

Mapping Nonprofit Data Accessibility in Latin American Countries: Early Insights from an Exploratory Comparative Study

Shortened Title

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Abstract: This paper presents findings from a global study of nonprofit data accessibility, focusing on Mexico and other Latin American countries. The analysis explores whether nonprofit databases exist, who operates them, what accessibility barriers are present, what requirements nonprofits must meet to register, and what registration costs they face. Using an exploratory comparative design, the study highlights both cross-country similarities and differences while situating nonprofit data systems within broader theories of transparency, accountability, and open-data governance.

Early insights reveal that about 70% of countries in Latin America maintain nonprofit registries, yet accessibility, usability, requirements, and costs vary widely. Registration processes range from low thresholds that allow broad inclusion to higher thresholds that impose stricter oversight but may exclude grassroots organizations. This variation raises an important question: Can the mere fact of being registered in a country serve as a sufficient threshold for donors, volunteers, and communities to trust an organization?

Or are more robust validation mechanisms needed to ensure credibility? Costs further complicate this landscape, as high fees can discourage participation while lower or no costs promote broader representation.

These findings underscore the importance of harmonized, transparent, and affordable nonprofit data systems that both broaden inclusion and strengthen credibility. They also provide a foundation for future phases of research that will expand beyond Latin America, test correlations between governance indicators and data accessibility, and explore pathways toward a global framework for nonprofit data that supports trust, accountability, and collaboration.

Introduction

Nonprofit organizations play an essential role in development across Latin America, yet the availability and accessibility of nonprofit data remain fragmented. Reliable information is critical for accountability, transparency, and effective collaboration. This paper examines nonprofit data systems in Mexico and across Latin America, analyzing existing databases and highlighting how accessibility, requirements, and registration costs influence nonprofit visibility and trust.

Mexico

Mexico serves as a particularly significant case study. The country has often been seen as a regional leader in nonprofit data transparency, maintaining two federal-level registries: the Federal Registry of Civil Society Organizations (Registro Federal de las Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil, RFOSC) and the Directory of Authorized Donees (Listado de Donatarias Autorizadas) administered by the Tax Administration Service (SAT) (Brandim Howson, 2022). Both have become important tools for demonstrating organizational formality and eligibility for resources. For example, registration with the Federal Registry of Civil Society

Organizations, established in 2004, became a prerequisite for civil society organizations seeking access to federal funding, and is now also required by many private funders as a mark of legitimacy. Similarly, inclusion in the Authorized Donees registry, first published in 1999, allows organizations to receive tax-deductible donations—making it the Mexican counterpart to the U.S. 501(c)(3) designation. However, while these registries exist, questions remain about their accessibility, usability, and the frequency of data updates.

At the state level, many states maintain their own nonprofit listings. However, these are often closed to the public or, in other cases, outdated. There is no standardization regarding how frequently these records are updated, which limits their reliability and usefulness.

Beyond federal and state registries, only a limited number of listings are managed by civil society organizations themselves. Some second-level and intermediary organizations have attempted to maintain such records, with mixed success. Among them, the Mexican Center for Philanthropy (CEMEFI) has been the most consistent, sustaining since 1990 an active membership directory combined with public federal information. However, its Directory of Philanthropic Institutions still faces significant challenges in keeping information up to date.

Taken together, these realities highlight the urgent need for open and accessible records of charities in Mexico. Greater accessibility and transparency would allow nonprofit leaders to learn about peer organizations and foster collaboration, allow decision-makers to identify credible social partners and allies and, most importantly, help communities and individuals in need connect with the resources and services they seek.

Latin America Beyond Mexico

A broader regional review shows that most Latin American countries also maintain government-

run nonprofit registries, typically housed within ministries of justice, interior, or social development. While the existence of these registries demonstrates institutional recognition of the sector, their accessibility and functionality vary widely. Some countries provide searchable online portals, while others require in-person requests, restrict access, or host registries that are outdated or fragmented across multiple agencies. Independent directories—often maintained by NGOs, academic institutions, or umbrella organizations—emerge where official data systems are limited, yet these efforts face sustainability and coverage challenges.

Across the region, common patterns emerge. Registration processes differ significantly in terms of cost and administrative burden, creating disparities in which organizations appear in official data. In some countries, registration requirements are minimal, lowering barriers to entry but raising questions about oversight and trust. In others, the process is more rigorous, requiring extensive documentation or notarial involvement, which may strengthen credibility but also exclude smaller grassroots groups. These variations highlight the central challenge facing Latin America's nonprofit sector: how to balance inclusivity with legitimacy while ensuring that data systems are both accessible to the public and representative of the full diversity of civil society.

Background of the Study

This study is part of a broader effort to establish a baseline of nonprofit data systems worldwide. Reliable and accessible nonprofit data have been recognized as essential for strengthening accountability, trust, and collaboration across civil society (Ebrahim, 2003; Fox, 2007). Yet globally, nonprofit registries are highly uneven in their design and openness (Janssen, Charalabidis, & Zuiderwijk, 2012).

Latin America was selected as an early focus because of its diverse political systems, varied governance practices, and the vital role played by

nonprofits in social, cultural, and economic life. The region also illustrates sharp contrasts: most countries maintain some form of nonprofit registry, yet the **usability, openness, and completeness of those systems vary significantly.**

Earlier phases of this study documented whether nonprofit databases exist and who operates them, identifying widespread custodianship but inconsistent accessibility. The present paper incorporates updated findings from the most recent dataset, including the addition of registration costs and requirements for nonprofit recognition, offering a richer lens to assess how financial and administrative thresholds shape equity and trust in nonprofit data systems.



Research Design & Methodology

This study employs a **comparative exploratory design**, which is well suited for contexts where limited prior cross-national analysis exists (Stebbins, 2001). A structured framework of more than 90 questions was developed to capture four key domains: (1) national context and demographics, (2) nonprofit registries and data systems, (3) requirements for nonprofit registration, and (4) accessibility and costs.

Data were drawn from international secondary sources, including the World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2023), the Human Development Index and other UN datasets (United Nations, 2023), the CIA World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023), Freedom in the

World reports (Freedom House, 2023), the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2023), and the Rule of Law Index (World Justice Project, 2023). These data provided standardized measures of governance, development, and institutional context for cross-country comparison.

In addition, **primary searches of government registries and independent databases** were conducted to identify whether nonprofit databases exist, who operates them, the accessibility and usability of their platforms, the types of data collected, the requirements for becoming a registered nonprofit, and the registration costs. Only primary source databases were included in the analysis, excluding secondary compilations or global repositories that aggregate data from original registries outside the region. Following recommendations for systematic cross-case research (Yin, 2018), country-level findings were normalized into matrices to allow comparability across diverse contexts.

The combination of exploratory design and structured coding enabled the identification of both common regional patterns and distinctive national practices, producing preliminary insights into nonprofit data accessibility in Mexico and Latin America. For transparency and replicability, a **detailed country-by-country breakdown of registries—including the number of databases, their operators, and access links—is provided in Appendix A.**

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interrelated strands of theory: **transparency theory, accountability theory, and open-data governance frameworks.**

First, **transparency theory** holds that open access to organizational information reduces information asymmetry between institutions and stakeholders. In the nonprofit sector, transparent registries allow donors, governments, and the public to evaluate legitimacy, credibility, and performance. Scholars such as Fox (2007) distinguish between “clear transparency” (data that are accessible and

understandable) and “opaque transparency” (data that are disclosed but difficult to interpret). This distinction is critical for nonprofit databases, which may exist formally but fail to meet the standard of meaningful transparency.

Second, **accountability theory** emphasizes the responsibility of nonprofits to multiple stakeholders — including beneficiaries, funders, governments, and communities (Ebrahim, 2003). Formal registration systems are often designed as accountability mechanisms, creating a legal and administrative threshold for organizational existence. However, whether these systems truly enhance accountability depends on their accessibility, enforcement, and the quality of information collected.

Third, **open-data governance frameworks** argue that public institutions managing registries should provide machine-readable, user-friendly, and timely data (Janssen, Charalabidis, & Zuiderwijk, 2012). Open-data approaches support not only compliance but also innovation, as nonprofit data can be reused by researchers, funders, and civic actors to strengthen collaboration and policy.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for analyzing nonprofit registries in Latin America. They suggest that the mere existence of a registry is insufficient; the degree of transparency, accountability, and openness determines whether the data ecosystem genuinely supports trust, equity, and collaboration.

Research Questions

In this study, the following guiding questions were analyzed to frame the collection and review of nonprofit data across 20 Latin American countries. These questions shaped the research design and provided a foundation for identifying both regional patterns and country-level differences.

1. Does a nonprofit database exist in each country, and who operates it?
2. How accessible and searchable are the registries?

3. What information is collected in these registries, and how comprehensive is it?
4. What costs are required to register, and how might these costs relate to governance and transparency?
5. What requirements must organizations meet to become a nonprofit in each country, and do these represent a low threshold or a high bar for entry?
6. Can registration alone serve as a sufficient threshold of trust for donors, volunteers, and communities, or is there a need for additional validation mechanisms beyond national registration systems?

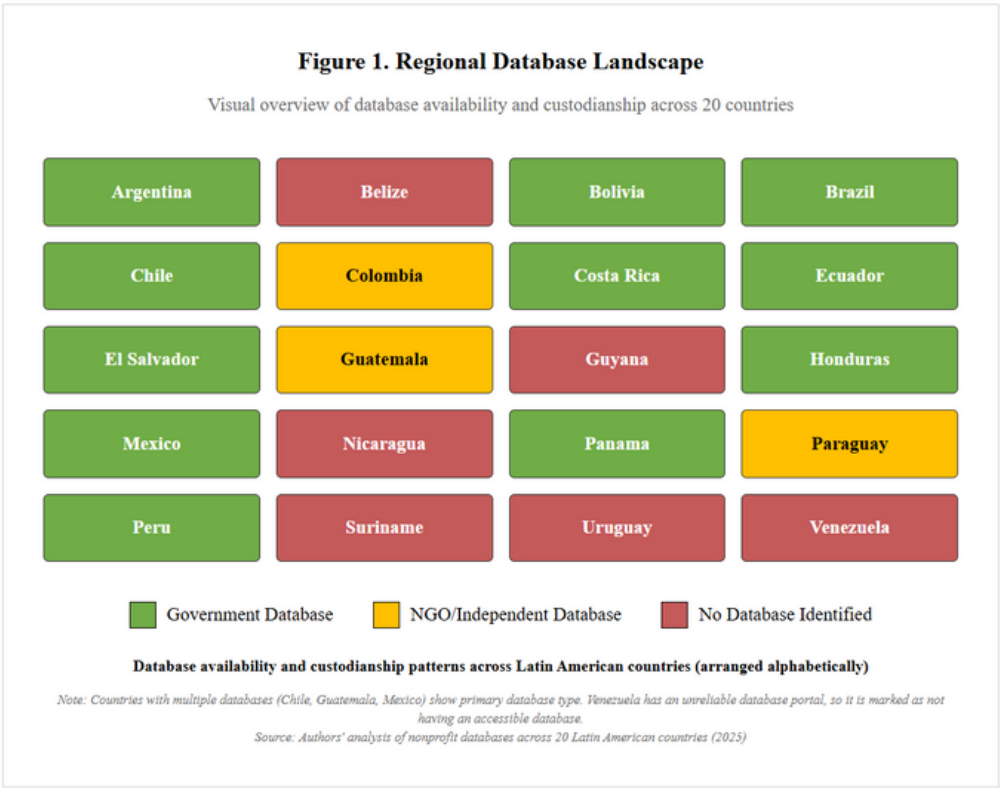
This paper does not attempt to answer all of these questions fully. Instead, it presents **initial findings** as a starting point, introducing the scope of the study and highlighting early patterns of accessibility, requirements, and costs. As data analysis continues, future papers will expand on these results, test correlations with governance indicators, and develop a deeper understanding of nonprofit data systems in Latin America and beyond.

Initial Findings: Mexico & Latin America

The study reviewed nonprofit data systems across **20 Latin American countries**: Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela (See Figure 1).

Existence of Databases

Of the 20 countries studied, **14 countries (70%) have at least one identifiable nonprofit database, while 6 countries (30%) do not**. The countries without identifiable registries are **Belize, Guyana, Nicaragua, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela**. In the case of Venezuela, a registry was located, but its instability and unreliability led us to classify the country as not



having an accessible database. These represent initial findings rather than conclusive results, as it remains possible that registries exist but are not easily searchable, publicly available, or consistently maintained online.

Among the countries with registries, 11 maintain a single database—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru.

Three countries (Chile, Guatemala, and Mexico) each host two registries, reflecting either parallel government and independent systems or separate databases for tax and social development purposes. In total, the study identified 17 nonprofit databases across the region (see Table 1 and Appendix A).

Table 1. Summary Statistics: Nonprofit Database Landscape in Latin America

Category	Count	Percentage
Countries Analyzed	20	100.0%
Countries with Databases	14	70.0%
Countries without Databases	6	30.0%
Database Distribution by Country	-	-
<i>Countries with 0 databases</i>	6	30.0%
<i>Countries with 1 database</i>	11	55.0%
<i>Countries with 2 databases</i>	3	15.0%
Total Databases Identified	17	-
Government-operated	13	76.5%
Non-governmental	4	23.5%

Note: Countries with 2 databases are Chile, Guatemala, and Mexico. Countries with 0 databases are Belize, Guyana, Nicaragua, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Source: Authors' analysis based on systematic review of nonprofit databases across Latin America (2025)

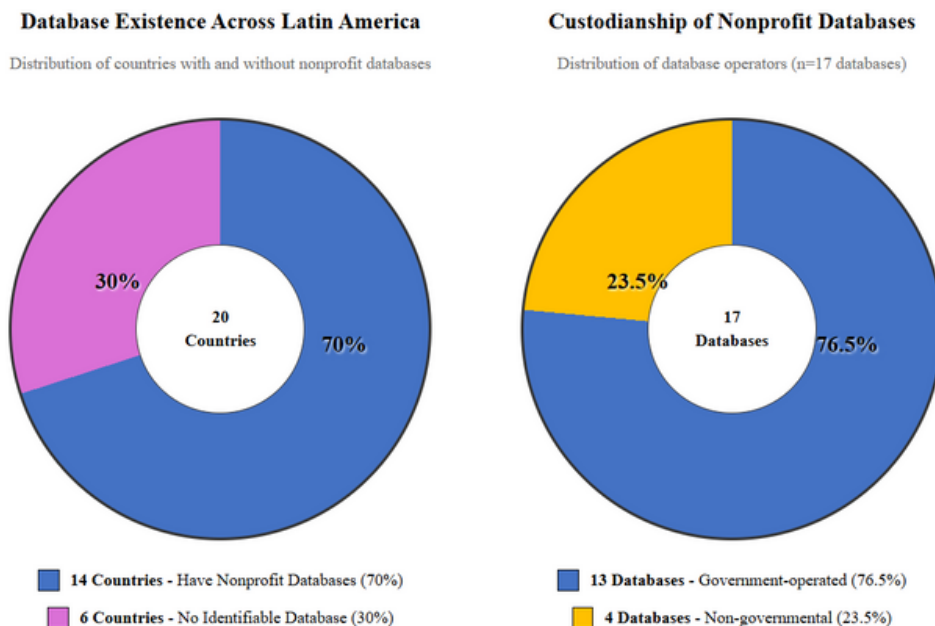
Government vs. Non-Governmental Custodianship

While most databases are maintained by government ministries such as Justice, Interior, or Social Development, **not all registries are government-run**. Of the 17 databases identified, **13 (76.5%) are government-operated** and **4 (23.5%) are managed by non-governmental entities**. Independent custodianship occurs in **Colombia and Paraguay**, as well as in both of **Guatemala's** registries (Pionero Philanthropy and El Directorio Guatemala). At this stage, the reasons for independent custodianship vary and require further study; these efforts simply demonstrate that nonprofit data collection is not limited to government actors (see **Appendix A**).

Accessibility and Usability

Accessibility remains uneven across the region. Some databases are publicly searchable and provide relatively open access, while others are difficult to use, require multiple steps to navigate, or are not updated consistently. These differences in usability directly affect the degree of transparency, as even existing registries may not serve their purpose if they are inaccessible or outdated. Further study will be needed to examine these dynamics in greater depth, but we wanted to highlight them here as an important dimension of nonprofit data accessibility.

Figure 2. Database Analysis: Existence and Custodianship Patterns in Latin America



Comprehensive analysis showing both country-level database availability and database-level custodianship patterns across Latin America

Source: Authors' analysis of nonprofit databases across 20 Latin American countries (2025)

Linking Database Accessibility and Governance and Freedom

The study identified variation in nonprofit database availability and custodianship across Latin America. Six countries—Belize, Guyana, Nicaragua, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela—did not have identifiable nonprofit registries at the time of review. In Venezuela, a registry was located but proved unstable and unreliable, leading us to classify the country as not having an accessible database.

Independent databases were observed in Colombia, Guatemala, and Paraguay. In Guatemala, both of the identified registries **appear to be** managed by civil society organizations rather than government ministries. The reasons for the creation of independent registries remain unclear and merit further study. Future research should consider whether such databases arise to fill gaps left by government systems, to respond to questions of trust in official records, or for other purposes altogether.

These findings indicate that governance and freedom contexts may influence the availability and custodianship of nonprofit data, but further research is needed to explore these connections systematically. For now, the study highlights the diversity of approaches across the region and the importance of examining both government and non-governmental efforts to maintain nonprofit registries.

Registration Requirements & Costs

The study found significant variation in the requirements and costs associated with nonprofit registration across Latin America. In some contexts, the process is streamlined and requires only basic documentation such as founding statutes and leadership lists. In others, it is more complex, involving notarial services, extensive documentation, and multiple layers of government review. Costs further complicate this landscape, ranging from contexts where nonprofits can register for free to others where registration may cost up to approximately \$2,000 USD. High fees discourage participation

from smaller organizations, leading to underrepresentation in official data, while lower or no-cost processes promote broader inclusion.

Together, these differences shape the level of trust and credibility one might reasonably place in a registry. Low-bar systems enable broad participation but risk admitting organizations with minimal scrutiny, while high-bar systems provide stronger assurances of legitimacy but may exclude grassroots organizations that lack the resources to comply. Taken as a whole, accessibility, requirements, and costs collectively determine both the breadth and the reliability of nonprofit registries across the region.

Country-Level Breakdown

A detailed country-by-country overview, including the number of databases, their operators, and links to each system, is provided in **Appendix A**.



Implications

The findings indicate that nonprofit data systems in Latin America are uneven. While government custodianship is the norm, significant gaps remain in accessibility and usability. Financial barriers also shape participation: high registration costs may discourage smaller organizations from formalizing, which could lead to underrepresentation in official datasets, while lower or no fees promote broader participation and more inclusive data ecosystems.

Beyond costs, nonprofit data systems must navigate the balance between inclusivity and credibility. Low thresholds for registration maximize coverage but may admit organizations with limited oversight, potentially weakening trust. High thresholds may strengthen legitimacy but risk excluding grassroots organizations that lack the resources to comply. This tension raises important questions about whether national registration alone is sufficient to guarantee nonprofit trustworthiness.

From a governance perspective, nonprofit registries should go beyond documenting organizational existence. Effective systems combine accessibility with meaningful validation mechanisms—such as periodic verification, public disclosure of key data, or multi-stakeholder oversight. For policymakers and practitioners, the challenge is to design frameworks that are inclusive enough to reflect the diversity of civil society, yet rigorous enough to ensure that registered organizations can be trusted as legitimate actors.

Research for Practice: Implementation

The study highlights several practical implications for strengthening nonprofit data systems in Latin America. **Nonprofit data can be centralized, which simplifies registries and ensures they are publicly searchable, affordable, and updated regularly.** Funders can leverage transparent and accessible data to guide more equitable investments and reduce the risks of funding unverified organizations. Nonprofits can benefit by gaining greater visibility and by more easily identifying other organizations working in similar areas, thereby increasing the likelihood of forming partnerships and collaborating effectively. **Nonprofit databases can also help individuals and communities in need locate services from trusted organizations more efficiently.** Taken together, these improvements can strengthen trust, accountability, and collaboration across the sector.

Conclusion

Latin America demonstrates both progress and fragmentation in nonprofit data accessibility. Of the 20 countries studied, 70% maintain at least one nonprofit database, yet accessibility, requirements, and costs vary considerably across the region. Lower thresholds and minimal fees promote inclusivity but may weaken oversight, while higher thresholds and costs strengthen credibility but risk excluding smaller grassroots organizations. This preliminary review suggests that nonprofit data systems in the region are not yet harmonized, affordable, or consistently transparent. Effective registries should ideally balance inclusivity with credibility, providing public access to reliable information while also incorporating mechanisms for validation. Such systems would enhance trust in civil society and enable governments, funders, and communities to work together more effectively in addressing social challenges.

Looking ahead, this study represents an initial step. Future research should examine more closely **what data are collected in each country, where similarities and differences exist, and what requirements organizations must meet to register and maintain nonprofit status.** This analysis should also address the broader question of whether registration alone is a sufficient marker of legitimacy. If it is not, further inquiry is needed into **what type of regional or cross-national system could strengthen validation and trust in nonprofits across Latin America,** ensuring that registries remain current, reliable, and accessible.

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Appendix A. Nonprofit Databases in Latin America

The table below presents our **preliminary findings** on nonprofit databases across 20 Latin American countries. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, these results reflect data available at the time of collection and may not capture every existing registry. If you have additional information, updates, or corrections, we welcome your input at info@wikicharities.org.

# of Databases	Country	Name of Database	Gov't Run	Link to Database
1	Argentina	Acerca del Registro Nacional de Sociedades	Yes	https://www.argentina.gob.ar/justicia/registro-nacional-sociedades/institucional
0	Belize	N/A	N/A	N/A
1	Bolivia	Registro Único Nacional de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales	Yes	https://ong.planificacion.gob.bo
1	Brazil	Mapa das Organizações da Sociedade Civil (Mapa das OSCs)	Yes	https://mapaosoc.ipea.gov.br/
1	Chile (1)	RPJSFL (Registro Nacional de Personas Jurídicas sin Fines de Lucro) -- National Registry of Nonprofit Legal Entities	Yes	https://www.srcei.cl/PortalOI/transparencia/DatoInteresCiudadano/PersonasJuridicas.xls
1	Chile (2)	El Registro Central de Colaboradores del Estado	Yes	https://registros19862.gob.cl/buscar//5
1	Colombia	RUES (Registro Único Empresarial y Social)	No	https://www.rues.org.co
1	Costa Rica	Registro Nacional (National Registry)	Yes	https://www.registronacional.go.cr/

Appendix A. Nonprofit Databases in Latin America (continued)

1	Ecuador	SUIOS (Sistema Unificado de Información de Organizaciones Sociales)	Yes	https://www.inclusion.gob.ec/
1	El Salvador	Registro de Asociaciones y Fundaciones sin Fines de Lucro	Yes	https://www.gobernacion.gob.sv/ong/
1	Guatemala (1)	Pionero Philanthropy	No	https://www.pionerophilanthropy.org/
1	Guatemala (2)	El Directorio Guatemala	No	https://directorioguatemala.org/organization-search
1	Honduras	DIRRSAC (Dirección de Regulación, Registro y Seguimiento de Asociaciones Civiles)	Yes	https://dirrsac.sgjd.gob.hn/registro_search.php
0	Guyana	N/A	N/A	N/A
1	Mexico (1)	Registro Federal de Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil.	Yes	https://sii.bienestar.gob.mx/portal/
1	Mexico (2)	Directory of Authorized Donees	Yes	https://portalconsdonazr.sat.gob.mx/Consulta/Eventualidades
0	Nicaragua	N/A	N/A	N/A
1	Panama	Public Registry of Panama (Registro Público de Panamá)	Yes	https://www.rp.gob.pa
1	Paraguay	PRO ONG	No	https://www.ong.com.py
1	Peru	Directorio ONGD, ENIEX, e IPREDA	Yes	https://sigcti.apci.gob.pe/InscripcionEntidad/Reporte/EntidadesConsultaDirectorio
0	Suriname	N/A	N/A	N/A
0	Uruguay	N/A	N/A	N/A
0	Venezuela	Registro Nacional de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales (RNONG)	N/A	N/A (unstable portal) - This is not counted as a reliable database, but it is important to note that something was found.