Local Governance and Democracy in Mexico

Francisco J. Porras
PhD student
Politics and International Studies
The University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL. UK
E-mail: F.J.Porras-Sanchez@warwick.ac.uk
porfs@csv.warwick.ac.uk

Paper for the ECPR joint sessions’ workshop no. 6
Turin, 22–27 March 2002

Abstract

Different approaches in governance literature assume that complexity has increased in societies and that, in order to cope with it, some sort of participation of non-state actors in governing processes is essential. The assumption is that legitimacy, and the financial and human resources required to achieve governability, are now more distributed among societal actors than in the past. Thus, a greater societal self-organisation is usually interpreted as both the cause and the result of new institutional arrangements that stress flexibility. However, these arrangements (especially the so called “governance structures”) have produced in the practice fragmentation and blurredness between public and private spheres. The literature has pointed at the possible representation and accountability problems that these developments pose to democratic polities.

This could be especially problematic in the case of countries where democratisation is still taking place. Implementing governance practices in places where institutions have to be democratised first, could further compromise democracy perspectives as a whole. However, the paper will argue that this is not necessarily correct. There is evidence to suggest that, in some Mexican municipalities, governance blurredness has actually increased accountability and broader (constituency related) participation. The consolidation of citizen councils with limited budgetary capabilities has fostered the “effective participation” and “enlightened understanding” that Dahl proposes as criteria of democracy. By getting involved in the introduction and improvement of public services, neighbourhood and planning councils have exerted influence over government decisions in non-electoral periods. At the same time, local governments have used governance structures to strengthen their legal and budgetary capabilities. The paper suggests that an approach that considers government / governance dynamics as complementary, and in some areas as mutually constitutive, should be more useful to understand democratisation processes in Mexico.
More complex societies

It is always useful to remember that the diverse meanings of governance can be partially explained by the very word’s ambiguity. *Gubernantia* makes reference to both a state of affairs and a process of policy implementation, and different approaches have stressed one or the other.

This paper assumes that governance structures are the result of a (methodologically previous) state of affairs, and therefore, that policy process is generated by social complexity. Citizens’ inclusion in determining and assessing public objectives is part of the adaptation to deal with the rise, in number and importance, of “self-organising inter-organisational networks” (Rhodes, 2000:61,64). Thus, governance practices can be understood as devices to re-think the roles of society and government, and their mutual interactions (Pier and Peters, 2000). Others understand them as an ideological-discursive shift based on epistemic communities (Salskov-Iversen et al., 2000), or as an effort to make “spending cuts acceptable” to society (Stoker, 1998: 18). Nevertheless, these different approaches to governance structures do not need to be considered as mutually exclusive. Either as reaction to ‘real’ conditions or as product of the small-state rhetoric, both approaches assume that complexity has increased in societies. They both suppose that the best way to deal with it is through the involvement of the governed in the governing processes (increasing flexibility of interactions among them). The key point is the normative assumption that government has to adapt to citizens’ needs in order to validate itself (which is also the crux of democracy’s paradoxes). But to achieve this is especially difficult in a *demos* that is more fragmented and has more resources than in the past.

The literature argues that the conditions of “modern governance” imply greater autonomy and power in networks that stretch over different levels and sectors of society (Kooiman, 1993a, 2000; Rhodes, 1997). Networks’ members come from all societal areas; they are grouped around private interests and are (usually) linked with the relevant policy-making body. State has also gone through a fragmentation process, producing smaller ad-hoc agencies in order to deal with the loss of legitimacy (Andrew, and Goldsmith, 1998). As a consequence, power dependencies have intensified among public and private sectors (Stoker, 1998). In the case of Mexico, complexity has increased not only because of the pre-eminence of new public–private networks, but also because some patterns of co-governance and power dependence have changed. Balances (although not checks) have increased significantly with stronger state legislatures (Ward and Rodríguez, 1999), and despite fiscal dependency from federal government, states and municipalities are more autonomous than in the past. Moreover, a

---

1 Mexico is a federal republic that follows the American model, with the difference that it is more presidentialist. Until recently balance between powers was little more than symbolic, for supreme court justices were approved by legislatures controlled by the *official* party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). After the national congress elections of 1997 the situation began to change with the PRI’s loss of majority. Since then it has been more evident that the 31 states and the Federal District (Mexico City) have always had a greater legal autonomy than usually acknowledged. Like in the American model, each state has an elected governor, a local congress (which promulgates the local constitution), and a supreme court. Each governor presides over the state’s municipalities, which are
greater environment of sub-national electoral pluralism has produced top-bottom dependencies. States’ governments are more interested in having efficient municipal administrations (regardless of the party in office) and, by achieving this, increase their legitimacy and chances of electoral gains. At the same time, local governments have regained their central role in the regions as decentralisation has advanced, only to be caught between newfound citizens’ demands and lack of resources. These processes have modified the usual models of interaction by introducing new variables in political arenas. In that sense, the adjustment and redefinition of roles of both government and society in Mexico imply more complex societies.

**Complexity, self organisation, and fragmentation**

By “more complex societies” literature usually means a) greater self-organisation among networks, b) blurredness between public and private actors (i.e. private actors taking public decisions without having a formal electoral mandate), c) fragmentation of citizen participation and government institutions, and d) a greater power dependence between societal actors.

The first variable to be singled out by governance literature was self-organisation. Governance approaches began as an effort to demonstrate that government intervention was not enough anymore to ensure the “intentional order” necessary to achieve growth and development. Among these we can find ‘governance without government’ (Rosenau, 1992) and “governing without government” (Rhodes, 1996) approaches, which assessed the problems of achieving convergence in an environment where action is not backed by formal authority and law enforcement – normally supra / inter national contexts - (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992). Rosenau (1997) talks about different “spheres of authority” trying to establish a qualitative difference between government and governance cases. Government takes place when, in order to influence others’ actions, legal coercion and authority are implemented. But governance develops when things are ‘done without the legal competence to command that they be done’ (Czempiel, 1992:250). This approach is usually classified under regime theories and draws attention to the problems of convergence in an environment of diminished State’s capabilities. Thus, although supra-national contexts are very different from sub-national ones, the approach seemed thought provoking when one considers the sub-municipal areas that local government cannot reach. However, absence of State’s prerogatives is not the same that presence of imperfect ones, and even a minimally efficient government can use its prestige to achieve convergence even when it does not have legal backup. The point is that this prestige is build precisely on legal capabilities in other areas. This fact

formed by elected mayors, aldermen and trustees. There are a little more than 2400 municipalities in the country.

2 The PRI governed Mexico from its foundation in 1929 to 2000. Political alternation at state and municipal level, though, began earlier. Opposition municipalities were recognised by the Interior Ministry (Secretaría de Gobernación) since the early 1980s and in 1988 the National Action Party (PAN) won the state of Baja California. Today the PAN governs 7 states, the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) governs 5 –including the federal district-, and coalitions do the same in 2. That is, out of 32 federal entities, non-PRI parties control 14. Since December 2000, the PAN governs Mexico at federal level.
suggests that this approach can be interpreted as another contribution to the now classical shift of question: The quid is not where a state governs, but what (Pierre, 2000). The really interesting aspect of this discussion is that it recovered the idea that the absence of traditional government resources does not amount to chaos. Self-organisation is responsible for the majority of society’s interactions (Kooiman, 1993b) and it is especially evident in the way networks behave. R. A. W. Rhodes, after classifying governance definitions with entomologist patience, concludes that governance is about coordination of more powerful networks, which can override the state’s capabilities for steering (Rhodes, 1997)\textsuperscript{3}.

By self-organisation, Rhodes basically means autonomy from the state and self-government (2000). These characteristics imply that networks draw resources from private and public actors alike and, more importantly, that they are unaccountable to the state. Being more powerful, networks make political environments more complex, to the point that in certain policy areas there is not a “sovereign authority” (Rhodes, 1999: xi). His approach seems to imply that proliferation of networks has qualitatively changed the role of governments in recent times, for

the governance approach does not claim networks are new, only that they have multiplied. Precise figures are not available, but the fragmentation of public services through the increasing use of special-purpose bodies and contracted-out services is obvious and wide spread (Rhodes, 2000: 64)\textsuperscript{4}.

Political systems are more complex not only because the upsurge of self-organisation, but also because the increase of blurredness and fragmentation. When convergence does take place (i.e. when networks do not override the state but collaborate with their resources) it usually implies some sort of redefinition of traditional roles. Some interviewees\textsuperscript{5} in Mexico think that in order to introduce governance structures it should be a requirement to have “strong” and “efficient” administrations, i.e. the government paradigm should be fulfilled first before inviting substantial citizen involvement. The problem lies in the practical ways to hold decision makers accountable when governance devices do not provide clear ways to “punish” and “reward” decisions outside electoral frameworks.

Pierre and Peters (2000) consider that the crux of the governance problem lies at the capacity of social groups to influence, implement, and sometimes resist policy. They try to go beyond the problem of blurredness by establishing that the original distinction lines between government and governance paradigms have never been clear enough. In order to do this, they introduce the concept of “continuum”. Government / governance practices, they argue, form a range of interconnected activities. Traditional government would be at one end of the scale

\textsuperscript{3} If networks actually override State’s capabilities is a debatable issue, as Pier and Peters (2000) suggest. Rhodes never fully demonstrates this basic assumption of his model.

\textsuperscript{4} That is also the case of more theoretical authors, like Stoker. He also defines governance in terms of “autonomous self-governing networks of actors” in an environment that “recognises the capacity to get things done which does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority” (Stoker, 1998: 18).

\textsuperscript{5} Ms Susana Dujowich, journalist in the City of Orizaba; Mr. Pedro Goytia, mayor of Zacatecas; and Mr. José Luis Medina, president of the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) in Zacatecas.
and governance at the other, with policy areas being in different stages of transition (ibid.)
The result, though, is government as an array of fragmented policy areas. And then, we return
to the problem of fragmentation, which is usually criticised in terms of accountability.
Andrew and Goldsmith (1998), for example, censure the introduction of appointed or
informally elected ad-hoc bodies and the removal of functions from formally elected officials.
The problem, as it has been said previously, is the lack of a clear way to influence policy-
making outside electoral arrangements.

Finally, governance literature argues that societies are now more complex for the resulting
power dependency (Stoker, 1998). Kooiman (1993 a) makes the case for government as only
one of the possible sources of governance. Governability resources are amply distributed
among sectors and levels of society, for government is defined in systemic terms. Almost all
social actors can make interventions trying to increase the “intentional order” of the whole.
Then, almost all relevant societal actors co-govern. Moreover, legitimacy and financial
resources, it is argued, are now more abundant among non-governmental sectors. And they
are badly needed to ensure successful policy implementation. The result is “social
governance”. It can be defined as

\[ \text{the functional interdependence between formally and/or relatively} \]
\[ \text{autonomous (non-hierarchically ordered) political and social actors} \]
\[ \text{(Kooiman, 1993 b: 251.)} \]

Interdependence is the quality by which “no single actor has the possibility of ‘doing the job’
(solving a problem or grasping an opportunity) unilaterally”. Complexity increases when “no
actor is so dominant as to enforce a single line of behaviour” (ibid.). Interdependence
increases complexity, for consensus is more difficult in an environment of fragmented
networks – i.e. interests-. Kooiman interprets social governance as a sign of the crisis of the
state, as a reaction of a sceptic society trying to limit formal governmental intervention
(Kooiman, J. and Eliassen, K. A. 1988). Co-dependence is especially important in Mexico
where the only way municipalities have to exert their mandate regarding public service
provision is by the funding of other levels of government and citizen’s participation.

**Governance structures and democracy**

Political environments that are more self-organised, fragmented, interdependent and blurred
pose questions regarding accountability and democracy. Governance structures have been
usually considered as both part of the solution and the problem.

On the one hand they can be counted as State’s adaptation devices to deal with new
complexities. Given a resource-limited state, governance structures provide for knowledge,
funds, and legitimacy that allow a more efficient policy implementation, or even the policy’s
implementation itself. In that sense, they are an important effort of flexibility; the state now
looks in society for resources of which it was considered to be the main source. Then,
governance structures seek the introduction of a more active and localised participation of
citizens, that (ideally), would increase equality in setting public agendas and more
“enlightened understanding” (Dahl, 1982). Governance structures are usually understood as
tools of participatory democracy; they are part of the “the post-political search for effective regulation and accountability” (Hirst, 2000:13).

On the other hand, complexity in political arenas is increased by the very introduction of governance structures. Some interviewees in Mexico\(^6\) were at first concerned by the fact that, especially among PAN municipalities, good administrations were followed by electoral defeats. In the case of the state of Veracruz, several municipalities of the centre of the state were lost in the 2000 elections after very efficient first-time opposition governments. The usual explanation was the lack of leadership among candidates and internal party divisions. However, citizens’ expectations also played an important role. They are dynamic, and they change according government responses (Downs, 1957). The general impression was that expectations and demand for better quality of services increased after governments began to publish its finances’ information on a monthly basis, and implemented neighbourhood councils that supervised the maintenance of urban infrastructure. Parties at government just assumed that administrative efficiency and transparency was more than enough to establish a partisan differential. But the introduction of citizen councils expanded self-organisation’s areas of influence. The very numbers of councils accentuate fragmentation of the public sphere, making control (not to speak of accountability) more difficult (Hirst, 2000).

In short, governance structures pose problems because they change traditional government paradigms. Cabrero Mendoza (2000) argues that it is particularly problematic in the case of Mexico, for two important processes of consolidation are taking place at the same time: on the one hand democratic consolidation (in the form of a respected institutional electoral machinery) is still in the making. The Electoral Institutes that supervise for clean elections are decentralised, and although controlled by a Federal Electoral Institute, there are still procedural variations in different states that have questioned the institutes’ autonomy (like in recent elections in the states of Yucatán and Tabasco). On the other hand, there is not a clear separation between administrative and political issues in local administration, for Mexico does not have a public civil service. So there is also a process of administrative consolidation; governments’ first priority is how to ensure policy continuity when the period of municipal administration is only three years long and re-election is not possible. Not surprisingly, there is a high rotation in administrative and technical posts, and as one interviewee said\(^7\), every three years “we have to begin from zero again”.

This is an important point, for the literature considers that governance structures are a step beyond government, and therefore, it assumes that a controlled bureaucracy works in public service provision. In the countries where this literature has been produced, governance structures are usually introduced to ensure higher degrees of legitimacy and participation. But

---

\(^6\) Mr. Francisco Briseño, local deputy in the congress of the state of Veracruz and former trustee and director of the Social Development Department at the Municipality of Orizaba; Mr. José Oscar Vega, director of the Association of Mexican Municipalities (AMMAC); Ms Adriana Guerrero, of the Municipality of León, among others. All of them have links to the National Action Party: Orizaba was governed by it between 1994 and 2000; it has governed León since 1989, and AMMAC members are usually municipalities with PAN mayors.

\(^7\) Mr. Gerardo Sanz Guraieb, founder of DIRCO (Integral Development for the Region of Cordoba – Orizaba), and NGO trying to ensure industrial policy convergence among 7 municipalities and the state government.
in Mexico, governments use governance structures to provide for basic infrastructure that otherwise could not be afforded. Some interviewees point at the paradox that some local administrations, the apparently most successful in getting citizen participation, are also the ones considered most “autocratic”. The fact is that in some municipalities governance structures have been implemented as a device for getting more federal transferences, as it will be explained later. Some authors are quite sceptical about the real impact of them in local democracy. It is argued that they only have symbolic value, for they are used as a top-down reform strategy where solid institutional frameworks, rule of law, checks and balances, civil service system, and accountability systems are all absent of ineffective (Arellano-Gault, 2000: 400).

So what to think about governance structures in an environment that is highly complex, given its transition characteristics? Interviewees agree that governance structures have, under certain circumstances, helped to build governmental institutions. They have helped in the construction of a more “enlightened understanding” of local administration problems and fostered participation in local issues (Dahl’s –1989 – criteria). And in that sense, helped to the consolidation of democratic institutions.

**Governance structures in Mexico**

Since the mid 1990s, a strong shift towards governance practices has taken place at municipalities (originally mandated by the national congress as a way to depoliticise the Solidaridad programme and foster decentralisation)\(^9\). Currently, the Law for Fiscal Coordination (LCF) requires municipalities to organise citizen consultations and citizen supervision of public works in order to qualify for the branch 033 resources (change introduced in the mid 1990s). This move was important, for it went beyond the usual approach of “democratic planning”. The Federal Law for planning –LFP– (art. 20) is the major framework for this “democratic planning system”. The problem is that this law does not consider municipalities explicitly and suggests the use of fora (where officials hear papers presented by citizens) as a device for exchange information about local needs.

The introduction of a very explicit LCF prompted the implementation of other forms of consultation. Since the mid 1990s, a complex structure of elected chiefs of blocks (CB), neighbourhood committees (NC), and Councils for Municipal Development (COPLADEM) has sprung in (mostly) urban municipalities, creating new ways to deal with urban service

---

\(^8\) I personally do not share the author’s pessimistic description of the institutional structures in Mexico.

\(^9\) The Solidaridad (Solidarity) federal programme was implemented in the Salinas administration (1988 – 1994) as a way to tackle extreme poverty in rural and urban areas. It introduced basic urban infrastructure, bypassing municipal governments, by dealing with elected neighbourhoods’ committees. All was coordinated through the Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL) via state delegations. The beneficiaries would normally pay a percentage of the costs by donating labour or paying fees. The programme was amply criticised by its clientelist approach (it is normally credited for the PRI revival of the late 1980s). During Zedillo’s administration (1994 –2000) the programme was decentralised after national congress pressure and was finally dropped.
provision. In the case of Orizaba (a city of 115,000 inhabitants), there are 1044 CBs, covering almost each block of its 23 Km². They are supposed to help with service provision by paying attention to the quality of basic services and reporting monthly to the City Hall; reporting potable water leakages in the main lines, and problems with the disposal of garbage are also among their duties. They also have to collaborate with the civil registry by helping people to report deaths and births, although this rarely happens, for they are ad honorem posts exercised in a part-time basis. In the case of the administration 1998–2000, only a small fraction of the CBs actually worked.

The neighbourhood committees are elected following public procedures, and the process is organised by officials. Neighbours elect a president, secretary, treasurer and three “vocals” in charge of different areas. The regulations vary according to municipality, but usually they are required to report monthly to the City Hall –if they are dealing with a public work - and to hold public meetings with the neighbours every two months). Each committee elects a “public work committee” if it is necessary. It reports on the quality of the work made by contractors, it organises the collection of fees (although they do not manage money directly) and it functions, in general, as a public service agent. It decides which public work has priority in the neighbourhood or section, and the decision is binding to the municipality. Also in the case of Orizaba, 80 committees helped with 243 public works in 2001, spending 70% of the budget for public services. León, a regional capital of 1m inhabitants has managed to build a complex structure of NCs and councils per area. In this case there are 746 NCs, although the interviewees acknowledge that they could only work with 180 directly in 2001. A number of neighbourhoods constitute a section (27 in the city) and (at least last year) they were able to deal with 27% of the demand (being mainly introduction and improvement of basic urban infrastructure). Zacatecas (roughly 100,000 inhabitants) has managed to organise NCs in most of its neighbourhoods (8–10 per section, having 22 sections in total). Only 40% of the demand (also basic infrastructure) was met.

While in the past local governments were expected to provide for all public services, now it is usual that the introduction of infrastructure related ones (like paving, public lighting, and main lines of potable water) is paid by governments and citizens in an 80-20 proportion. This is an important change in the usual ways of local government in Mexico. Today, if a neighbourhood requires the introduction or significant improvement of its urban infrastructure, it is quite probable that the only way to get it is by the organisation of a committee and the collaboration of prospective users (in the form of manual unpaid work or the payment of 20% of the total cost of the public work). All this costs exclude any future fee in the case of potable water and public lighting (paid annually in the form of an estate tax).

---

10 Some of the mentioned examples come from three study cases: the municipalities of Orizaba, León, and Zacatecas. The PRI governs Orizaba; León is governed by the PAN, and Zacatecas by the PRD. These municipalities are considered referential models to other municipalities in the country. León, for example, receives nearly 80 visits per year to know about their experiences in implementing NCs (interview with Mr. Horacio Guerrero, director of the Municipal Institute of Planning (IMPLAN) in León; 12/02/01).

11 It is difficult to know what percentage of CBs actually worked. In practical terms mayors do not put much attention to CBs, as they are seen as an old institution originally designed by the PRI governments to ensure neighbours vote (interview with Dr. Ángel Escudero, former mayor of Orizaba, 18/01/01).
That is public service provision by reaction to controlled citizen mobilisation. Citizens are supposed to be the main agents (gestores) of community development. And government is a coordinator of community resources.\textsuperscript{12}

The presidents of NCs in the same section of the city elect representatives to the local COPLADEM. This is formed by sectional representatives, the mayor, aldermen, trustees, and technical staff. It is the final decision body on matters of urban planning, and from this year on it will have budgetary capabilities in some states. In the case of Zacatecas, the COPLADEM will determine how to spend the federal transfers of the budgetary branch 033, the main source of funding for municipal infrastructure. In León, the COPLADEM will actually decide over what public works are to be done, including those financed by transfers and local revenue. In general, branch 033 (with 026) forms the main source for municipal revenue (see table 1). This is important, given the fact that the LCF explicitly asks for a form of public consultation (more than fora), and that all this is supervised by local congresses.

Table 1. Municipalities’ revenues 1988 – 1999 (Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Own revenues (Taxes)</th>
<th>Revenues transferred from state and federal levels</th>
<th>Public debt</th>
<th>Other revenues</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>31.81</td>
<td>58.05</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>36.88</td>
<td>50.99</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>37.74</td>
<td>48.08</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>8.23</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>39.96</td>
<td>47.11</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>40.89</td>
<td>47.88</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>39.19</td>
<td>44.37</td>
<td>8.04</td>
<td>8.40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>37.60</td>
<td>46.93</td>
<td>8.82</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>35.37</td>
<td>49.11</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>8.86</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>33.82</td>
<td>49.52</td>
<td>7.39</td>
<td>9.27</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>32.97</td>
<td>49.93</td>
<td>7.63</td>
<td>9.47</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>32.16</td>
<td>50.35</td>
<td>8.17</td>
<td>9.32</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>31.38</td>
<td>50.77</td>
<td>7.41</td>
<td>10.44</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The actual spending in services is different, though. Branch 033 and 026 resources are tagged. Branch 033 has two funds that are managed by municipalities directly. Fund 3 can only be used in the introduction of urban basic infrastructure (potable water, paving, health related services, roads, sewerage, and basic education infrastructure). Fund 4 can only be used to improve security (financing municipal police departments), paying public debt or new expensive acquisitions (like a new fleet of patrol cars, for example)\textsuperscript{13}. NCs usually decide

\textsuperscript{12} Interview with Ms Ángeles Ramírez, 11/01/02.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Mr. Pedro Goytia, mayor of Zacatecas, 16/02/01.
about the use of fund 3, and COPLADEMs about general policies regarding transfers. Branch 026 gives municipalities money to deal with extreme poverty (CESEM, 2001). So, the final picture is that a relevant transfers’ percentage pays administrative expenses related to public service provision. Nevertheless, NCs and COPLADEMs decide over roughly a quarter of the municipalities’ expenses, which is a very significant portion (see table 2).

Table 2.
Municipalities’ expenses 1989 – 1999 (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Administrative Expenses</th>
<th>Public works</th>
<th>Transferences</th>
<th>Debt / Service</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>56.38</td>
<td>25.41</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>8.07</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>57.74</td>
<td>25.58</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>55.93</td>
<td>27.23</td>
<td>6.48</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>56.18</td>
<td>25.64</td>
<td>7.17</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>56.13</td>
<td>24.61</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>8.30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>57.74</td>
<td>24.86</td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>7.24</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>57.25</td>
<td>24.09</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>7.74</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>58.92</td>
<td>20.76</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>7.48</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>60.67</td>
<td>20.56</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>59.11</td>
<td>21.30</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>8.05</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>52.40</td>
<td>23.82</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>10.23</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>49.93</td>
<td>28.15</td>
<td>10.07</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>8.51</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Governance structures and presidentialism

At the same time, the local level of government has gained substantially in resources and legal capabilities; a process initiated by the constitutional amendment of 1983 but consolidated and accelerated by the alternation of opposition political parties in office. The introduction of a new Federal Code for Electoral Institutions and Practices (COFIPE) in 1992 established separate courts to deal with post-electoral problems and determined that citizen councillors, grouped in local State Electoral Institutes, would be the organisers of the elections and the scrutinisers of the results. The Interior Ministry (Secretaría de Gobernación) had been in control of electoral procedures before. This change ensured a greater variety of political projects and more pressure to administer efficiently (this is the “rational shift” in local administration mentioned by Ward, 1998 and Rodríguez and Ward, 1991). Alternation, more resources, and decentralisation have put local government back at the centre of municipal life; before 1983 municipalities were mostly administrators of decisions and resources from state capitals.

In practical terms, the figure of the mayor has been at the centre of this revitalisation, but not necessarily because strong leadership has secured social backup. Mayors are at the centre of
municipal political life. The mayor is elected with his trustees and aldermen in a single slate. COFIPE regulations ensure a certain degree of representation of opposition parties in the city council, but state rules usually give the mayor a significant majority of councillors. In the case of Orizaba, for example, the mayor, 2 trustees, and 8 aldermen of the same party, plus 4 aldermen of the opposition form the city council. Because re-election is not possible, political careers usually depend on support from the mayor and other party members. Dissent in the city council is not easy. As a result, city councils almost never work as the legislative balance to the executive part of government they are supposed to be (mayors in Mexico are called “municipal presidents” and are supposed to enact the resolutions voted in the city council, that when in session - Cabildo - is the final governing body of the city). Thus, we have here the case of strong local governments (with strong presidentialist legal structures) coexisting with governance practices: strong hierarchies fostering administrative efficiency and transparency, and horizontal networking with planning and budgetary capabilities. How can we interpret this experiment?

One first possible approach is to disregard the real power of governance structures in the design of governing objectives. This might be the case of Orizaba: strong presidentialism is enough to control the decisions of the COPLADEM (to which, in this particular case, one has to be appointed instead of elected) and the neighbourhood councils are not numerous enough to pose any serious pressure over government. Governance structures increase government legitimacy by dealing with potentially difficult neighbourhoods (participation is higher in lower socio-economic strata) by the introduction of urban infrastructure in long forgotten communities. They would also help governments to save resources, for all public works would be financed by transferences and users’ payment. This, however, could also be the interpretation of more successful experiences. Zacatecas’ COPLADEM will decide over the branch 033 expenses, but that is a limited section of the local budget (although significant). The city council will retain power over local revenue. And if something goes wrong, the city council can always point the finger to the COPLADEM (as indeed has happened already). In short, these experiments could be interpreted as cases of limited governance: there is an increase in complexity in certain policy areas. But as a whole, they serve to legitimise government policy without seriously compromising it.

A second possibility is to regard these governance structures as real ones, producers of “intentional orders” with the participation of governmental and non-governmental agents (Stoker, 1998), increasing the degree of complexity in the government decision process (Kooiman, 1993 b). That would mean that governance dynamics affect public policy and that government is increasingly dealing with “management of self-organised networks” (Rhodes, 1997). If governance occurs, then a certain amount of convergence is to be expected. But as Cabrero Mendoza would say (2000), this comes at the price of heavy bargaining and sometimes confrontation, for consensus is not easily reachable. More importantly, and that is the case of the three studied municipalities, governance structures have created a demand for infrastructure introduction and citizen participation that no government can match (actually one interviewee used the image of an inverted funnel to describe the situation)14. In the case of León they have had protest meetings in front of the city hall, demanding services in neighbourhoods that have already complied with the rules of the COPLADEM but that have received none. After a certain point, it seems, government has to be careful with the dealing of

14 Mr. Luis E. Conde, of the Social Development Department in León, 10/01/02.
Local Governance and Democracy in Mexico

It is not sure anymore that legitimacy will increase and, at least in the case of León, the participative structure is so big that officials doubt that the municipality saves resources. That is also the case of Zacatecas, and in both cities officials and citizens are not sure if by using governance structures it is easier to govern. It is interesting that (depending on the policy area) both interpretations are valid in the three studied cities. That is precisely why I think that it is not enough to see at the fieldwork findings to know which approach is more accurate. In order to understand why these competing explanations can coexist it is necessary to return to the governance definitions that originated our question.

Local governance and democracy in Mexico

There is not enough compiled national, or even regional data in order to assess the impact of governance structures in equity of participation in setting the agenda of public matters (criteria of Dahl, 1982, 1986). Data is dispersed in the 2400+ municipalities; and not all of them have decided to introduce neighbourhood councils or COPLADEMs, for in the case of rural municipalities, they can get more resources from branch 026 for which no citizen consultation is compulsory. Most of the evidence is drawn from interviews with practitioners at local and regional level; it suggests that governance structures per se do not produce better democratic conditions. In order to do that, other conditions have to be present. They are related to the ability of mayors to develop strong social leadership, many times helped by national associations of municipalities (like in the case of AMMAC, the Association of Mexican Municipalities, that advertises the case of León as a referential model).

It appears that governance structures do introduce more complexity as predicted by the literature. However, it is limited by their use in public services introduction and quality assessment. Governments can gain legitimacy by allowing citizens to decide about priorities in their neighbourhoods or sections; their decisions are more in the nature of what service has to be introduced in what area first (given the scarcity of resources this is relevant for a neighbourhood). In the case of public works committees the consequences of citizens’ decisions is limited by the work itself (as general specifications apply to all contractors). In the COPLADEMs, the presence of councillors and technical staff influence results in voting general policies.

Self-organisation is more evident in the number of committees, but also is interdependence. Despite fragmentation, NCs and COPLADEMs are perceived as an important link between society and the municipal hall. Local government in Mexico continues to be the central political actor in municipalities, and the fact that it has promoted these forms of citizen participation has increased its prestige. This prestige is used to facilitate convergence and resource exchange between sectors (in Orizaba, for example, local government usually gets important regional factories to donate construction materials, which are given to citizens in exchange of manual labour in their neighbourhood’s public works). Blurredness in COPLADEMs certainly exists, as it is very difficult for a common citizen to determine who voted what. Having said that, it is interesting to note that planning councils of this kind have actually increased accountability by the introduction of a constituency notion. Given that councillors and mayors are elected in a slate system, there are not sub-municipal constituencies to which they are responsible. The fact that they are elected for three-year non-
renewable periods does not help to build a social notion of constituency. The presence of sectional representatives in the COPLADEM has established a bridge between territorial representation and councillors in charge of different policy areas.

Participation has also increased, and with that, transparency. It is now customary that important urban municipalities publish information regarding its finances and advance of public works in a monthly basis. The mere amount of people that at one time or another participate in governance structures ensures that the interest in public services is greater than in the past (in León alone, the councils that send representatives to the COPLADEM are formed by four thousand people). Without governance structures, those people would not be involved in assessing public services in one way or another. Finally, the NCs and COPLADEMs have plaid a role in influencing governments in non-electoral times. In that sense, participatory democracy has been strengthened, and electoral (formal) one has been benefited indirectly by stressing the link between administrations and the quality of public services during tenure.

At the end, much of the concerns regarding governance structures are related to the conceptual separation that literature has established between government and governance practices. Government has been marginalized by a literature that has stressed how self-organisation, fragmentation and interdependence have changed societal functions: almost as if governance was the opposite of government. Yet, the link between government and governance at sub-national levels seems to have characteristics of a mutually constitutive duality. Effective government produces a certain degree of governance and, at least in Mexican municipalities, governance structures have been used to strengthen government capacities (in order to get state and federal transfers). That is to say that interdependence, a common assumption in approaches to governance, can also be an attribute of government. In the Mexican case it is not possible to make a straight differentiation between traditional government practices and governance structures. What is more, transition between one and the other does not occur in a linear way; or necessarily towards the direction of “governance” either, but is messy and full of contradictions. If this is true, then governance would be only a new name for government and citizenship in times of more complexity.

References


