by the implementation of the access to information system in Córdoba. A total of nine interviews were carried out with participants from a range of relevant sectors, including two provincial public officials, one municipal public official, one civil society representative, one academic, one graduate student, and three journalists. Table 8 shows interviewees' details.

<b>Name of Interviewee</b>	<b>Stakeholder Group</b>	<b>Institution &amp; Role</b>	<b>Date of the Interview</b>
María José Flammini	Public administration (provincial level)	Head of the Citizen Participation Unit at the Provincial Ministry of Government	21.05.2025
Maria Victoria Sibilla	Civil society	Democracy and Institutional Quality Coordinator at Fundeps (Foundation for Sustainable Policy Design)	23.05.2025
Julio Romero	Academia	Lecturer and Researcher at Siglo 21 University, National University of Córdoba, and Provincial University of Córdoba	23.05.2025
Iñigo Biain	Journalism	Journalist. CEO & Founder at infoNegocios.	23.05.2025
Maria Florencia Guidobono	Public administration (municipal level)	Undersecretary of Smart Cities at the Municipality of Córdoba	26.05.2025
Maria Nayet Nadua Kademian Mansur	Student	PhD student in Political Science at the National University of San Martín	26.05.2025
Brenda Lisa Austin	Public administration (provincial level)	Legislator at the Provincial Legislature of Córdoba (Unión Cívica Radical – main opposition party)	27.05.2025
Andrés Ferreyra	Journalism	Freelance journalist for Perfil and Radio Continental Córdoba	27.05.2025

Juan Bernaus	Journalism	Journalist. Editorial Coordinator at Perfil and Program Host at Canal C	28.05.2025
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**Table 8.** Interviewees.

The interview material was examined through thematic analysis, using a set of codes developed deductively from the interview guide and aligned with the study’s conceptual framework. These initial codes covered topics such as legal and procedural frameworks, citizen awareness and engagement, institutional capacity, and political will. As the coding process progressed, new categories emerged inductively, allowing the analysis to capture unanticipated themes and perspectives raised by the interviewees.

The findings are presented below, structured around key thematic areas. Each subsection integrates illustrative quotes to reflect the diversity of viewpoints and to highlight tensions, commonalities, or contrasts across stakeholder groups.

### 5.3.1 Enabling Conditions

#### 5.3.1.1 Political will and the OGP action plan

Three interviewees—the provincial public official, the academic, and the civil society representative—have been directly involved in the design of Cordoba’s Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plan. Their reflections on the process were generally positive, highlighting the inclusion of diverse stakeholders and the opportunity to co-create a draft law on access to public information. The provincial public officer underscored the value of participatory approaches, stating that incorporating perspectives from outside the government “*makes it a law aligned with current times*” and helps ensure that “*other actors represent different citizens*” (M. J. Flammini, personal communication, 21 May, 2025).

The academic echoed this appreciation, framing the initiative as a step toward institutional improvement. He emphasized both the horizontal inclusion of civil society and public universities, and the constructive influence of international organizations, which he argued contribute to “*a continuous learning environment*” and encourage perspectives beyond purely technocratic ones. However, he also noted that not all voices are adequately represented: territorial social organizations and youth are often absent from participatory spaces. As he explained, “*the tables are mostly composed of people over*

30. *That's a challenge, especially when dealing with a tech-savvy generation that lacks familiarity with the State*" (J. Romero, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

The civil society representative, whose organization has historically advocated for access-to-information reforms, also took part in the co-creation process. While supportive of drafting a new law, she questioned the strategic decision to frame the legislative initiative within the OGP plan. In her view, the legislature—rather than the executive—should serve as the primary venue for developing such proposals. She noted that *"because this runs until 2027, it risks being disconnected from political timing"*, and emphasized that structural reforms are often more complex and less immediate than standard OGP commitments (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

More broadly, interviewees expressed divergent views on the provincial government's political will to promote access to public information. The legislator and one journalist were skeptical, describing a persistent culture in which public officials perceive information as proprietary. The legislator observed that this mindset has not been challenged in Córdoba to the same extent as at the national level, where a newer legal framework has begun to shift expectations. The journalist added that *"some transparency efforts seem overacted"*, noting that sensitive data often remains concealed, contributing to perceptions of selective disclosure (B. L. Austin, personal communication, 27 May, 2025; A. Ferreyra, personal communication, 27 May, 2025).

By contrast, six out of nine interviewees—the academic, the two public officials, the civil society representative, the student, and two journalists—perceived a genuine, albeit uneven, interest in advancing transparency within the provincial administration. Several cited recent digitization efforts, improvements in open data platforms, and increased emphasis on transparency in policy design. Nonetheless, both the academic and the civil society representative underscored persistent shortcomings in responsiveness and institutional coherence. As the latter explained, while some information is proactively published, *"the back-and-forth, the responsiveness, is still lacking"* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

These insights suggest that while attention to transparency has increased within the provincial government, political will remains fragmented. Efforts are constrained by institutional inertia, uneven stakeholder engagement, and the limitations of existing legal and procedural frameworks.

### 5.3.1.2 Perceived adequacy of the legal framework

When asked about the adequacy of Córdoba's current legislation—Law No. 8803 on Access to Knowledge of State Acts, enacted in 1999—most interviewees considered the framework outdated and insufficient. Respondents identified a range of shortcomings, including its inability to address contemporary administrative practices, technological developments, and evolving standards in transparency and public access.

A recurrent critique concerned the law's technological obsolescence. Several interviewees emphasized that the normative framework fails to reflect the digitization of public administration. The provincial public officer observed: *"It clearly needs to incorporate digital processes and the advancement of the internet. A new law is needed"* (M. J. Flammini, personal communication, 21 May, 2025). Similarly, the academic underscored that the provincial framework falls behind the national standard, particularly in its lack of *"participatory mechanisms, evaluation tools, and the inclusion of all public institutions as obligated actors"* (J. Romero, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

The civil society representative also echoed these concerns, stating: *"We submitted a report from Fundeps calling for the law to be updated"* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025). As summarized during the interview, the report emphasizes that Law No. 8803 consists of only ten articles and focuses narrowly on procedural aspects, without establishing a comprehensive rights-based framework. According to the representative, the law omits core principles such as maximum disclosure, transparency, and informalism, and limits the definition of public information to written documents supporting administrative acts. Moreover, it excludes several key actors from its scope, including the judiciary in its jurisdictional functions and private entities receiving public funds—such as political parties, trade unions, and contractors. The Fundeps report recommends a broad reform agenda, including recognition of access to information as a human right, alignment with national standards, expansion of the definition of public information to cover all formats, extension of the list of obligated entities, the creation of an autonomous oversight body, and the introduction of proactive disclosure obligations.

Criticism also targeted the law's vague definitions and limited scope of application. The legislator referred to it as *"a pioneering norm that has become outdated"*, noting that its ambiguities permit discretionary interpretation and obstruct effective enforcement (B. L. Austin, personal communication, 27 May, 2025). She also highlighted the absence of administrative appeal mechanisms, procedural clarity, and enforceable obligations for proactive publication or disclosure exemptions.



A more moderate perspective was expressed by the municipal public officer, who described the law as *“adequate, though it could definitely be updated given its age”* (M. F. Guidobono, personal communication, 26 May, 2025). Meanwhile, the civil society representative further qualified her assessment by acknowledging that *“the procedures are reasonable”*, but ultimately emphasized the law’s insufficiency due to a lack of institutional infrastructure: *“What’s in the law isn’t necessarily wrong; it’s just incomplete. The problem is that it’s not being enforced”* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

Taken together, the interview findings and external evaluations point to a widely perceived need for reform: Córdoba’s current legal framework does not meet the standards required to ensure meaningful and enforceable access to public information.

### **5.3.2 Demand for Information**

#### **5.3.2.1 Stakeholders’ perceptions of FOIA importance and public awareness**

Across all interviews, there was a clear consensus on the fundamental importance of the right to access public information. Stakeholders emphasized that FOIA is not merely an administrative instrument, but a cornerstone of democratic life and a mechanism through which citizens can scrutinize, evaluate, and ultimately legitimize the actions of the state.

The provincial public official underscored this idea, describing FOIA as a means *“to build trust among citizens”* and *“to legitimize the State as an actor capable of transforming people’s lives”* (M. J. Flammini, personal communication, 21 May, 2025). She also highlighted the relevance of this right in the current national context, marked by fiscal austerity measures under President Javier Milei’s administration. Referring to the campaign rhetoric centered around drastic public spending cuts—symbolized by the image of a “chainsaw”—she noted: *“It’s an audit that is necessary in this ‘chainsaw’ context where public employment is questioned or there is talk of ‘overspending’. It’s a way to demonstrate that every public employee fulfills a function and addresses concrete needs”* (M. J. Flammini, personal communication, 21 May, 2025).

The recent political shift at the national level—defined by a fiscally austere, market-oriented government—was also mentioned by journalists as a factor that has renewed public attention to transparency. One of them observed: *“Fortunately, current times—this particular juncture brought by Milei’s government—have put these issues in the*

*spotlight... it's valuable that citizens are now more aware of what political leaders do, regardless of their party"* (I. Biain, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

The second journalist offered a complementary perspective, stating that FOIA is *"fundamental for any democracy"*, particularly in times when political narratives may distort public understanding. He argued that access to official data is the only way to verify the truth behind political messaging: *"We see governments creating their own realities. What matters is not what's happening, but what the politician convinces people is happening... The only way to challenge that is through access to the data"* (A. Ferreyra, personal communication, 27 May, 2025).

The academic highlighted the historical and civic relevance of the right to information, calling it *"a fundamental right to sustain the democratic process"*, and *"a right to know, shaped by Argentina's history"* (J. Romero, personal communication, 23 May, 2025). The student emphasized that FOIA enables citizens (M. N. N. Kademian Mansur, personal communication, 26 May, 2025). The civil society representative also reaffirmed its importance, aligning with the broader view that FOIA plays a central role in enabling oversight and ensuring an informed citizenry (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

In sum, the interviews reflected a shared understanding of FOIA as a democratic safeguard—especially salient in moments of political and institutional stress. However, their views on public awareness of this right were notably more critical. Across interviews, a shared perception emerged that civic understanding and utilization of access to information mechanisms remain limited in Córdoba.

Several respondents—including both public officials and civil society actors—described current levels of citizen engagement as insufficient. The provincial official remarked: *"There is still not much awareness at the citizen level"*, and emphasized the need for cross-sectoral efforts to ensure that people *"understand that this right exists and exercise it"* (M. J. Flammini, personal communication, 21 May, 2025). The municipal public officer similarly noted that FOIA is often used as a last resort: *"Today, those who use it are trying to solve something they couldn't resolve through regular administrative channels"* (M. F. Guidobono, personal communication, 26 May, 2025).

Some interviewees also raised concerns about how citizens perceive the utility of FOIA mechanisms. Journalist I. Biain noted that *"the public believes that more can be hidden than actually can"* (I. Biain, personal communication, 23 May, 2025). Journalist A. Ferreyra offered a complementary view, stating: *"I believe the general public is unfamiliar with the request mechanism, they look at this right somewhat suspiciously,*

*and perhaps they're just not interested... That's why I think not only the media, journalists, and communicators, but also institutions and professionals who can connect this law with the general public, the audience, the citizenry, the public conversation, are of utmost importance—to help people understand that this right exists. At the very least, they should know it's there, within reach”* (A. Ferreyra, personal communication, 27 May, 2025).

The academic offered a more structural perspective, suggesting that while some governments make real efforts to facilitate access, these are often insufficient given the diversity and complexity of society. *“Not everyone experiences this right in their daily lives unless they are directly affected or belong to a group that requires that information to act—for example, environmental activists”* (J. Romero, personal communication, 23 May, 2025). He emphasized the need to distinguish between individual and collective engagement with FOIA, underscoring that awareness is typically higher in organized civil society or issue-based groups. In line with this, the civil society representative observed that knowledge of this right remains concentrated in *“specific groups—journalists, academics, activists—rather than the general population”* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025). The student reinforced this view, noting that FOIA's limited appeal beyond expert circles may help explain low levels of demand: *“Access to public information tends to interest very small circles—perhaps an academic conducting research, journalists, or the political opposition. It is not, per se, a matter of general interest”* (M. N. N. Kademian Mansur, personal communication, 26 May, 2025).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest a broad consensus: public awareness of the right to access information remains limited in Córdoba, and efforts to expand and normalize its use among citizens have yet to reach their full potential.

### **5.3.2.2 Relevance of access to public information in professional and organizational contexts**

Interviewees widely acknowledged the importance of access to public information for fulfilling their professional responsibilities and advancing their organizational missions. Several emphasized that public data enables oversight, supports research, and strengthens the legitimacy of actors within the public sphere.

From the perspective of the provincial public official, the availability of such information plays a key role in validating the role and performance of the civil service: *“It legitimizes our work. If someone checks a public servant's salary or function, and sees that the areas*

*operate well and meet social needs, that supports coherence between staff levels and the problems being addressed*” (M. J. Flammini, personal communication, 21 May, 2025).

The civil society representative referred to access to public information as a “gateway right”—a foundational tool for broader rights advocacy and citizen engagement. She explained that her organization regularly files information requests as part of diagnostic efforts, advocacy campaigns, and legal strategies to evaluate whether public policies comply with rights-based standards. *“It’s a research input. We use it to assess public policies on gender, environment, health... to evaluate them, recommend changes, and support our advocacy”* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

Journalists also highlighted the central role of public information in investigative reporting. One of them noted that government documents are often a more reliable source than official statements, stating: *“Many findings are hidden there—not in what officials say, but in what the documents show. That’s where the truth is... Public records give journalism the certificate of veracity the public expects”* (J. Bernaus, personal communication, 28 May, 2025).

The student interviewee reflected on the impact of restricted information access on academic inquiry, emphasizing how data availability can shape research agendas. *“Often, we don’t pursue certain topics because the data isn’t accessible. Many research problems are defined by the datasets that are available”* (M. N. N. Kademian Mansur, personal communication, 26 May, 2025).

In a related line of questioning, interviewees were asked whether they knew of any cases in which a public information request had generated significant legal, journalistic, or political consequences. Six of the nine respondents referenced the recent case involving La Voz del Interior, one of Córdoba’s most prominent newspapers. In March 2025, the outlet filed a legal injunction (*recurso de amparo*) after the provincial legislature refused to disclose the names and roles of its contracted employees. Although the request was initially rejected, the President of the Legislature later released the list to the press (La Voz del Interior, 2025). One journalist described the case as an example of the Streisand effect—a phenomenon whereby attempts to suppress information inadvertently increase public attention to the issue in question (Jansen & Martin, 2015).

### **5.3.2.3 Accessibility and public use of FOIA mechanism**

When asked to describe the process for requesting access to public information in Córdoba, most interviewees either had limited knowledge of the procedure or had never

used it themselves. Only three out of nine participants reported having submitted a formal request. This limited level of engagement points to broader challenges related to the visibility, usability, and reliability of the system.

Those with firsthand experience described a procedure that, although formally available online, remains unintuitive and frequently ineffective. The civil society representative explained that the request must be submitted through the province's Ciudadano Digital (CiDi) platform for public services, using a generic form designed for multiple types of administrative communication, which is *“not easy to find on the website and less simple than at the municipal level”* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025). Although tracking is technically possible via a digital case number, the responsibility for follow-up lies with the requester: *“You have to start calling, emailing, or even going in person to get updates”* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

She also reported that in her organization's recent experience, several requests went unanswered despite being formally submitted: *“Out of the four or five requests we made last year, we didn't get any responses. We know that once we file the request, we have to start calling and following up because the system just doesn't work as expected”* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025). Similarly, the legislator shared her experience from her previous role as a national deputy, noting that her team would often submit parallel requests through national-level mechanisms, which were more likely to yield timely responses: *“We would sometimes get answers faster from national channels than from Córdoba's institutions”* (B. L. Austin, personal communication, 27 May, 2025).

Overall, the interviews revealed a consistent pattern: five of the nine participants reported relying on informal strategies—such as phone calls, personal contacts, or in-person visits—to obtain the information they needed. These extra-mechanism approaches not only reflect structural inefficiencies but also reveal a widespread lack of trust in the system's ability to fulfill its legal function.

#### **5.3.2.4 Perspectives on sensitive information**

Although not a central focus of the interview guide, a few participants offered their views on particularly sensitive areas of public information. These reflections provide insight into the types of data that, while publicly relevant, may provoke controversy, be prone to misinterpretation, or face resistance to disclosure.

Public sector salaries were mentioned as a recurrently sensitive issue. One interviewee emphasized the dual nature of salary information: while it is legally subject to public access, its disclosure often fuels stereotypes about public servants, such as perceptions of inefficiency or corruption. Moreover, cases involving irregular or controversial payments—such as high-value cultural contracts or inflated invoices—were cited as examples of how financial information can be weaponized in public discourse, contributing to political scandals or shaping negative narratives.

Another interviewee pointed to crime and public safety statistics, noting that recent efforts by provincial authorities to release such data were promising but lacked sustained regularity. The participant suggested that security-related information can be politically delicate, especially when it reveals unfavorable trends.

A third participant highlighted discretionary spending as a particularly opaque and politically sensitive category. They noted that such expenditures are often shielded from scrutiny because they may function as informal budgetary tools within the political system. Related concerns were expressed regarding payroll data, public works contracts, and procurement processes—areas seen as vulnerable due to the large sums of money involved and the potential for misuse.

Together, these perspectives underscore the complexity of balancing transparency with political sensitivity. They reflect broader challenges in advancing access to information in domains where institutional incentives to disclose may be weak or even counterproductive for those in power.

### **5.3.3 Institutional Capacity**

#### **5.3.3.1 Institutional and structural barriers to effective FOIA implementation**

In addition to procedural concerns, interviewees identified several barriers that hinder the effective implementation of the legal framework. Four participants—two journalists, the academic, and the student—emphasized the difficulty for ordinary citizens in interpreting the information made available. Although some datasets (e.g., budget execution figures) are accessible online, they are often presented in technical formats or with minimal contextualization, which impedes broader public understanding. One journalist suggested the need for simplified, citizen-oriented displays of key indicators such as debt levels or public employment figures: *“It should be on a big screen, with clear numbers, not buried*

*in datasets that require expertise to interpret*” (I. Biain, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

The academic interviewee expanded on this point by describing various access and interpretation gaps—generational, digital, territorial, and linguistic—that affect different groups. He noted that technological framing often dominates information design, which inadvertently excludes those unfamiliar with digital or data-centric terminology. For example, during his doctoral research, he encountered difficulties obtaining and interpreting budgetary data that was presented from an economist’s perspective, making it inaccessible for researchers from other fields. He further stressed that public communication should not be limited to data release alone but include narrative formats—such as reports or explanatory documents—that facilitate understanding (J. Romero, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

The civil society representative also highlighted territorial disparities, noting that her organization’s ability to follow up on requests is largely due to its physical proximity to provincial institutions. In contrast, citizens in smaller or more remote communities are at a disadvantage (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

In parallel, the academic interviewee pointed to structural challenges, noting that information requests in Córdoba remain dispersed across multiple channels. While CiDi exists as a centralized portal, many ministries also maintain their own contact points, leading to fragmentation. He emphasized that *“formal mechanisms coexist with non-formal ones”* and that navigating these parallel routes is part of the challenge when trying to obtain public data (J. Romero, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

From an institutional perspective, both the provincial public official and the civil society representative pointed to the lack of inter-ministerial coordination. The former observed that while the necessary infrastructure exists, *“it is not easy to coordinate across ministries to ensure timely and consistent data updates”* (M. J. Flammini, personal communication, 21 May, 2025). The latter added that there is no clear mechanism ensuring that all agencies will respond equally or consistently (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025). The municipal official, for her part, raised concerns about the clarity of citizen requests, noting that her office often receives submissions that are difficult to interpret, suggesting a possible need for public guidance on how to formulate information demands (M. F. Guidobono, personal communication, 26 May, 2025).

Together, these findings illustrate how structural, technological, and social dimensions intersect to shape the barriers that continue to hinder effective access to public information in Córdoba.

### 5.3.3.2 Preparedness of public officials to manage information requests

Interviewees expressed divergent views regarding the preparedness of public personnel to receive and process requests for access to information. Out of six participants who addressed this issue, only two—both public officials—considered civil servants adequately prepared. One of them emphasized that, if the request is clearly formulated and correctly directed, most government areas have personnel capable of providing a response (M. J. Flammini, personal communication, 21 May, 2025; M. F. Guidobono, personal communication, 26 May, 2025).

In contrast, four interviewees—including the academic, the legislator, the civil society representative, and a journalist—highlighted gaps in institutional capacity and professional culture. The civil society representative pointed to repeated noncompliance with deadlines and procedural norms as indicative of a broader issue: *“I don’t feel that this is something embedded in the functional routine”* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025). The academic echoed this view, citing direct experiences with public employees who were unfamiliar with the procedures and unsure how to process a request. He stressed the need for targeted training and awareness-building: *“There is a challenge in sensitizing those responsible for providing public information—not just about how to do it, but why it matters”* (J. Romero, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

The legislator went further, suggesting that the problem lies not only in technical capacity but also in institutional attitudes. In her view, there is a persistent lack of understanding among public officials that they are legally obligated to disclose information, particularly under the principles of proactive transparency: *“They must understand that failing to deliver information makes them liable for neglecting their duties as public officials”* (B. L. Austin, personal communication, 27 May, 2025). Finally, one journalist expressed concern about the overall preparedness of government staff, suggesting that responses to requests are often subordinated to political interests rather than handled through standardized administrative channels (A. Ferreyra, personal communication, 27 May, 2025).



### 5.3.4 Perceived areas for improvement

Interviewees proposed a wide range of improvements to the current access to information system in Córdoba, with recurring emphasis on the need for broader dissemination, institutional clarity, and user-oriented design. A central theme across the responses was the limited visibility of the right to information and the procedural tools available to exercise it. Four participants—including two public officials, the civil society representative, and the student—stressed the importance of communication strategies to raise awareness and improve the accessibility of the system. This includes both public campaigns and clearer instructions within the digital platform. As one public official noted, *“digitalization must be accompanied by clear, simple communication”* (M. F. Guidobono, personal communication, 26 May, 2025), while another emphasized the value of building a culture of transparency through civic education: *“The tool exists, the law exists, but people don’t know it. It should go hand in hand with pedagogy about what our rights are and how to exercise them”* (M. J. Flammini, personal communication, 21 May, 2025).

Three respondents—the civil society representative, the academic, and the legislator—underscored the lack of institutionalization in the current system. Rather than a coherent and centralized implementation framework, they described a fragmented structure lacking clear points of responsibility or escalation in the event of non-compliance. The civil society representative called for a stronger governance model, with designated authorities in each branch of government to ensure accountability, arguing that *“institutional clarity—internally and externally—is essential for predictability and enforcement”* (M. V. Sibilla, personal communication, 23 May, 2025).

Practical suggestions were also made to improve both the design and operation of the platform itself. These included simplifying the entry point for filing a request, improving the tracking mechanism for submitted cases, and enhancing interdepartmental coordination to ensure timely responses. A municipal official emphasized that even when digital portals exist, *“it is not easy to find the submission form on the website”* (M. F. Guidobono, personal communication, 26 May, 2025), and that without internal coordination, responses are often delayed due to bottlenecks between departments.

A separate but related concern was raised regarding the capacity of public institutions to comply with legally established deadlines. Several respondents pointed to structural and operational challenges, such as the persistence of paper-based archives or the need for document scanning, which frustrate timely replies.

In addition, two journalists advocated for the introduction of assistance mechanisms—either in-person or AI-based—to help users formulate their requests and later interpret the data they receive. This suggestion aligns with broader concerns voiced by other interviewees about the technical complexity and opaque language of official datasets. As one journalist noted earlier, even basic access to information does not guarantee its intelligibility for all citizens (I. Biain, personal communication, 23 May, 2025; J. Bernaus, personal communication, 28 May, 2025).

Overall, the responses suggest that beyond legal reform, the system in Córdoba would benefit from targeted efforts in civic education, improved platform usability, strengthened institutional mandates, and capacity-building initiatives to ensure effective implementation.

## **6 Discussion**

This chapter discusses the main findings of the study in light of the research questions and the theoretical framework. It begins by revisiting the two guiding research questions to reorient the reader toward the core analytical goals. The discussion is then organized thematically to interpret the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders regarding the functioning of the access to information system in Córdoba, with particular attention to structural barriers, institutional capacity, and public awareness. Subsequently, the chapter explores stakeholders' proposals for legal, institutional, and procedural improvements. By linking these empirical insights to the broader literature on FOIA implementation—especially in decentralized and subnational contexts—the chapter highlights both the challenges and opportunities involved in advancing meaningful transparency at the provincial level.

### **6.1 Reconnecting with the research questions**

This section revisits the research questions that guided this study, serving as a bridge between the empirical findings and their broader interpretation. The first research question asked: How do key societal actors in Córdoba perceive and experience the current process for requesting public information? This was explored through a mixed-methods approach that combined a Likert-scale questionnaire with semi-structured interviews. The aim was to uncover shared perceptions, perceived barriers, and divergent experiences among relevant stakeholder groups, including journalists, civil society organizations, public officials, academics, and students.

The second research question addressed: What potential avenues for improvement can be identified through the analysis of these actors' perceptions and experiences? This dimension was examined by analyzing both the survey items related to reform priorities and the interview data, which offered more nuanced insights into the legal, institutional, and operational changes envisioned by stakeholders. Together, these questions provided a framework for interpreting the findings not only within Córdoba's institutional context, but also as a contribution to the broader literature on FOIA implementation in subnational and decentralized settings.

### **6.2 Interpreting perceptions and experiences of FOIA use (RQ1)**

In relation to the first research question, “How do key societal actors in Córdoba perceive and experience the current process for requesting public information?”, it is possible to

say that the key societal actors considered in this study describe a process that presents visible shortcomings and operational obstacles. They portray a system that is often unreliable, characterized by delays or outright lack of responses, and administered by personnel who are not consistently prepared to manage requests. Although a digital mechanism for filing requests exists, all public institutions maintain their own reception desks and institutional communication channels through which they also receive submissions. As a result, the process is fragmented and lacks standardization. There is no central oversight body responsible for coordinating implementation efforts across institutions, which reinforces the system's diffuse and inconsistent character. This situation reflects the arguments put forward by Burt and Taylor (2009), who contend that FOI implementation is particularly vulnerable to failure in contexts where local governments lack the capacity to retrieve dispersed information. When data is scattered across departments, handling complex requests becomes significantly more difficult.

Interviewees further noted that the provincial platform's online form is hard to locate, its interface is not intuitive, and the tracking mechanism provides little detail or opportunity for interactive communication. Consequently, requesters often resort to informal strategies—such as calling by phone, visiting offices in person, or relying on personal contacts—to obtain the information they need.

At a broader level, interviewees acknowledged recent efforts by the provincial government to proactively publish data, despite the absence of an updated legal framework that mandates active transparency. There is a recognition of a political will, although uneven and constrained, to advance transparency, digitize public administration processes, and increase the availability of information. Nonetheless, limitations remain. Interviewees stressed that the information made available is not always presented in formats that are easy to interpret or reuse. For instance, key documents are often delivered as PDFs or spreadsheets lacking sufficient context. Moreover, the predominance of a technocratic, data-driven approach, rather than citizen-centered communication, poses a barrier for the general public to understand and engage with the content.

Differences in perception also emerged across stakeholder groups. Public officials, who are directly involved in the daily functioning of government, generally reported greater confidence in the capacity of civil servants to handle requests. In contrast, other actors—including journalists, the opposition legislator, and the civil society representative—were more skeptical. Journalists and political critics in particular described a culture of secrecy that persists among senior authorities, which they see as incompatible with open and transparent governance. This tendency aligns with what Mendel (2014) describes as an "opaque bureaucratic culture" that remains pervasive in many public sectors and must be

addressed. In this regard, as emphasized by the World Bank Group (2020), efforts to transform organizational culture are most likely to succeed when driven by commitment at the policy-making and senior executive levels of public agencies.

### **6.2.1 Structural and institutional barriers to effective implementation**

In terms of the enabling conditions for FOIA implementation, interviewees recognized the importance of having a legal framework in place, yet emphasized that Córdoba's current law is insufficient for guaranteeing effective transparency. The legal framework was described as outdated, with limited scope and vague definitions that curb consistent application. While it outlines procedural steps, it lacks core principles and robust institutional design, ultimately leaving implementation vulnerable to discretion and inefficiency. This perception is consistent with broader assessments of Argentina's subnational legal frameworks. As Farioli (2015) notes, no province in the country achieved a "highly satisfactory" rating in the national SICAN<sup>1</sup> index evaluating legal quality, suggesting that provincial governments generally lack the capacity to adequately regulate this right or to effectively promote transparency and accountability.

Government efforts to advance transparency, particularly through proactive publication of information, were generally acknowledged and valued. Participants highlighted recent improvements in digital platforms and noted the inclusion of transparency goals in the provincial Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plan. This reflects broader international dynamics, where organizations such as the OGP—and international actors more generally—have played a significant role in encouraging the adoption of access-to-information laws, either by exerting political pressure or by shaping transnational legal norms that influence domestic reform agendas (Lemieux & Trapnell, 2016). The OGP process itself was appreciated for fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration, even among those who had not directly participated in its co-creation tables. Several interviewees praised this participatory format as a positive step toward reforming the State from within, an approach consistent with practices observed in other political systems, such as the Swiss case, where stakeholders are systematically consulted throughout the development of legislation (Holsen & Pasquier, 2011). At the same time, it has been argued that in contexts where secrecy remains structurally embedded, sustained pressure from independent journalists, civil society actors, and access-to-information advocates is

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<sup>1</sup> "SICAN" refers to the *Sub-index of Regulatory Quality* (*Subíndice de Calidad Normativa*, in Spanish). The acronym derives from the Spanish denomination.

essential to push governments toward full and effective implementation of transparency laws (Gill & Hughes, 2005).

This reflects broader international dynamics, where organizations such as the OGP—and international actors more generally—have played a significant role in encouraging the adoption of access-to-information laws, either by exerting political pressure or by shaping transnational legal norms that influence domestic reform agendas (Lemieux & Trapnell, 2016).

Nonetheless, critical views emerged concerning key limitations. One recurring concern related to the format and timing of the OGP mechanism. Some interviewees questioned its suitability for long-term legislative change, noting that structural reforms require more durable political commitment than the executive-led OGP timeline can provide. Others flagged representational gaps in the participatory process, especially the underrepresentation of youth and grassroots territorial organizations. In addition, concerns were raised about the executive branch leading the development of legal reform, which ideally should be initiated and debated within the legislature.

Regarding institutional capacity, participants pointed to significant obstacles that limit the system's ability to function as intended. The most urgent issue identified was the frequency with which information requests go unanswered, undermining trust in the procedure itself. In other cases, delays in response were attributed to poor internal coordination, lack of standardized procedures, and limited staff training. According to several interviewees, not all public employees are adequately equipped, either administratively or in terms of awareness, to process and fulfill FOIA requests.

While some public officials expressed confidence in the preparedness of their institutions, other stakeholders, such as civil society representatives, journalists, and opposition voices, maintained a more critical stance. These actors emphasized that the culture of secrecy still persists in many areas of government, and that political interests may override transparency norms in practice. This tension reflects broader challenges documented in other contexts, where bureaucrats' interpretations of what constitutes appropriate information release can significantly shape the implementation of access-to-information laws (Gill & Hughes, 2005). Moreover, institutional preparedness is not only a matter of technical training: without adequate incentives and a cultural shift toward openness, even well-trained staff may narrowly interpret legal exceptions or adopt practices that obstruct access—such as failing to document decisions or treating public information as inherently confidential (World Bank Group, 2020). Compounding this, evidence from other regions has shown that FOIA responsibilities are often delegated to

junior officials who lack the authority or influence to obtain the required information from their peers, undermining the process from within (Bashir & Nisar, 2020).

A further issue is the fragmented and non-centralized nature of the system. Despite the existence of an official digital platform for submitting requests, most public bodies maintain their own institutional communication channels and entry points. This lack of standardization and central oversight contributes to a diffuse implementation landscape and likely impairs the government's ability to monitor overall performance, track compliance, or identify systemic bottlenecks. This observation echoes recommendations from international organizations, which underscore the importance of assigning dedicated officers within each agency to handle information requests, particularly in contexts where demand is high or requests are complex (World Bank Group, 2020). More broadly, effective access-to-information systems require a clearly mandated entity with sufficient authority to coordinate information governance across government bodies, ensuring coherence in both practices and responsibilities (Lemieux & Trapnell, 2016).

Proactive disclosure was frequently mentioned as a positive development, but several limitations remain. Interviewees pointed to the technical complexity and lack of user-friendly formats in which data is published. Even when information is made available, its design often reflects a technological or expert-centric logic that inhibits citizen comprehension and use. This disconnect between availability and accessibility was seen as a critical barrier to meaningful public engagement. As Borges et al. (2020) argue, access alone is not sufficient to meet user needs; for transparency to be effective, the cognitive demands placed on citizens must be considered, and the information provided must be understandable and usable by non-experts.

Some public officials also mentioned structural limitations, such as the persistence of paper-based documentation in many state agencies. This reliance on non-digital records delays responses and creates operational bottlenecks, as documents must often be located in physical archives and digitized before they can be shared with the requester. As Mendel (2014) points out, antiquated and inefficient information systems and archival practices remain key barriers to effective FOIA implementation. In line with this, Lemieux and Trapnell (2016) emphasize that proper information governance requires comprehensive data inventories, standardized and enforced information management policies, and robust processes for digitizing paper records and maintaining long-term digital repositories. Villar (2021) similarly stresses that transparency laws must account for document management, since the quality, reliability, and accessibility of public records are central to the success of access to information initiatives. Without effective recordkeeping, as the

World Bank (2020) notes, governments face longer response times, increased administrative costs, and a potential erosion of public trust.

Together, these challenges reflect the intersecting legal and institutional constraints that shape the implementation of the right to access public information in Córdoba. While recent efforts signal a growing commitment to transparency, deep-seated structural barriers continue to limit the law's practical effectiveness.

### **6.2.2 Public awareness and demand for information**

In terms of public awareness, the study reveals a clear disconnect between the formal existence of access to information rights and their visibility or comprehension within the general population. Despite being normatively recognized as a democratic safeguard, the right remains poorly understood by citizens and largely confined to specialized groups. This limited awareness weakens the demand for transparency and restricts the broader social impact of FOIA mechanisms. The issue becomes especially relevant in the current national context, where the government has emphasized shrinking the public sector and intensifying scrutiny over institutional spending. In such a climate, access to public information becomes a key tool for monitoring state actions and holding officials accountable. As Holsen and Pasquier (2011) argue, proximity between citizens and regional institutions can enhance the use of access to information laws. Furthermore, making government decision-making visible fosters more accountable governance, as public officials are more likely to act transparently when they know their actions can be observed. However, the level of public engagement with the right to access information remains limited. As highlighted by the World Bank Group (2020), the accessibility of FOIA systems is strongly conditioned by the extent of public awareness regarding both the existence of the right and the procedures to exercise it. Without such awareness, citizens are unlikely to make use of these mechanisms—an observation echoed by Holsen and Pasquier (2011), who note that individuals are generally not inclined to submit requests unless they clearly understand that they are entitled to do so. In the case of Córdoba, this pattern was also observed: the demand for information appears to be concentrated within a relatively narrow set of actors—civil society organizations, journalists, researchers, and other organized stakeholders—who combine both the motivation and the technical capacity to engage with the system. These groups often assume a *de facto* intermediary role, not only submitting requests but also interpreting, contextualizing, and disseminating the information obtained for broader public use.



This asymmetry in engagement highlights a structural weakness in the institutionalization of FOIA as a universal right. Rather than functioning as a broadly accessible mechanism, the system appears to operate as a niche tool leveraged by those already familiar with public sector dynamics. Moreover, the findings suggest a persistent ambiguity about the nature of the right itself. Even among engaged actors, there are conceptual misunderstandings regarding what qualifies as a formal FOIA request, pointing to an underdeveloped civic culture around the right to information.

This limited and uneven demand is further reinforced by the technical and procedural barriers that citizens encounter when attempting to use the system. When the request process is neither intuitive nor well-communicated, it risks becoming a deterrent rather than an enabler. In this context, building public capacity and fostering clarity about both the purpose and the procedures of information access becomes essential, not only to strengthen demand but also to ensure that the system functions as an inclusive and empowering democratic tool.

### **6.2.3 Interpreting perceptions of sensitive information**

The findings related to sensitive information suggest important areas of tension in the transparency landscape of Córdoba. While survey respondents generally rated topics such as public sector salaries, procurement, and security data as highly important for public access, qualitative input from interviews points to a perception that these issues remain politically or socially sensitive.

This contrast appears to reflect a broader challenge in access-to-information reforms: the gap between normative commitments to openness and the practical hesitations surrounding the disclosure of information considered delicate. Financial matters, particularly employee salaries, discretionary spending, and high-value contracts, were mentioned as examples of information that, while formally public, may be subject to misinterpretation or media distortion.

Interviewees also expressed reservations about the publication of security-related data and discretionary budget allocations, suggesting that the limits of transparency are shaped not only by legal frameworks but also by power dynamics and political considerations. From this perspective, the reluctance to disclose certain types of information may reflect not a mere technical shortcoming, but a more complex negotiation between accountability imperatives and institutional caution.

Overall, these findings invite further reflection on the practical boundaries of openness in governance. They suggest that advancing more robust and socially legitimate transparency practices may require not only legal reform but also attention to the political, cultural, and communicative conditions that shape how sensitive information is shared and understood.

### **6.3 Stakeholder visions for improvement (RQ2)**

The second research question guiding this study asked: What potential avenues for improvement can be identified through the analysis of these actors' perceptions and experiences?

A range of proposals emerged, pointing to the need for reform across legal, procedural, institutional, and cultural dimensions. First and foremost, stakeholders consistently emphasized the urgency of updating the legal and regulatory framework governing access to information in Córdoba. The existing law, seen as outdated and limited in scope, was considered misaligned with both national legislation and international standards. An updated framework was envisioned as one that reflects technological advancements, expands the definition of public information, and incorporates clearer obligations for both proactive and reactive transparency. In this regard, Lemieux and Trapnell (2016) argue that the time to consider implementation is not after a law is passed, but during the drafting stage itself, anticipating potential resistance and designing provisions that are realistic and enforceable in practice.

At the procedural level, participants envisioned a fully digitized, user-friendly request system, accessible to all citizens regardless of their level of familiarity with government processes. The need for a central, clearly designated oversight authority was another recurring theme. Such a body would be tasked with coordinating efforts across public institutions, standardizing the publication of information, supervising compliance with legal timeframes, and promoting institutional accountability. As noted by Altavilla (2018), it would be nearly impossible to dismantle a culture of secrecy and replace it with one of participation and open government without a specific and capable institution entrusted with fostering these values and sanctioning non-compliance when necessary. This is closely tied to calls for improved training of public officials, not only in administrative terms but also with regard to the civic significance of fulfilling transparency obligations.

Beyond legal and institutional changes, interviewees pointed to structural and communicational improvements. One key area of concern was the accessibility and intelligibility of public data, particularly for citizens without technical expertise. Suggestions included the implementation of user guidance tools, potentially including digital or AI-based assistance, to help individuals formulate requests and interpret the information they receive. These recommendations align with Holsen and Pasquier's (2011) observation that promotional and support measures, though often overlooked in FOI legislation, are as crucial as access rights themselves. In a similar vein, the OECD (2014) stresses that maintaining users' interest in public data is essential for achieving policy goals, warning that if released data does not meet users' needs, engagement will drop and no public value will be generated.

Finally, the discussion highlighted the importance of cultivating a more informed and engaged citizenry. This involves sustained efforts to promote public awareness of the right to access information, its relevance to democratic accountability, and the practical steps needed to exercise it. Dissemination strategies, civic education campaigns, and broader cultural shifts were all seen as critical to transforming FOIA from a niche instrument into a widely understood and routinely exercised right.

#### **6.4 Contributions to FOIA implementation literature**

This study contributes to the literature on the implementation of Freedom of Information Acts (FOIA) by applying the conceptual framework developed by Lemieux and Trapnell (2016) and adopted by the World Bank to examine enabling conditions, demand, capacity, and oversight. While this framework has primarily been used to assess FOIA implementation at the national level, this research extends its application to the subnational context—an area that remains significantly underexplored in both global and Latin American scholarship.

By focusing on the province of Córdoba, Argentina, the study provides original empirical evidence on how FOIA is implemented within a federal system where responsibilities are deeply decentralized. As highlighted in the literature, federalism often exacerbates the fragmentation of FOIA implementation, making subnational case studies particularly relevant for understanding how institutional, political, and administrative dynamics influence access to public information. The case of Córdoba offers a window into how these challenges play out on the ground and how key societal actors—journalists, public officials, civil society representatives, academics, and students—experience and perceive the process.

Furthermore, this study adopted a stakeholder-centered approach, focusing on actors who engage with public information in their professional or organizational routines. This angle adds depth to the understanding of FOIA implementation by grounding the analysis in the experiences of those most likely to use and interpret the system.

## **6.5 Limitations**

The analysis does not cover the "Oversight" domain of the original framework, meaning that appeal mechanisms and enforcement bodies were not examined in this case. Additionally, the study's sample was determined through purposive sampling and may reflect some degree of selection bias. Participants were identified through personal contacts, social media outreach, and snowball sampling, which could limit the generalizability of the findings. Nonetheless, the study offers valuable insights into FOIA implementation dynamics at the subnational level and suggests directions for further research.

## **7 Conclusion**

### **7.1 Summary of key findings**

This study set out to explore how access to public information is implemented at the subnational level, focusing on the case of Córdoba, Argentina. Two research questions guided the investigation: (1) How do key societal actors in Córdoba perceive and experience the current process for requesting public information? and (2) What potential avenues for improvement can be identified through the analysis of these actors' perceptions and experiences?

In response to the first question, findings indicate that the current FOIA process in Córdoba is widely perceived as fragmented, inconsistent, and often unreliable. Although a digital mechanism exists, it is not fully standardized across institutions, and public bodies continue to rely on their own decentralized procedures. Stakeholders reported challenges such as delays, lack of responses, inadequate staff preparedness, and the absence of a central coordinating authority. While public officials tended to be more optimistic about internal capacities, other actors—particularly journalists, civil society representatives, and opposition voices—were more critical, emphasizing cultural and operational barriers rooted in secrecy and low institutional responsiveness.

The second research question revealed a clear consensus on the need for reform across several dimensions. Key proposals included updating the legal framework to align with national and international standards, improving the usability and accessibility of the digital platform, enhancing institutional coordination, and strengthening training for public officials. In addition, participants stressed the importance of improving public awareness through civic education campaigns and user guidance, and of designing information systems that are not only transparent but also intelligible and citizen-oriented.

### **7.2 Contributions of the study**

This thesis offers original empirical evidence on the implementation of FOIA at the subnational level, an area largely underexplored in the literature. Most academic studies to date have focused on national experiences, leaving a gap in the understanding of how access to information laws function in decentralized governance contexts. By focusing on the province of Córdoba, the study provides insight into the dynamics of transparency and administrative capacity within a federal system, where institutional autonomy at the subnational level amplifies variability in legal frameworks, practices, and outcomes.

The study operationalized the conceptual framework developed by Lemieux and Trapnell (2016), originally intended to assess FOIA implementation at the national level, and applied it to a provincial context. This application not only validated the usefulness of the framework's four domains—Enabling Conditions, Institutional Capacity, Demand for Information, and Oversight (the latter excluded in this case)—but also highlighted the framework's adaptability for analyzing subnational variation. The findings suggest that implementation barriers in Córdoba are consistent with those identified in other countries, such as low administrative capacity, cultural resistance, and lack of incentives. However, the decentralized nature of provincial governance introduces unique structural complexities that merit further theoretical refinement.

From a policy perspective, this research provides relevant insights for public authorities in Córdoba seeking to strengthen their access to information systems. The findings underscore the need for a more coherent and centralized legal and institutional framework, improved training for civil servants, and the integration of user-centered design principles into information systems. The study also highlights the importance of communication strategies and civic education to increase public engagement with FOIA tools. These inputs may inform the design of future Open Government reforms at the provincial level, including upcoming commitments under the OGP framework.

### **7.3 Methodological reflections and limitations**

Methodologically, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining a Likert-scale survey and semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected stakeholders. This design allowed for both breadth and depth in capturing perceptions across a range of societal actors. The focus on individuals who interact regularly with public information—journalists, civil society organizations, academics, public officials, and students—was critical to ensuring informed and context-specific insights.

However, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged, as they constrain the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the findings. First, the domain of “Oversight” within the Lemieux and Trapnell (2016) framework was deliberately excluded from the scope of this research due to time constraints. This omission limits the capacity of the study to fully assess the mechanisms designed to ensure enforcement and accountability in the FOIA ecosystem, which are critical components for understanding implementation effectiveness.

Second, the study employed a non-probabilistic sampling strategy, combining purposive and snowball sampling methods. While this approach was suitable for identifying informed stakeholders, it carries the risk of selection bias. Participants were recruited through professional networks, social media outreach, and referrals, which may have unintentionally favored certain profiles, perspectives, or sectors, thus affecting the diversity and representativeness of viewpoints included in the analysis.

Third, while the qualitative component of the study—particularly the semi-structured interviews—yielded valuable and context-rich insights, the absence of complementary administrative data limited the ability to cross-validate stakeholders' perceptions. Quantitative indicators such as the volume of FOIA requests, average processing times, appeal success rates, or compliance audits would have strengthened the analytical depth of the research. Unfortunately, such data were not publicly accessible at the time of writing. Future research would greatly benefit from integrating these administrative datasets to support comparative analysis and identify performance trends over time.

#### **7.4 Suggestions for future research**

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, comparative analyses across multiple provinces in Argentina—or across subnational units in other Latin American federal countries—could illuminate patterns of implementation, allowing for identification of structural, political, or cultural factors that facilitate or obstruct FOIA effectiveness.

Second, further studies should include oversight mechanisms and appeal processes, exploring how the absence or weakness of such structures affects citizens' capacity to challenge noncompliance and enforce their right to information. This could also include assessing the role of judicial institutions in guaranteeing access to information.

Third, additional research should evaluate FOIA effectiveness in terms of broader policy outcomes, such as its contribution to curbing corruption, improving service delivery, or enhancing public trust in institutions. This would require systematic methodologies capable of linking FOIA usage with changes in institutional behavior or public accountability.

Finally, a promising area of inquiry is the role of municipalities. Given their proximity to citizens and the practical importance of local-level data, municipal governments represent a critical but underexplored tier in the transparency ecosystem. Future studies could assess the institutional, technical, and political conditions that shape access to information

at the local level and examine whether similar implementation barriers observed at the provincial level replicate in municipal contexts.



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## Appendix

### A Online survey

## Survey: Public Information Request in Córdoba

*This survey aims to gather the perceptions of relevant stakeholders regarding the procedure for requesting public information in the province of Córdoba, Argentina. Completing the form takes approximately 5 minutes.*

*The survey is conducted as part of the Master's thesis for the MSc in Public Sector Innovation & eGovernance by Valentina Testa.*

*Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without consequences. By clicking 'Next,' you are giving your consent to take part in this study and for your responses to be used in the research analysis.*

*If you have any questions or wish to get in touch, please write to: valentinatesta@gmail.com*

**Email Address\***

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### General Information

*Please fill in the following details to identify the respondent's profile. This information will be used exclusively for analytical and academic purposes.*

**Full Name\***

*Short answer*

**Were you born in the province of Córdoba, Argentina?\***

- Yes
- No

**Do you currently live in the province of Córdoba?\***

- Yes
- No

**If not, have you lived in the province of Córdoba in the past?**

- Yes

- No

Which municipality do you reside in?

*(Optional) Short answer*

Which sector do you belong to?\*

*Checkboxes (multiple answers possible):*

- Provincial public administration (Córdoba)
- Municipal public administration (within the province of Córdoba)
- National public administration
- Civil society organizations (NGOs, foundations, collectives)
- Academia / Research
- Student
- Journalism / Media
- Other

Organization you belong to:

*(Optional) Short answer*

Role within your organization or current activity:

*(Optional) Short answer*

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Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements using the scale below:\*

**1 = Strongly disagree**

**2 = Disagree**

**3 = Neither agree nor disagree**

**4 = Agree**

**5 = Strongly agree**

### **Legal Framework and Institutional Commitment**

- The current legal framework in the province of Córdoba is adequate to guarantee the right of access to public information.
- The procedures to request information are clearly defined and accessible.
- The provincial government demonstrates a strong commitment to transparency.

- Public institutions proactively publish information without the need for formal requests.
- There are clear mechanisms to appeal denied or unanswered requests.
- Public institutions in the province of Córdoba hinder access to public information.

*(Reverse control question)*

## **Public Awareness and Access**

- Citizens in the province of Córdoba are aware of their right to access public information.
- Public institutions make efforts to inform the public on how to file access requests.
- The procedure to request public information is simple and easy to use.
- The existence of request fees discourages the use of the access to information system.
- The procedure to request public information should be accessible to all citizens, regardless of their place of residence within the province.
- The general public is unaware of their right to access public information. *(Reverse control question)*

## **Institutional Capacity and Response**

- Public officials are adequately trained to respond to information requests.
- Responses to requests are delivered within a reasonable timeframe.
- The information provided by institutions is complete and understandable.
- The lack of personnel or resources affects the effectiveness of access to the information system.
- Institutions use modern digital tools to manage and respond to requests efficiently.

## **Trust, Impact, and Civic Participation**

- Access to public information strengthens citizen trust in the provincial government.
- Information obtained through requests has contributed to public debates or decision-making processes.
- Access to public information is useful to citizens.
- The access to information system has helped expose cases of mismanagement or corruption.



- The access to information law is a useful tool for citizen participation and oversight.
- My sector (journalism, civil society, public administration, etc.) regularly uses access to information requests in its work.
- In practice, access to information in the province of Córdoba is an ineffective tool. *(Reverse control question)*

## Future Improvements

- The province of Córdoba needs a new access to information law aligned with national and international transparency standards.
- An online platform for submitting requests would improve access to information.
- Key stakeholders should be included in the reform process of the access to information legal framework.
- More training is needed for public officials on how to use the system.
- More training is needed for citizens on how to use the system.
- My institution/organization would be willing to contribute to improving transparency practices.

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## Sensitive Topics in Access to Public Information

Please indicate how important it is for you to have public access to the following types of information in Córdoba.\*

Scale:

**1 = Not at all important**

**2 = Slightly important**

**3 = Neither important nor unimportant**

**4 = Important**

**5 = Very important**

- Salaries and payroll of public employees
- Public budget and spending execution
- State contracts and tenders
- Asset declarations of public officials
- Government purchases and acquisitions
- Social programs and subsidies
- Environmental information (impact, waste, etc.)
- Data on security and police performance

- Public healthcare system statistics
- Meeting records between officials and private actors

Is there any other type of information you consider important that was not included?

(Optional) Short answer

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### **Personal Experience (Self-Assessment)**

- I have submitted at least one public information request in the past 12 months.\*
  - Yes
  - No
- I consider that I have sufficient knowledge on how to submit a public information request.\*
  - Yes
  - No
- I feel capable of using the access to information system effectively.\*
  - Yes
  - No

## **B Interview outline**

Before we begin, I'd like to share a few details about this interview. This conversation is part of my Master's thesis research for the MSc in Public Sector Innovation and e-Governance, a program coordinated by KU Leuven, the University of Münster, and TalTech. The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

With your permission, I will record the conversation. The recording will only be used to support the analysis and will not be shared publicly. Your name and comments may be included in the final thesis, as you have agreed.

Thank you again for your time and for being part of this research.

### **General perceptions**

1. In your opinion, how important is the right of access to public information in the province of Córdoba today?
2. How would you describe the current process for requesting public information?
3. Have you or your organization ever submitted a request? If so, what was the experience like?

### **Legal and institutional framework**

4. Do you believe the current legal framework (Law No. 8.803) is adequate? Why or why not?
5. What strengths or weaknesses do you observe in the institutions responsible for implementing this right?

### **Accessibility and barriers**

6. Do you think the access to information system is equally accessible for those living outside the provincial capital?
7. Do you consider that public officials are well prepared to respond to requests?

### **Impact and use**

8. What role does access to public information play in your work or in your organization's mission?

9. Are you aware of any cases in which an information request had a significant impact (e.g., in the media, legal proceedings, or public debates)?

**Recommendations for future improvement**

10. What improvements would you suggest for the current information request process?
11. What is your opinion on Córdoba's commitment to reform its access to information law as part of the Open Government Partnership (OGP)?

**Closure**

12. Is there anything else you would like to mention that we have not yet addressed?

## **C Declaration of Authorship**

I hereby declare that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this Master Thesis titled “From Law to Practice: Exploring the Implementation Gap of Access to Information in Córdoba, Argentina” is my own work. I confirm that each significant contribution to and quotation in this thesis that originates from the work or works of others is indicated by proper use of citation and references.

Tallinn, 02 June 2025

Valentina Testa

## D Consent Form

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