

# Collaborative governance: beyond mere participation

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## Abstract

The crisis of legitimacy that governments in general have faced since the late 20th century has resulted in an increasing quest for opening the policy making processes to new non-state actors. The idea is to involve public agents, private actors, and civil-society in general, in some joint effort to make or implement public policies. Many countries have designed different participatory governance arrangements to involve those actors in the decision-making processes. Although the results of such practices have varied in scope and impact, their analysis has been mainly focused on the collaborative process. Little attention has been paid to the elements within the decision-making process that allows for an actual impact of the non-state actors into the decision-making process.

Based on the definition of collaborative governance of Ansell and Gash (2008), this paper seeks to analyze the rules and procedures for the decision-making

processes within bureaucracies that foster or constrain collaborative governance. I argue that the success of the collaborative process is not only determined by the extent to which the actors involved are interdependent, devote the necessary time and trust each other, but also—and more fundamentally—by the capacity of public offices to accommodate such process into their daily routines.

Specifically, I study the interaction between the collaborative and the bureaucratic routines in order to understand the extent to which participation actually constitute an input for decision-making. I exemplify my argument with an analysis of a participatory arrangement implemented by the Mexican federal government.

## 1. Introduction

The crisis of legitimacy that governments have faced since the late 20th century constitute a challenge for getting citizens' demands met effectively (Donahue 2004; Christensen, Lægreid and Rykkja 2016; Dahl and Tufte 1973). There is an increasing quest for opening the policy making processes to new non-state actors. Accordingly, different governments around the globe are implementing innovative strategies of governing to create more inclusive decisions on public action that are more publicly satisfying (Ansell and Gash 2008; Donahue 2004; Sørensen and Torfing 2011; Van Heffen, Kickert and Thomassen 2000; Heinrich, Lynn and Milward 2009). Regardless of the term used to define such strategies of governing (e.g. collaborative governance, policy networks, collaborative management)<sup>1</sup> (c.f. Ansell and Gash 2008), the underlying premise of such collaborative arrangements is that policy making can produce better outcomes by integrating into their decision-making processes the knowledge of the actors affected by a certain public problem. In this logic, "even the most powerful public

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<sup>1</sup> I use the concept of collaborative governance in the terms set forth by Ansell and Gash (2008) since an operational definition has already been developed.

agencies, corporations or individuals cannot produce the results they want when working alone” (Innes and Boohe 2003: 35).

Central to collaborative governance —as to any other participatory arrangement— is the collaborative process that guides collective decision-making (Ansell and Gash 2008). Since such participatory arrangements not always have resulted in collective decision-making (Braun and Schultz 2010; Huxman 2003), it is not a surprise that the literature on collaboration has mainly focused on identifying the success factors of this kind of collaborative process (c.f. Newman et al 2004; Selin and Chevez 1995; Bantrop 2001; Innes and Boohe 1999; Thomson and Perry 2006; McGuire 2006; Bryson, Crosby and Stone 2006; Ansel and Gash 2008).

An underlying assumption in this discussion is that public agencies have the capacity for automatically integrating collaborative decision-making processes within their routine operation. Based on the definition of collaborative governance set forth by Ansell and Gash (2008), I analyze how the collaborative process interacts with the decision-making processes within bureaucracies. I argue that the success of the collaborative process is not only determined by the extent to which the actors involved are interdependent, devote the necessary time to the process and trust each other, but also —and more fundamentally— by the capacity of public offices to accommodate such process into their daily routines. To exemplify how this interaction takes place in practice, I analyze a participatory arrangement implemented by the Mexican federal government: the social accountability committees for all social programs.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section I describe the collaborative process that guides collaborative governance, and its determinants. Next, I study the collaborative process within the bureaucratic routines by analyzing the main features of bureaucracies and their implications for integrating the

collaborative process into their decision-making processes. In the following section I use the case of the social accountability committees in Mexico to analyze the interaction between the collaborative process and the bureaucratic routines. In the last section I conclude by discussing the implications of analyzing the factors of success and failure of collaborative governance only in terms of the determinants of the collaborative process, without including the capacity of public offices to incorporate this process into their daily operation.

## 2. Collaborative process

Collaboration is a process that occurs over time. For analytic purposes, scholars have artificially divided it into different stages, although in practice it unfolds in a nonlinear manner (Thomson and Perry 2006; Ansell and Gash 2008; Himmelman 1996; Ring and Van de Ven 1994; Ostrom, 1998; Susskind and Cruikshank 1987; Huxham 2003; Imperial 2005; Edelenbos 2005).

The progress towards defining the determinants for collaboration among governmental and non-governmental actors reflects a longstanding work based on this analytical framework. Despite the rich literature produced on the subject, it is mostly based on the analysis of single-case studies around specific policy areas or forms of collaboration (Imperial 2005; Ansell and Gash 2008). As a result, there are cumulative non-standardized concepts that make it difficult to build on the literature of collaborative governance (Wood and Gray 1991). Indeed, when researchers employ different definitions of collaboration, it becomes practically impossible to study it systematically, and identify the factors that explain its success (Wood and Gray 1991; Imperial 2005).

Ansell and Gash (2008) address this issue by developing a meta-analytic

strategy with which they analyze different sets of case studies in order to develop a common “model” of collaborative governance. By doing so, the authors make two important contributions to this literature. First, they identify the factors that, in general, explain why a collaborative process results in a collective decision-making process. They argue that a collaborative process entails the interaction of four variables: face-to-face dialogue, trust-building, commitment to process, shared understanding and intermediate outcomes.

According to Ansell and Gash (2008), face-to-face dialogue is a basic necessary condition for collaborative governance to take place, since it allows participants to identify opportunities for mutual gain by breaking down stereotypes and barriers to communication. Additionally, the authors argue that for stakeholders to be willing to embark in a time-consuming process, they must perceive it as a process that can effectively produce collaborative outcomes. They also conclude that the process of collaboration entails trust building and commitment to process. If the collaborative process requires a deliberate effort from all the actors involved on it—and that the outcomes that results from it would not necessarily reflect the preferences of all of them—, then it is necessary that they can be certain that the procedures are trustworthy and will include everyone’s opinion. Commitment to process, then, entails mutual recognition of interdependence and a shared ownership of process. The actors involved in this process stop being spectators of the decision-making process to become part of it. As such, they are also responsible for policy outcomes.

The model proposed by Ansell and Gash (2008) stipulates that the collaborative process also requires the actors involved to have a shared understanding of the purpose of the process they are taking part of. This means

that the actors involved in the process agree in what they can achieve together, but also in the definition of the problem they intend to address (or the relevant knowledge necessary for doing it). Finally, the authors argue that having small wins (that may be as simple as strategic plans or joint fact-finding) produces a virtuous cycle of trust building and commitment that strengthen the collaborative process as a whole.

The second major contribution of Ansel and Gash (2008) to this body of literature is an operational definition of a rather elusive concept. They define collaborative governance “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets.” (2008: 544). Indeed, for these authors, the focus of collaboration is on public policy or public management because, after all, collaborative governance aims at including public and non-public actors in the decision-making process. Since collaborative governance occurs in the interaction of public and non-public actors for the design or implementation of public policies, I argue that the success of a collaborative process not only depends on the variables that determine that process, but also on those within the public agencies’ routines. This is an issue that has been addressed in the public administration literature’s understanding of collaboration. O’Toole (1997) has stressed the need for conducting research that could improve public administrations’ capacity to cope with the challenge of involving new actors (such as businesses, not-for-profits, other units of government, and clients) into their decision-making processes.

When analyzing the factors that affect the collaborative process, this

literature finds that the decision-making processes within public agencies are disconnected from collaborative arrangements. For instance, the actors involved in the collaborative process faces a constant tension since they must contribute to the organization' and collaboration' goals at the same time (Thomson 2001). Indeed, public officials constantly face the difficulty of balancing their organizations' policy priorities with the local preferences, mostly because they cannot modify the purposes of their actions in view of what results from collaborative exercises (Newman et. al 2004). This means that public managers are simultaneously involved in different arrangements that are not easily to separate: "it is often difficult to distinguish where the boundary lies between these different environments" (McGuire 2006:35), and hence, to prioritize one above the others. This may explain why collaborative structures do not seem to be replacing public bureaucracies. After all public institutions —particularly public agencies— are the ones that usually have the last call regarding policy decisions (Agranoff 2006).

When trying to address this disconnection, scholars have focused their research on identifying the aspects of the collaborative process that should be altered to improve the process. Most of the scholars agree that interdependence (Logdsdon 1991; Pfeffer 1997; Thomson 2001; Ansel and Gash 2008), time (Huxham 1996; Ansel and Gash 2008; Thomson and Perry 2006; Agranoff 2006) and trust (Ostrom 1998; Agranoff 2006; Ansel and Gash 2008) are the basic elements for a successful collaborative strategy.

Only tangentially has this literature approached the issue regarding the administrative context within which the collaborative process take place. Huxham (1996) argues that collaboration among organizations requires that the actors involved have the necessary authority to implement the commitments that may

result from the process, otherwise “there will need to be continual checking-back to the ‘parents’ before action can happen” (1996:5). Thomson (2001) argues that among the five dimensions that cross-cut the collaborative process, the administration dimension implies that, for collaboration to exist, there must be “some kind of administrative structure” that transforms joint decision making into action (2001:26). Agranoff (2006) recognizes that it is far too early to know how, and to what extent, does collaborative structures affect “what we have traditionally known as *government*” (2006: 63; emphasis in original).

Two fundamental problems arise when the inherent tension between the collaborative and the bureaucratic decision-making processes is analyzed only taking the collaborative process itself as the analytical unit. First, if taking this to extreme, the argument becomes tautological. Indeed, to improve the collaborative process one must affect the factors that influence it, but the way to affect those factors is by affecting the collaborative process itself.

The second problem lies in the practical implications of this tension. As shown before, the research on the subject has already made important progress in identifying that one of factors that hinder the achievement of a collective decision making process is the lack of capacity of public agencies to integrate into their routinely decisions the products that come out of the collaborative process. But since the factors that affect the collaborative process are only analyzed taking the collaborative process itself as the analytical unit, the factors that crosscut processes outside the collaborative process will be unaffected, and so the collaborative process will remain the same. The consequence is not insignificant: no matter how much interdependence, time and trust there is between state and non-state actors in a collaborative process, if bureaucratic structures are unable to incorporate



whatever results from the collective decision-making processes, collaborative arrangements would not achieve their ultimate purpose.

As Janssen and Estevez (2013) put it “The development and deployment of collaborative solutions require governments to embrace an orchestration role, monitoring and steering what is happening in the collaborative eco-system, introducing a shift in governments' role, and introducing roles that are different from their traditional ones.” (2013: S1). To put it simple: the study of the collaborative process necessitates the analysis of the bureaucratic processes within which it is supposed to fit in.

### 3. The collaborative process within bureaucratic routines

Regardless of the extent to which public policies are formed by collaborative decision making-processes, they are to be implemented within bureaucracies. The study of bureaucracy is one of the most profuse fields in public administration. Since my purpose is not to contribute to that literature but to make explicit the tensions between bureaucratic and collaborative processes, I center the analysis of bureaucracies in the reasons that explain why their behavior differs from the expected. To do so, this analysis is based in the most basic notion of bureaucracy: organizations with a hierarchical authority structure (Weber 1946), where the work of its members is continually regulated or monitored in order to reduce discretion, so that their action do not deviate from the political mandate or the policy objectives (Calvert, McCubbins and Weingast, 1989). The literature suggests three perspectives to analyze bureaucracies: administrative controls, officials' motivations, and organizational features (c.f De Jong's 2016; Meyers and Vorsanger's 2003).

- Administrative controls

The administrative controls perspective focuses on bureaucratic rules and procedures, and how they shape bureaucratic outcomes. A basic premise is that rules are created because bureaucrats' discretion needs to be limited in order to make sure that they act in accordance to the organization's objectives or mandate (Wilson 2000; Calvert, McCubbins and Weingast 1989). Even though the creation of every rule might be justified in terms of the social benefits it generates (Goodsell 1985; Kaufman 2015), the sum of written rules, procedures, and regulations often translate into slow and rigid organizations (Kaufman 2015; Bozeman 1993; Monahan and Herd 2010) or even undesired behaviors (Merton 1957). This is because complying with each rule require economic resources, time and energy (Foster and Jones 1978; Foster 1990), which it is not itself a problem, except when those rules no longer serve the purpose for which they were created (what Bozeman 1993 defines as "red-tape").

Even though not all the existent rules in a bureaucracy are red-tape, they all mean an administrative burden for bureaucrats (Bozeman 1993). Administrative burdens are defined as "individual's experience of policy implementation as onerous" (Burden *et.al* 2012:742). Administrative burdens affect officials' behavior since they shape the view that bureaucrats have of policies (Moynihan and Herd 2010).

Indeed, bureaucratic support or resistance towards certain mandate does not only depends on its objective but also on the perception of the burden that

implementing such policy will presumably have (Burden, et. al/ 2012)<sup>2</sup>. The implications that this idea has for the analysis of the collaborative process—as one mandate that is to be incorporated within bureaucracies—is simple: bureaucrats will be willing to modify their daily routines to integrate non-state actors into their processes as far as doing so is not perceived as burdensome (cf. Moynihan 2003). Otherwise, if it is perceived as a burden, then it will compete for time and attention with other mandates. This is consistent with what Agranoff (2006) found out by empirically analyzing 14 networks in the federal, state and local governments: public managers only invested 15 to 20 per cent of their time to “all forms of collaborative activity” (2008: 57) greatly because besides participating in collaborative processes for implementing certain policies, they still had to undertake their routinely work.

- Public officials’ motivations

Another perspective from which bureaucracies can be analyzed is by looking at public officials’ motivations. This perspective focusses on street-level bureaucrats (SLB)<sup>3</sup> that, as “public service workers who interact directly with citizens (...) and have *substantial discretion* in the execution of their job” (Lipsky 2010: 3, emphasis added), end up functioning as policy makers (Bardach 1998; Maynard-Moody and

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<sup>2</sup> Naturally, since the burdensome of a rule is based on a perception (that of the bureaucrat), it is influenced by the public officers’ personal beliefs (Burden et al, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> There are many types of public workers in bureaucracies. I deliberately center the analysis of their ideologies and motivations in street-level bureaucrats for two reasons. The first was already mentioned, and is that the main purpose of this article is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of bureaucracies, but to understand how it relates to collaborative decision-making processes. The second (and most important) reason partly derives from the previous: because the values behind collaborative governance are frequently perceived as desirable, it is not expectable to find higher ranks’ public officials resisting collaborative mandates. On the contrary, street-level bureaucrats, which are the ones in charge of implementing the mandate, might put some resistance (not for the values that collaboration entails, but for the factors discussed in this section) and end up frustrating the objectives’ set by their superiors.

Musheno 2000; Hill and Hupe 2002; Lipsky 2010). The premise is that, given the nature of the job SLB's conduct, it is practically impossible to eliminate the discretion with which they work (cf. Lipsky 2010: 14-15). The considerable discretion SLB have is problematic because the way they give sense and translate ambiguous policies and mandates into specific actions depends on their own interests and needs (Kerwin and Furlong 2010; Brodtkin 2012). This is not to say that SLB are conceived as intrinsically ill-intended but rather, that they are influenced by several factors that impact their discretionary behavior (Wilson 2000; Meyers and Vorsanger 2003; Lipsky 2010). As Wilson (2000: 53) put it "the imperatives of the situation<sup>4</sup> more than the attitudes of the worker shape the way task are performed in [public offices]".

There are two main factors that influence SLB's behavior: goals' ambiguity and conditions of work. Very often organizations make explicit their purpose through the definition of goals that are ambiguous and unclear (Wilson 2000; Hill and Hupe 2002). In such cases, SLB have to provide the vague goal with substantive content, that is, to translate the goal into concrete and observable actions. The way each bureaucrat manages to do this will depend on his or her own understanding of the goal, which is determined by his or her personal beliefs and experiences (Wilson 2000; Lipsky 2010).

Goals are difficult to operationalize (Winter 1999). Moreover, it is also difficult to generate performance measures that account for the specific contribution that each public worker has towards that goal (Lipsky 2010). Since performance cannot always be monitored, what is often measured only indicates the specific activities

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<sup>4</sup> Wilson (2000) argues that front-line workers everyday deal with situational imperatives, that is, with situations that are so powerful and urgent that displace formal organizational goals as the factor that guide their actions.

that SLB conducted, which certainly does not signify a better or worse performance. This affect SLB's actions in the sense that "[their behavior] comes to reflect the incentives and sanction implicit in those measurements" (Lipsky 2010: 51).

The conditions under which SLB work also influence their decisions and actions. Usually SLB lack the necessary resources to cope with the ever-growing demand for services. In turn, they end up rationing services and favoring some clients before others (Lipsky 2010; Winter 2001; Pessó 1978). Additionally, SLB job are subject to peer expectations, and those expectations are precisely what orients their discretionary behavior: SLB are constantly required to decide what, when and how to provide certain good or service, and since only do peer groups fully understand those sorts of work pressures (Wilson 2000; Lipsky 2010), peer expectations determine both the way a job should be undertaken, and "what the job is" (Wilson 2000: 48, emphasis in original).

The inherent discretion that SLB have for conducting their job has an important implication for analyzing the extent to which a mandate for incorporating collaborative processes is implemented in practice. Regardless of how collaborative arrangements may be appreciated by SLB, the actions that they will carry out to attain it would vary depending on what they (and their peers) believe collaboration is, and to the extent to which it should (or the available resources allow to) permeate their routines. If SLB have a very narrow understanding of collaboration, or situational imperatives (such as having to initiate a participatory forum without the necessary time to invite all the relevant actors) leads them to exclude certain non-state actors from participating in the collaborative process, the mandate might as well become something different from what policymakers or higher-ranked public officials anticipated. This does not mean that it will inevitably happen, but that, as

with any other mandate that needs to be carried out by officials under not always favorable working conditions, a mandate for collaborative governance will have to overcome these difficulties.

- Organizational features

Policies or mandates are transformed into action within organizations. Consequently, for analyzing bureaucracies' behavior, it is relevant to study their formal organizational structures. The organizational perspective focusses on the way bureaucratic structures affect organizational behavior, and hence, its outcomes (Egeberg 2003). A basic premise from this theoretical standpoint is that there is a dialectic relationship between organizations and their members. Indeed, on the one hand, it is assumed that a heterogeneous group of individuals—in terms of their preferences, information, interests, or knowledge—shapes the organization they belong to (March and Simon 1958: 2). On the other, it is also assumed that individuals' knowledge and beliefs are influenced by organizational features (Simon 1999).<sup>5</sup>

Egebert (2003) offers a classification for analyzing the organizational features that influence bureaucratic behavior, based on the relationship between bureaucratic structures and the decision-making process that occurs within it. This classification focuses on the organizational structure, the organizational demography and the organizational locus.

Regardless of the individual motivations for implementing a mandate, organizations' structures determine officials' capacity to do it. Structures based on

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<sup>5</sup> Although it is worth mentioning that rational choice institutionalists consider that individuals' preferences are determined exogenously.

a centralized model of organization rely on field staff to assure a homogenous implementation of policies and mandates. In theory, this model allows for making administrators accountable for the implementation of a mandate; in practice, they are exposed at local pressures and many of them end up being coopted by people in their locality (Peters 1999; Peters, Erkkila and Von Maravic 2016). A more decentralized model provides the necessary flexibility for organizations to respond to local needs, but is unable to control the amount and orientation of the resources used for implementing a given mandate (Peters, Erkkila and Von Maravic 2016).

Structures are also shaped by the organization's size and resources. These factors define the extent to which organizations are able to implement a mandate. When a mandate is to be implemented through decentralized structures, these factors also influence organizations' capacity to do it uniformly among different areas (Gulik 1937; Peters 1999; Egeberg 2003). Finally, structures specify the expected format of coordination for decision making in an organization. Organizations that are hierarchically structured rely on command, while collegially structured organizations rely on arguing and bargaining (Egeberg 2003).

The second feature, organizational demography, refers to the individuals' background and projection. These factors determine how prone is an individual to internalize the organizations' values. The more the members of an organization have internalized its values, the less external control mechanisms are needed to assure the expected implementation of a given mandate (Egeberg 2003). The last organizational feature analyzed is the organizational locus. Location affects the perception and role expectations that organization's members have of each other and of the organization. Physical distance affects contact patterns and coordination behavior, which is necessary for dealing with processes that require information

exchange and face to face dialogue (Egeberg 2003).

The analysis of organizational features suggests that they may function as facilitators or inhibitors for effectively implementing certain mandates within bureaucracies. For collaborative governance analysis, it means that the effectiveness of collaborative arrangements between state and non-state actors for decision-making within a bureaucracy will depend on how capable is the organization to accommodate a collaborative process within its structure. Bureaucracies with a very hierarchical structure, limited size and whose decision-making processes are dispersed through different units (separately located) might encounter complications that goes beyond those related to the bureaucrats' lack of will (due to their personal interests and beliefs).

Studying collaborative governance as an arrangement that demands that a collaborative process will be adapted to the bureaucratic processes and routines, make evident the practical difficulties for implementing it. Collaborative governance has as its very core the purpose of making more legitimate political mandates by opening the decision-making processes to include both state and non-state actors. By doing so, what is being assumed is that bureaucracies will be up to the task of translating the mandate of collaborative governance into specific actions that will produce more collaborative decision-making processes within public organizations.<sup>6</sup> In other words, what is being assumed is that collaborative

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<sup>6</sup> There is an underlying assumption that is worth mentioning, although is not extensively discussed here because exceeds the purpose of this paper. Democratic governance assumes that participation of state and non-state actors into the decision-making process will result in decisions politically desirable and technically viable. Indeed, the decisions that result from collaborative processes are supposed to signify that a consensus over the means and ends was reached, which would be translated into less veto points for implementing it. It also means that, since state actors would participate in the process by bringing into it their knowledge of how public offices function, legal and regulatory issues for implementing the mandate would not signify an impediment.



processes can actually occur within public offices.

The analysis of the collaborative process within bureaucratic routines shows that this is not necessarily true. As Newman and her colleagues (2004: 218) put it: “New forms of government (...) do not displace the old but interact with them, often uncomfortably”. I center my analysis in such interaction in order to demonstrate that collaborative governance literature is being built up upon a false premise and that, when doing so, the success of collaborative processes is compromised. I argue that the success of the collaborative process is not only determined by the extent to which the actors involved are interdependent, devote the necessary time and trust each other, but also —and more fundamentally— by the capacity of public offices to accommodate such process into their daily routines. The fact that policies or mandates are based on normative perspectives such as governance, does not mean that the specific dilemmas of the organized action will be solved (Arellano et al, 2014). Moreover, “daily experiences reveal mismatches between policy-specific responsibilities and administrative operations, [that] function as a prod for managerial strategies and push personnel to adapt in incremental but consequential ways.”(Moynihan and Soss 2014: 326). Hence, my argument is not that the collaborative process or the bureaucratic routines should be improved, but that they should be linked.

In the following section I use the case of the social accountability committees in Mexico to analyze the interaction between the collaborative process and the bureaucratic routines. The objective is to explore some of the reasons that explain how some social accountability committees have succeed and failed (in terms of their capacity to be incorporated in the public agencies decision making processes).

#### 4. The collaborative process within bureaucratic routines: the case of social accountability committees in Mexico.

Social accountability is a type of citizen participation whose purpose is to make public officials accountable for the actions they implement in specific communities. Unlike other types of participation, social accountability is oriented towards controlling, monitoring and evaluating government's actions and programs (Fung 2006, Malena et. al 2004, Hevia 2006). In Mexico, the objective of including citizens in the control and monitoring of social programs dates back to 1982, when it was incorporated (at least explicitly) as a goal of the National Policy for Democratic Planning. However, it was not until the creation of the National Program for Solidarity (PRONASOL), under the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, that required the involvement of the citizenry for deciding where the program's budget should be oriented, and to monitor the its correct allocation, that the term of Social Accountability was adopted. Although the following administration dissolved PRONASOL, the model of social accountability remained, although exclusively to monitor the correct application of public resources (Hevia 2007). Regardless of the generalized shortcomings of the social accountability Mexican model, there are some exceptions that demonstrate that, under certain circumstances, effective social accountability can be attained.

This analysis is based on the study of social accountability committees in Mexico, including their legal framework, official documents and over 60 interviews with federal, state and municipal officials and with beneficiaries of different social programs implemented in five municipalities of Mexico.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The committees interviewed were located in the following municipalities of Mexico: San Bartolomé Quialana and Santiago Matitlán in the State of Oaxaca; Oxxkuskab and Mérida in the State of Yucatán, and San Luis de La Paz, in the State of Guanajuato. They were in charge of

Mexico's social accountability committees are a good case for analyzing the interaction of collaborative processes and bureaucratic routines because it is a mandate for collaboration that is systematically implemented through different public offices across the country, and hence, allows for comparability. Indeed, the General Law of Social Development (LGDS for its initials in Spanish)—applicable to the federal, state and municipal levels of government—requires every federal social program to be subjected to social accountability. It means that, in every locality of the country, there should be as many social accountability committees as federal social programs implemented. This makes it possible to examine the variations between committees in terms of the degree in which their work succeeded in becoming part of the public offices' decision-making processes.

Equally important for selecting Mexican social accountability committees as case study is that they are based in a model of social accountability that has the necessary attributes to be considered as a collaborative governance arrangement, in the terms set forth by Ansell and Gash (2008). The definition proposed by the authors includes six criteria. First, collaborative governance entails that "the forum is initiated by public agencies or institutions". With the enactment of the LGDS in 2004, the offices in charge of the implementations of each social program are responsible for the creation of the social accountability committees in each locality and for defining the way in which they will carry out the social accountability's activities.

Second, "participants in the forum include non-state actors". It is specifically mandated by law that the social accountability committees should be integrated by the beneficiaries of the social programs of the locality where they are

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monitoring the programs of the following ministries: Urban Development, Social Development, and Natural Resources.

implemented. The federal representatives in the localities must convene a meeting with the beneficiaries of the social programs in order to formally establish the committee, which they must register in an official system (controlled by the federal Ministry of Public Administration).

Third and fourth, “participants engage directly in decision making and are not merely ‘consulted’ by public agencies” and “the forum is formally organized and meets collectively”. The formal process through which social accountability committees should be conducted is by verifying if the goals set by every program were met, as well as by monitoring the correct use of resources. The committees should meet at least twice a year in order to assess the program's performance.

Fifth “the forum aims to make decisions by consensus”. The program’s assessment is made based on the information (e.g. plans, contracts for the execution of infrastructure works or for the supply of goods and services) provided by the authority responsible for the program’s execution, and by the irregularities detected by them or other beneficiaries. The complaints and anomalies detected should be communicated to the authority responsible for the program’s execution, be captured in predefined formats, and uploaded to the official system.

Sixth, “the focus of collaboration is on public policy or public management”. The LGDS specifies that social accountability would be the mechanism to involve citizens in monitoring social programs’ goals achievement and the correct application of public resources allocated to them. Moreover, social accountability committees are responsible for monitoring that the competent authority addresses the complaints made and that this translates into a better management of the programs.

- The model of social accountability in Mexico

According to the norms and procedures that regulate social accountability in Mexico, the governmental units responsible for the federal social programs (and their representations at local level) would serve as facilitators of the information that the committee members need to carry out their monitoring functions. In turn, this would be reflected in beneficiaries who participate actively and periodically in the committees of which they are part, and that those beneficiaries are well aware of their responsibilities and the procedures to carry them out. This should translate into officials who are recognized as recipients of the information generated by the committees and responsible for processing and using it to ensure the proper use of resources and the achievement of program goals. Finally, thanks to the computer system and the dissemination activities that the federal agencies must undertake, the activities carried out by each committee, the follow-up of the complaints and the outcomes of the activities of the committees would be made public.

The performance of social accountability committees differs from what is expected, and these differences are also evident among committees. In the following sections I analyze those differences from the collaborative process and bureaucratic routines perspectives.

- The model of social accountability in Mexico from the collaborative process perspective.

As mentioned before, a collaborative process that result in collective decision making process entails face-to-face dialogue, trust-building, commitment to the process from all the actors involved, shared understanding between stakeholders and intermediate outcomes.

Given that the Mexican model of social accountability entails the creation of committees that gather periodically, state and municipal authorities engage into *face to face dialogue* with the members of committees at least twice a year. In all of the cases observed, this allowed to break down stereotypes and produce closer relations between them. As a woman that integrated the committee of a predominantly indigenous municipality in the state of Oaxaca said, when they gathered with the municipal authorities and contractors in charge of developing a public work in their locality, they “lost the fear to interact with men, and to being around construction workers for monitoring the work they were doing”.

Although there was a close relationship between the members of all of the committees analyzed, this was less evident in those programs that provide monetary transfers or other kind of benefits whose quality is not subject to be assessed. This is also true for those programs that provide benefits once a year (like a roof or another type of support for improving houses), since they only require that committees physically interact a few times. Hence, the links of closeness and trust among them were less strong than those created between the members of the committees in charge of surveilling a public work or the delivery of monthly benefits.

When it comes to the *trust-building* process, beneficiaries and governmental (municipal, state or federal) authorities, in general, seemed to trust each other, at least in terms of the information (e.g. tickets, contracts) they shared. Indeed, when asked to the beneficiaries how could they know if the resources were properly executed, they all stated because of the information was provided that the authorities provided them, which they considered to be complete.

Greater variations were observed between the committees that were analyzed was in terms of their *commitment to the process*. In Oaxaca, it was evident that both governmental authorities and beneficiaries needed each other for

conducting the task. Municipal authorities were open and willing to make the contractors in charge of building public work to modify it if the committee determined that it was deficient. Hence, it was particularly useful for municipal authorities to have people surveilling that contractors comply with what was agreed. On the other side, the beneficiaries felt that being elected by their community as members of the social accountability committee was an honor that entailed a great responsibility, that of promoting their locality's development, so they owned the process and rely on the information the municipal authorities provided them to do it.

In the rest of the cases, the channel to communicate any irregularity (such as a delay or incorrect use of the money) was not perceived as an effective one. In consequence, beneficiaries used informal means instead, since they seemed an alternative equally (un)effective and less complicated. As a state official commented, the state authorities involved in social accountability have a close relation with the members of the committees, so when they see that something is not as it should, instead of filling a report, they let them know informally, with the expectation that they would act more promptly. In these cases, social accountability was reduced to filling paperwork just for the sake of formal compliance. Of course, this is related to the lack of a *shared understanding* of their mission. Despite the training that the members of the committees receive from federal authorities, the members of the rest of the committees (both the state and non-state actors) did not seemed to realize what "monitor and control" could mean.

Only in the case of the committees in Oaxaca did they produce *intermediate outcomes* that encouraged the beneficiaries that integrated them to continue collaborating. This is particularly true for the committee in San Bartolomé

Quialana,<sup>8</sup> since as soon as the beneficiaries were elected as members of the committee, they started monitoring different public works, and asking the contractors to modify the building materials they were using, to comply with what was stated in the contract.

Using the collaborative process as analytical framework to study the social accountability in Mexico shows that, although exceptionally, collaborative decision making processes are achievable. In the following section I analyze the administrative context where social accountability was implemented.

- The model of social accountability in Mexico from the bureaucratic routines perspective.

I analyze social accountability in Mexico taking as unit of analysis the bureaucracies in charge of intervening in the process. I analyze them from the administrative control, the workers' motivations and the organizational features' perspectives.

*Administrative control.* As mentioned before, social accountability is the most standardized and systematic attempt for creating a collaborative process in Mexico and, also, the most regulated. In consequence, most of the federal and state public offices have personal in charge of conducting activities related to social accountability (after all, they are obliged by law to promoting it). Every single public official interviewed agreed that social accountability was a very valuable resource for improving social programs' performance. However, most of them also agreed that it does not achieve its purpose and that it is an overregulated and costly process, specially for the state level of government. As one public officer from the

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<sup>8</sup> The social accountability committee of San Bartolomé Quialana, in the state of Oaxaca, whose performance earned them (in 2015) the National Prize of Social Accountability, became an effective mechanism for making their local authorities accountable for the public work developed in the municipality.



federal level put it: "they [the state level officers] listen to the words 'social accountability' and they run away. This impedes that they see it as what it is: a participatory arrangement that seeks to empower people to control their own resources... something that they are entitled for". The federal representatives in the localities studied, in charge of implementing different social programs, also perceived the process as burdensome. They had the impression that the process implied so much paperwork, that they had to spent a great part of their time filling formats instead of making substantive work.

*Public officers' motivations.* Federal representatives at local level and state public officials interpreted differently the extent of citizen involvement that social accountability implied. However, all of them were aware of the formats that must be uploaded to the computer system, and the times for doing so. In part, this occurs because the indicators that are used to monitor their performance in promoting social accountability are the number of committees created and, to proof that they are in operation, the number of reports uploaded to systems. It is not surprising then that most of the public officials interviewed perceived the process as a requisite and not as a mechanism of control that can improve public actions.

Certainly, this contrasts with the generalized perception of social accountability as valuable, but can be explained by the very limited personnel there is dedicated to it. In 2016, there were over 200 federal social programs, 194,414 committees, and the Ministry of Public Administration only had 6 persons (with many other responsibilities) devoted to "promoting social accountability". Moreover, even if federal social programs have personnel working at their representations at local level, they are only partly devoted to carry out activities related to social accountability, and they do so in detriment of their core activities. It is not surprising that they are unable to follow up on the complaints that are made

and that the involvement of state actors and federal representatives in each committee depends on the conviction of each of them.

*Organizational features.* In Mexico, the three levels of government (federal, state and municipal) are responsible of implementing social policy, and hence, of the social accountability process. This decentralized structure entails different forms of carrying out social accountability, which depend on which level of government holds responsibility for the program that is being subject to social accountability. Some federal social programs are implemented by their representatives at the local level; others are designed and financed by the federal government, but implemented by state level officials; some federal social programs are designed by the federal government, but financed and implemented by both federal and state governments; and finally, others are design and executed by state governments, but also subject to social accountability.

The implications of the way the Mexican bureaucracy is structured are evident. Depending on the kind of program, the coordination required for conducting social accountability will vary. It may be the case that within the same ministry, there are different programs, each of a different type. This means that are several processes for conducting the same task within the same office. In other words, the same public officer, in charge of implementing two different programs, might need to activate two different processes for guaranteeing that they both have social accountability.

This is even more complex if we consider that in every single case, the coordination required must be achieved by public officers that are located in different offices, in different states. The logistical difficulties that involves communicating the irregularities detected in one municipality, thousands of kilometers away from the central offices, might be one explanation of the fact that

in 2016, only 2 complaints were made regarding the set of programs of the Ministry of social development, and 3 regarding the housing and public infrastructure programs (which was subjected to social accountability by 2,315 committees). Moreover, the required coordination entails that public officials, with very different cultural backgrounds, conduct social accountability based on the same recognition of the difficulties and steps of the process that if their contextual conditions were equal.

## 5. Analysis and conclusions

Social accountability in Mexico is a clear example that collaborative governance is an arrangement that can be implemented differently depending on the existent conditions of the collaborative process and those of the bureaucratic routines in each case. While this analysis suggests that a collaborative decision making process was achieved in the committees where face-to-face dialogue among participants existed, the actors trusted each other, were committed to the process and had a shared understanding of how social accountability might be pursued (all of which helped to generate intermediate outcomes); it also showed that the collaborative process in most of the cases was deficient.

For such cases, the collaborative process as analytical framework was very helpful to identify the specific attributes these committees lacked, but it felt short in explaining the reasons why they did it. Indeed, from the collaborative process' perspective it could be argued that in the cases where social accountability was not achieved, the members of the committee did not trust each other and were not committed to the processes. But this analytical framework is not useful to explain why it did not occur. To put it simply, the collaborative process perspective helps

to identify the factors of failure or success of collaborative governance, but not the reasons why those factors work as they do (e.g. why the actors were not committed to the process), and hence, how can they be altered. That is where the analysis of the bureaucratic routines takes relevance.

Analyzing the bureaucratic routines where the collaborative process is to be embedded allows for understanding the reasons why collaborative process develop differently in every case. This is not to say that the collaborative governance literature does not address this issue. Naturally, the existence of face-to-face dialogue will be easier where the state actors involved in the collaborative process are physically located in public offices near the non-state actors. Likewise, state actors that are not overwhelmed by excessive administrative burdens will have the time to meet regularly with non-state actors and generate a trust-based relationship, and hence, to commit to the process. It is more probable that state and non-state actors have a shared understanding of their mission in the process if they have similar backgrounds than if they do not. What I have argued, however, is that collaborative governance literature addresses this issue only implicitly, assuming that the bureaucratic context will be adapted (or not) to collaborative process, but not considering it as a factor for the process' effectiveness and, hence, a factor that is subject to be modified.

As long as the analysis of collaborative process neglects the bureaucratic routines as one of the fundamental factor that affects collaborative governance and, instead, focusses on explaining the stages of the collaborative process as the source of failure or success *and* as attributes of the process the collaborative processes will fail to achieve collective decision-making processes.

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