

STRENGTHENING THE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK: THE PARTNERSHIP OF GOVERNMENT AND ACADEMIA IN THE STATE OF ZACATECAS

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ABSTRACT: This paper reviews the collaborative experience between government and academia in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico, as a means to strengthen the governance framework. The partnership between the two parties entailed efforts to constitute a public policy evaluation body, in addition to setting up an academic programme with the same orientation. The first section of this paper examines the nature of the concept of governance and its relevance in public policy framework; it also introduces the concept of collaborative governance and its success variables as a more adequate concept to construe or perform case studies. The second section reviews how the agreements between the parties were reached and details the partial outcomes of said partnership. The third section analyses the lessons learned through this experience, as well as its most pressing challenges and pitfalls, through the lens of critical success variables of collaborative governance, adding two more variables to this explanatory framework. We argue that this sort of experience can be a useful tool in fostering the governance framework, particularly at a subnational level, further interweaving the links between the public sector and academia, allowing for a greater knowledge transfer and an improvement of the policy framework.

KEYWORDS: Governance, public policy, collaborative governance, evaluation, subnational, Zacatecas.

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The complexity of problems in modern societies is a compelling reason for exploring alternative ways in which these can be addressed in a more inclusive and comprehensive fashion; ways in which governments and non-state actors can collaborate towards that end –hence the relevance of governance and its implications in the process of governing–.

This paper reviews a collaborative experience between government and academia in the Mexican state of Zacatecas. This collaboration, we argue, contributes to the broadening of the governance framework, since it brought different actors to form a partnership for improving a given process or processes. In this particular case, the collaboration was formed to enhance policy processes (the foundation of government activity) through developing capabilities and performing evaluations.

The first section of this paper addresses the nature of the concept of governance, as well as some of its fundamental tenets and its implications. The concept of collaborative governance is then introduced as a narrower and more useful notion to construe our experience collaborating. The second section reviews how the collaborative experience was formed as well as its most salient features. The third section analyses the experience of Zacatecas through the lens of critical success variables of collaborative governance in the form of lessons, challenges and pitfalls. We believe the lessons drawn from this experience constitute a solid background to explore the formation of partnerships for influencing the policy process, particularly at a subnational level.

THE NATURE OF GOVERNANCE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH PUBLIC POLICY

The interactions and dynamics between the different actors in a given society have been widely acknowledged as a key factor in the formation and enlargement of the governance systems over the last 20 years (Fukuyama, 2014; Kjaer, 2004; Rose-Ackerman, 2017).

The traditional conception of the State as a top-down, authoritative manager of public interests has gradually morphed into its conception as another stakeholder in a larger framework of stakeholders that coexist in an environment rife with tensions stemming from within and without their geographical and political domains. Given the exhaustion of the traditional managerial modes, the role of the State has evolved into a more horizontal and flexible model to manage the different interests –public or private– that exist in modern societies, in a more efficient and functional fashion (Aguilar Villanueva, 2016).

The transit to this model goes hand in hand with the reconfiguration of the State's functions associated to the neoliberal era and its crisis in terms of legitimacy (in the eyes of the electorate), in terms of efficiency (the alleged fiscal imprudence and the inability to deliver public services efficiently) (Bevir, 2013; Campbell & Pedersen, 2001; Harvey, 2005), as well as for the ensuing and growing fragmentation in the delivery of public services imposed by the neoliberal dictum (McMichael, 2008; Mkandawire, 2005).

Among many different things, this narrative fed on assumptions that split state action into two different phases: a 'steering' phase that entails processes of decision-making, regulation and coordination; and a 'rowing' phase that includes the actual delivery of public services (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). This line of argumentation underlines the State's necessary involvement in the 'steering' phase and underscores its inherent inefficiency in the 'rowing' phase, both in terms of poor management of resources and poor achievements. Therefore, it is suggested that the State must introduce incentives that stimulate private entities to compete –through privatisations, outsourcing– in its regulated markets in order to improve efficiency.

These changes were supplemented by the administrative reforms advocated by the "New Public Management". These focused on efficiency and performance assessment, as well as achieving concrete goals and the topics of providing incentives to public parties in order to foster competition between them (Bevir, Rhodes, & Weller, 2003; Hood, 1991). Simultaneously, international organisms such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, adopted the concept of 'good governance' as a basic criterion for granting loans and development aid to developing countries. The problems of development –it was argued– were associated to the poor quality and low legitimacy of political institutions (Leftwich, 1994; Williams & Young, 1994; World Bank, 1989). Since economic efficiency was the main goal assumed by such organisms, 'good governance' was related to the quality of the institutions that were supposed to act as an enabling mechanism of the market economy, but also as a means to curb the endemic corruption associated to developing countries. In other words, governance was conceived as a tool that could contribute to the economic liberalisation dictum and the parallel replacement of hierarchic bureaucracies by the growing use of markets and networks, particularly in the delivery of public services.

The transit to more horizontal decision-making models in the public sphere has occurred in such context: on the one hand, from the perspective of economic liberalisation as a precondition for a robust and optimal economic performance and the need to have a reliable institutional framework in place; and on the other, the larger participation of different stakeholders in defining

the public agenda. These perspectives have allowed the gradual replacement of a vertical and bureaucratic decision-making process with a model that, even if it can't be considered as completely horizontal, can be thought of as a network of different stakeholders actively seeking to influence the policy process, producing comprehensive solutions to complex problems (Kooiman, 1993; Messner, 1997) under the assumption that not even the traditional vertical model of the State with maximum capacities (Aguilar Villanueva, 2006), nor the minimalist version of the State, can produce comprehensive answers.

This emergence of broader patterns of social participation helped to spread the notion that in order for the State to have and maintain an adequate performance, there needs to be a broad, inclusive framework guaranteeing that all stakeholders (and their interests) are represented in the policy process (Bevir, 2010; Salamon, 2002). Also, there needs to be a functional management system able to process converging and diverging –and even opposing– interests. Said features modify the ways in which the public interest is defined. Within this broad conception, the larger participation of society members in the decision-making process and the interactions amongst different networks sideline –to a certain extent– the State's participation to perform, almost exclusively, the roles of coordination and regulation (Pierre, 2000).

Hence, governance highlights the growing relevance that civil society and non-state actors have in the definition and implementation of government models with higher levels of management and decentralisation capable of performing the traditional functions of centralised governments. Governance, then, focuses more on processes and interactions linking the State to civil society, and less on the traditional State institutions (Bevir, 2010). In general terms, governance refers to the relations and processes through which the diverse interests and resources that coexist in different environments are managed from a multilevel perspective (Ackerman, 2004; Bache & Flinders, 2004; Liesbet & Marks, 2003; Stephenson, 2013).

Since the initial deliberations on the concept of governance (Kooiman, 1993), it has been adapted to different conceptual environments with different applications, given its plural and multilevel nature. Nowadays, we talk about global governance in diverse aspects (Dingwerth & Pattberg, 2006; Messner & Nuscheler, 2003; Rosenau, 1999), corporate governance, economic governance, environmental governance and even internet governance, just to name a few.¹

However, the conceptions addressed above usually are envisaged as antagonistic versions of the role of the State and the ways in which complex social problems should be tackled in increasingly problematic environments. On the one hand, governance is conceived as the logical consequence of institutional

¹ See Bevir (2007, 2011) and Kooiman (1999) for different applications and definitions of the concept.

evolution towards more inclusive decision-making frameworks; on the other, it is thought of as an assault on traditional government institutions to undermine them, giving way to decision-making frameworks capable of protecting and promoting the expansion of corporative transnational interests. In other words, the otherwise natural tensions between State and non-State actors are downplayed or exacerbated, respectively. These interpretations, however, may lead to a biased, hence distorted, interpretation of the concept of governance, obscuring its unquestionable underlying observations: a) the inability of State institutions to address the plethora of existing problems, and b) the increasing importance and relevance of the role of non-state actors.

An alternative way of interpreting the two positions abovementioned is through a narrower concept like collaborative governance.² It refers to the synergic process of formal interaction between different actors to obtain any given outcome. Although this concept does not remove the underlying tension abovementioned, it does provide a more adequate explanatory framework for determined collaborations between State and non-State actors, in a context of collective action that takes the nature of different multilevel actors into account with the explicit purpose of influencing public policy within a formal process of governance. In other words, this process of broadening the governance framework entails setting the conditions under which the formal collaboration and the sharing of knowledge and experiences between actors is possible.

In that sense, public policy, as the main instrument of governing, shares the same elements of governance, namely: its multilevel nature, the involvement of a growing number of actors, the coexistence of different perceptions about public problems, as well as the multiple strategies and instruments involved in its implementation (Bressers & Kuks, 2003; O'Toole, 2000). From the perspective of the coexistence of multiple stakeholders and the interactions amongst different levels, together with the rising complexity of the challenges modern societies face, cross-sector collaborations play a critical role (Agranoff & McGuire, 2004; Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006; Goldsmith & Eggers, 2005; Rethemeyer, 2005; Schuppert, 2011).

The analysis of multiple experiences of collaborative governance suggests that any successful collaboration is grounded on five key variables: a) history of conflict/cooperation between actors (which may foster/hinder the collaboration), b) incentives for stakeholders to participate (expectations and outcomes), c) power and resource imbalances (proneness to manipulation by stronger actors), d) leadership (facilitating the collaborative process), e) ins-

² In spite of the concept's potential theoretical breadth, collaborative governance has been explored in greater detail through specific collaborative experiences (Ansell & Gash, 2008). For more details about the concept see Fung & Wright (2001), Gray (1989), and Susskind & Cruikshank (1987).

titutional design (protocols and rules for collaboration). It is argued that these variables contribute to the development of a virtuous cycle grounded in the ‘small wins’ of the collaboration, which in turn, deepen the trust, commitment and shared understanding between its stakeholders (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

The conceptual reflections above described, in addition to the variables mentioned above, will orientate the analysis of a collaborative governance experience between the government and academia in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico. We will return to these variables in the third section.

THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND ACADEMIA IN ZACATECAS

A longstanding cross-sector collaboration, even symbiotic at times, exists between governments and academia. These two sectors have collaborated in a number of issues. However, its most prominent collaboration in recent times focuses on Research and Development (R&D), as well as innovation processes in the realms of agriculture, healthcare, and information technology. These collaborations have managed to impact the quality of life for human beings in most regions of the planet in a profound and decisive way. The importance of this partnership is reflected in the fact that, for instance, 60% of the funding in basic research in the United States of America comes from the federal government. Furthermore, up to 70% of the funding of key institutions in the field of innovation –like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology– is provided by the federal government (Katz, 2014).

Even though the collaborations between academia and public policy are also frequent, they are not as prominent –at least in terms of funding– as is the case of R&D. Mostly, this owes to the fact that public policy is often approached not as a practical field, but more like an object of study. However, this situation has taken a turn over the last two decades with an increasing involvement of academia in the experimental design and implementation of different policies.³

Another strand of cross-sector collaboration in which different sectors and levels of civil society have been involved, and in which academia has played a key role, relates to demands of transparency and accountability of governments, not only in terms of processes and resource management, but also their actual performance (Behn, 2001; De Leon, 1998), putting to good use the old saying about the ability –and we add, the moral obligation– of

³ For instance, see the works on behavioural economics and its relationship with public policy by Thaler and Sunstein (2008), Congdon, Kling, and Mullainathan (2011), Banerjee and Duflo (2012), Chetty et al (2014), and List and Gneezy (2014).

policy analysts to ‘speak truth to power’ (Wildavsky, 1979), also playing a vital role in a system of checks and balances.

Collaborations between universities and governments in Mexico are not something new and have had some relevance over the years owing to practical, even political reasons.⁴ These partnerships have focused on developing capabilities and improving processes within the public sector through tackling social problems, but they have also played a role in expanding the financial capabilities of public universities. To a certain extent, the association between these two sectors stems from the need to provide comprehensive solutions to complex social problems and to generate knowledge that is only attainable through this sort of ventures and the integration of different visions. Additionally, through these type of partnerships, universities are able to fulfil their social role and commit to the actual solution of problems (Castro Martínez & Vega Jurado, 2009; Gibbons *et al.*, 1994).

In that sense, collaboration agreements between academia and governments, whether municipal, state or federal, have gravitated around the commission of universities to perform studies and evaluations, and to provide consultancy services on a number of topics. Also, universities are hired to enhance the institutional capacities of governments through developing capabilities and improving certain processes. In other words, these partnerships seek to profit from one another, be it through the development of capabilities or financial support, on a rationale that underpins their respective independence.

Consequently, one aspect that deserves further exploration has to do with the actual possibilities of expanding governance frameworks under the rationale of collaboration described in the previous section, that is, the articulation of collaborative efforts of the two sectors, government and academia, with a more practical orientation, thus establishing a constant feedback cycle for the government’s performance under the scrutiny of academia, particularly in the field of public policy.

In that sense, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) argues that the existence of policy communities, formed by actors working around specific areas or topics, enables a learning process that allows for the improvement of policies. In a way, such communities resemble policy networks, which in turn can be conceptualised as cooperative experiences between the State and non-State actors underpinning collaborative governance processes. However, unlike processes of collaborative governance,

⁴ For instance, the recent creation of the Anticorruption National System (*Sistema Nacional Anticorrupción*) cannot be understood without the active participation of the Centre for Research and Teaching in Economics (*Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas*). Another example: the Ministry of Social Development incorporated the territorial development approach developed by the Metropolitan Autonomous University to its operative framework (*Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana*).

collaboration in policy networks works in an informal fashion. This aspect may seriously hamper the contributions stemming from such collaboration.

Government and policy evaluation in Mexico have a long history (López Rodríguez, 2017; Oropeza, 2005). Not long ago, a vibrant policy community formed around the topic, but its institutionalisation is relatively recent (Feinstein, 2012; Méndez, 2017; Ríos, 2014). In order to improve policies, and considering its relatively low institutional development, a team of scholars launched an initiative to integrate a Public Policy Evaluating Body (*Órgano Evaluador de Políticas Públicas del Estado de Zacatecas*, OEPPEZ) in the state of Zacatecas. This initiative was built with the explicit aim of establishing a permanent monitoring and evaluation system of the current policies operating in Zacatecas with a twofold objective: a) to function as an independent watchdog for the government's performance, and b) to provide a constant stream of information concerning the design and implementation of policies in order to improve them. However, this initiative underwent a rather cumbersome process in order to become operational.

The project⁵ was originally developed by a team of academics from the Programme of Studies and Intervention for Alternative Development (Programa de Estudios e Intervención para el Desarrollo Alternativo, PEIDA) of the Autonomous University of Zacatecas (Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, UAZ), whose objective is to foster local development through social participation and involvement in the community. This particular focus gradually expanded for broadening the topic's theoretical understandings in order to participate more effectively in the design and evaluation of policies related to the problems affecting the local communities in which the programme had been active.

The initiative of establishing an evaluating body supported by public funds originated in this particular circumstance: on the one hand, the social need for reliable information concerning policy performance and, on the other, the lack of dedicated funding to cover current expenditure in such endeavours. The first attempt to create said body included its integration to the LXI State Legislature (2013-2016). The rationale behind this proposal was to provide objective analytical information to all legislators, and to consolidate the role of the Legislative body in the system of checks and balances of an accountability framework, thus giving real weight to policy evaluations. As things stand, most policy evaluations do not have a concrete effect on policies due to the lack of links between the theoretical exercise (the evaluation) and its implementation.

⁵ The whole project is documented in an internal report (PEIDA-UAZ, 2017). In order to systematise the project, we used the methodology of systematisation of experiences (Vega González, 2015), by focusing on the categories of goals, timeline, context and lessons learned.

This “missing link” situation could be addressed by establishing a mechanism of policy evaluation within the Legislature. The information provided to legislators would have a hypothetical impact in the policy process, given the participation legislators have in the budgetary process. In other words, this rationale linked the recommendations made by the OEPPEZ with the actual capability of the Legislature of allocating specific funds to specific strategies and programmes, and with the implementing bodies’ actions oriented to follow said recommendations.

The proposed funding model only included the running costs of the OEPPEZ. That was possible due to the fact that the academics’ wages would continue to be covered by the UAZ. The project was introduced and discussed during one of the Legislature sessions, and despite the interest it generated amongst an important number of legislators, those associated to the State Governor’s ruling party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI) voted against the motion of including it in the following year’s budget. The reason –they argued– was that the OEPPEZ was a political move against the ruling party with the obvious purpose of questioning the merits of the incumbent regime. The project –argued legislators of opposing parties– could have been approved and funded by members of this opposing segment. Nonetheless, to proceed in such a way would have undermined the original motive of the OEPPEZ for being a Legislature tool, turning it into a political tool. In other words, its social and political legitimacy, as well as its objectivity (beyond the scientific rigour), would have been tainted from the start. As a consequence of this, the PEIDA team decided to put the project on hold.

A second attempt contemplated the integration of the OEPPEZ as part of the State’s Human Rights Programme, produced by the State’s Executive initiative during its participation in discussion seminars by legislators, scholars, and members of the general public. During these seminars, the proposal to create the OEPPEZ was suggested under the rationale of guaranteeing and protecting the human rights (particularly social and economic rights) of the population of Zacatecas, and all related rights through public policies. At that moment, the academics’ concern still was that of the links between evaluation and policy modification. Within this framework, the OEPPEZ would produce recommendations and suggestions related to the improvement of specific policies. These recommendations would automatically be part of the agenda of Zacatecas’s Human Rights State Commission (*Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Estado de Zacatecas*). The initiative was incorporated to the aforementioned programme and was presented in March 2017. However, the person in charge of the programme was selected as Head of the Commission, which, once again, put the project on hold due to a potential conflict of interest.

The third attempt to create the OEPPEZ was approached from a slightly different position. The head of the Planning Office of the State of Zacatecas Government (*Coordinación Estatal de Planeación de Gobierno del Estado de Zacatecas*, COEPLA⁶) participated in a seminar in which members of PEIDA were also participating. The fact that both parties were participants of this seminar established a common ground, which opened the door to discuss topics like the OEPPEZ in an informal setting. The debates spurred an interest on the issue from the Head of COEPLA, giving the project a real chance to see the light of day. Moreover, staff members of COEPLA had also taken part in a public policy seminar organised by PEIDA. The interactions between academics and bureaucrats gave way to the development of an ambitious project that complemented the field of action of the OEPPEZ. Said project encompassed the creation of an academic programme in the field of public policy –a bachelor and a master’s degree– designed for bureaucrats.

Several meetings took place in the latter part of 2016 in which different possibilities of bringing the ambitious project to fruition were debated. Given the UAZ’s financial constraints, it was agreed that the Government of the State of Zacatecas (*Gobierno del Estado de Zacatecas*, GODEZAC) would foot the bill at least during the project’s initial phases in order to support the programme’s consolidation. A cooperation agreement (*convenio*) was signed by both parties. This agreement established the institutional commitments of both parties to foster different collaborations to improve policies. Amongst other actions, the UAZ committed to: a) link research activities with the actual delivery of *ad hoc* solutions to the problems of the state of Zacatecas, b) develop capabilities in order to promote human development, and c) promote cultural production. GODEZAC, on the other hand, committed to foster governance processes by actually involving social stakeholders in the government process. Furthermore, the agreement explicitly stated that UAZ would redirect its academic activity towards the actual development needs of the state, while GODEZAC would support innovation initiatives aimed at improving government and policy processes.

The signing of said agreement gave way to two more agreements (signed March 2017): one related to the creation of the OEPPEZ; the other one related to the creation of the Development and Public Management Academic Unit (*Unidad Académica en Desarrollo y Gestión Pública*) within the UAZ. This academic unit would host the bachelor’s degree programme (*Licenciatura en Desarrollo y Gestión Pública*), aimed at developing a professional bureaucracy for the State. It would also host the master’s degree programme (*Estudio y Solución de Problemas Públicos del Estado de Zacatecas*), whose purpose is to

⁶ At the time it was known as the Planning Unit (*Unidad Estatal de Planeación*).

further the development of the current bureaucrats' capabilities by linking their everyday functions and the problems they aim to tackle, with their respective research projects (a dissertation required to obtain the degree) and the works of the OEPPEZ. Both of these programmes started with an induction module (March-June 2017) that gave way to the selection of the most apt candidates to enrol in both programmes. The demand to enrol in the programmes surpassed the initial enrolment estimates by over 200%.

The two academic programmes were positively peer-reviewed, also getting the approval of the University Council (*Comisión Académica del Consejo Universitario*) in October 2017. Both programmes started in November 2017. It is worth mentioning that although the agreements stated that both programmes should have started in August 2017, there was an important delay in the process. This delay was due to the fact of internal struggles within the UAZ to block the initiative. As we will see below, this is an important factor to bear in mind when promoting innovative experiences: what institutional procedures may help avoiding power struggles that hinder innovative processes.

As for the original purpose of the collaboration, the creation of the OEPPEZ, the specific agreement states that evaluation should improve GODEZAC's decision-making processes which, in turn, would create better conditions for the people of the state of Zacatecas. In that sense, the agreement still stands. There is an imperative need for an evaluation body to conduct research with the most rigorous methodological standards. For that reason, UAZ should be involved in the exercise. It was originally agreed that the composition of OEPPEZ would include a combination of bureaucrats (staff from the planning and evaluation areas) and academics (a multidisciplinary team). The academic staff would coordinate the works of the evaluation body. The first activity of the personnel selected to integrate the evaluating body was its participation in a series of seminars (*diplomado*) in the topic of public policy evaluation (April-July 2017). To this end, the PEIDA staff signed another collaboration agreement with the University of Guadalajara (*Universidad de Guadalajara*) through its Government and Public Policy Research Institute (*Instituto de Investigación en Políticas Públicas y Gobierno*), with funding obtained from the UAZ-GODEZAC collaboration.

As for the integration of the OEPPEZ, the interactions in the seminars allowed us to perceive some peculiarities during the in-group dynamics. To begin with, the possible topics of evaluation were debated. The discussions showed, firstly, the natural differences between the two sectors concerning the perceived object of interest and hypothetical nature of the OEPPEZ; and secondly, the substantial underlying interests of the two sectors: the academics

showed interest in theoretical perspectives and debates, while the bureaucrats were more interested in procedural and normative aspects of policy.

The final product of these seminars was the design of evaluation protocols on the four agreed policy areas. Fittingly, four mixed teams were assembled to deal with one policy area each: 1) employment, 2) food security, 3) security and 4) social development (limited to upper secondary education in this initial phase). The results from the dynamic in those four groups were quite diverse. The employment team could not reach an agreement between academics and bureaucrats; this disagreement led to the development of two evaluation protocols, one by GODEZAC staff, the other by the academics. Both food security and security teams were able to integrate their respective evaluation protocols –but the bulk of all this work was done by the academics, while the GODEZAC staff only showed a marginal involvement. The social development team was the only one capable of diffusing the inherent tensions between the two sectors and integrating both visions into a sound evaluation protocol. The dynamic of this team was capable of resolving the disagreements stemming from the debates as to which idea (social development, social cohesion) should be the overarching concept, or what areas should be considered within this overarching concept. An agreement was reached between the team members to focus on this initial phase on the area of education, specifically on upper-secondary education, due to it being one of the most salient problems in the State.

LESSONS, CHALLENGES AND PITFALLS

The process described above reveals two basic aspects concerning the broadening of a governance framework: a) the latent possibilities to establish different sorts of partnerships amongst different sectors and stakeholders (Schuppert, 2011); and b) the intrinsic difficulties in creating sustainable, functional partnerships.

According to the key variables to succeed in collaborative governance experiences described in the first section (history of conflict/cooperation between actors, incentives for stakeholders to participate, power and resource imbalances, leadership, and institutional design), we can derive some lessons, challenges and pitfalls of the collaboration between GODEZAC and UAZ.

Concerning the history of conflict/cooperation between the actors, we can say that prior to the collaboration described, there was a rather acrimonious rift between the parties that became quite evident in the lack of their shared initiatives, which did not go beyond the hiring of specific services, in addition to two different, even antagonistic, narratives and conceptions of one another:

GODEZAC assuming its governing role as exclusive; UAZ proclaiming its autonomy. The most conspicuous lesson regarding this first aspect is that the broadening of the governance framework is a feasible aspiration, even when the creation of partnerships with a real chance to impact the policy process is hard to achieve. To a large extent, the inherent difficulties owe to the lack of institutional channels that could have facilitated this process otherwise. Nevertheless, informal channels and networks can play a substantial role (at least during the early phases of a project), allowing for different stakeholders to reach agreements that can be formalised at a subsequent stage.

This sort of agreements also reveals the actual possibility of independent stakeholders playing an active role in the checks and balances system. A previous history of conflict between the parties, like the one mentioned above, does not necessarily represent an insurmountable obstacle. Such endeavours, though limited, show that the transit to more modern, flexible and inclusive ways to exercise power is already a reality in our country. Furthermore, they have shown that governments should not only be subjected to independent scrutiny of their performance, they should also assume a proactive role in that regard.

One of the most evident pitfalls of this sort of experience has to do with the existence of informal interactions amongst actors in the governance framework. Even though informal interactions are inevitable to a certain degree, in a weak institutional framework such as the Mexican, they only stimulate informality to the extent that the institutionalisation of processes will continue to be the exception rather than the norm.

A more practical challenge goes through the establishment of a robust work dynamic within the different evaluation teams. There also needs to be a mechanism in place that allows the resolution of the disputes that hamper the teams' progress. So far, as we saw above, the work dynamic is different from team to team, and that has produced mixed results.

With regards to the incentives for stakeholders to participate, the collaboration itself involves a series of incentives for both parties. The academics, on the one hand, have the incentive of recording the evaluation projects as research projects, which gives them two specific incentives: 1) the professional reward of witnessing a research project with tangible social results, and 2) an economic incentive that facilitates the research project itself. On the other hand, the bureaucrats may improve the quality of their work through the collaboration, giving them a sounder professional authority, which might also translate in political gains.

Concerning power and resource imbalances, perhaps the most conspicuous challenge relates to funding, particularly during this embryonic phase. Given

that the whole endeavour relies on public funding, the risk of cash flow suddenly stopping is always a possibility, for instance on the grounds of budgetary restrictions. Even though their respective institutions covered the wages of the GODEZAC and UAZ staffs, if the funds had stopped flowing, different activities such as the participation of external actors in the exercise, fieldwork activities and current expenditure would have been compromised; the publication of the OEPPEZ products would have also been at risk. The funding scenario is not at all far-fetched.

As for the leadership variable, one of the most important lessons drawn from this experience is how leaderships, even when they stemmed from an informal interaction, allowed for this project to emerge. This feature, however, evidences how a collaboration of this sort might grow to be reliant on informal mechanisms (as referred above) rather than on institutional processes. If the project does not consolidate over time as an institutional process, it is not unlikely to imagine it at risk if any of the current leaderships, whether from the government or academia, were to abandon it (be that for administrative, political or professional reasons).

Another lesson has to do with the work dynamic in the evaluation teams. In our experience, the social development team was able to progress, in a more or less steady fashion, because the academics within the team assumed a proactive and conciliatory role amongst the team members' different postures and interests. Said leadership enabled the whole team to adopt a productive role and contribute to the team's goals. The next phase of the OEPPEZ relates to the functional integration of the evaluation teams and setting the research agenda for a first batch of deliverables.

Regarding the institutional design, there are some challenges and pitfalls that might limit the success of this collaborative experience. Even when there have been numerous attempts to establish evaluation practices within the Mexican government since the 1930s, they have all been undermined due to internal and external reasons, be that political, economic or legal (López Rodríguez, 2017). One of the first positive effects of this experience, in terms of institutional innovation, relates to the amendment of the normative framework (Planning Law of the State of Zacatecas) to institutionalise the evaluation body. The challenge then lies in institutionalising the new practices beyond the mere rhetoric and normative amendments.

Moreover, the innovation products that might derive from this collaborative experience are somehow previously constrained due to a normative and regulatory framework that operates as a straitjacket, thus limiting the impact of said innovations. The challenge ahead lies in finding the adequate channels and the flexibility to overcome the rigidities of the current institutional setting.

Besides funding, the most pressing challenge has to do with the consolidation and sustainability of the whole endeavour, both as part and parcel of the academic exercise as well as the government dynamic. This consolidation would give the endeavour institutional reliability that would safeguard it from political and financial turmoil.

Another challenge involves the adoption of the recommendations made by the OEPPEZ to the State Government. The first two attempts to create the evaluation body entailed the way in which an evaluation could be linked to policy amendments: in the first case, the link was in the form of budgetary modifications and the accountability of executive bodies; in the second case, the link took the form of issuing recommendations and monitoring those same recommendations. Those two attempts, as we saw, did not come to fruition. The third attempt finally bore fruit. However, the link was not as clear and explicit as it was in the other two cases. Although the legal framework has been amended, the proper channels in which the findings and recommendations of policy evaluation link with the planning process and budgetary considerations are yet to be defined. We would be looking for the possibility of at least setting an ambitious improvement agenda by the government. The OEPPEZ must consolidate a sound work dynamic: autonomy is key in buttressing its legitimacy.

Additionally, the academic programme (Master's degree) faces an important challenge related to the developing of research projects relevant to the State's problems and the way they can be linked and shaped into policies. Also, the issue of linking those projects with the OEPPEZ remains a challenge to be adequately addressed. In other words, to articulate, in a functional and productive context, the impact of the teaching-research-policy sequence.

A potential pitfall relates to the sudden vanishing of government programmes in Mexico without any sort of explanation. It is a well-known fact that the extinction of those programmes is largely attributable to political caprice. At any given moment, let us think, the results obtained by the OEPPEZ may not be to the ruling class' liking. This situation might easily put an implicit or explicit pressure in the evaluating body to censor the publication of those results –or even worse: this situation may lead to the alteration of the results. All of which, needless to say, would subvert the *raison d'être* of this endeavour. 'Speaking truth to power' can be highly problematic in this context.

Moreover, we can mention a couple of additional variables that –we think– add to the aforementioned in terms of explaining the success of collaborative governance experiences. One of those variables is knowledge transfer. This collaboration allows for a unique opportunity for knowledge transfer between both sectors. First, once the collaboration is institutionalised, the

stock of assumptions and knowledge that bureaucrats operate under could be updated (be it from the works of the academic programme or from the dynamics and products of the OEPPEZ), allowing for the design, implementation and evaluation of policy to be more efficient and with defined and explicit purposes (Patton, 2008).

Second, academia may come in close contact with all the roadblocks and avenues, whether formal or informal, within bureaucratic structures that may determine the failure or success of certain policies. This knowledge might help in the devising of alternatives to obstacles, as well as in the establishment of links between evaluation and implementation. Stimulating policy learning in a local context may also improve the contents of the policies that stem from inadequate policy transfers from alien contexts (Ettelt, Mays, & Nolte, 2012).

Even when the underlying vision and interests of academia and the government are fundamentally different –even antagonistic– it is viable to find a middle ground in which both sectors can establish a fruitful collaboration towards the development of functional products that can affect the policy process. This conception is compatible with a policy framework flexible enough to stimulate experimenting, adapting and learning, and capable of delivering robust policies adjustable to an ever-changing scenario (Anderies & Janssen, 2013).

Additionally, the interactions between bureaucrats and academics are amenable to the stimulation of other innovative collaboration experiences. It is well-known that the interaction between bureaucrats and actors external to government structures is particularly relevant for encouraging innovation processes, especially in local contexts (state or municipal governments) (Considine, Lewis, & Alexander, 2009).

The other variable we consider as key in explaining the success of collaborative governance experiences has to do with power structures. Although the history of conflict/cooperation in our case was not an insurmountable obstacle (to a great extent due to effectual leaderships), the internal power struggles in the UAZ nearly crippled the whole endeavour. One aspect to consider when embarking in this sort of innovative experiences relates to the ways in which power structures might be affected and to the ensuing resistance to innovations. In our case, external pressures defused the internal obstacles, allowing for the initiative to continue. However, a lesson we can draw from this variable is that power structures ought to be taken into account. Institutional resistance is bound to emerge, given that innovations alter the status quo. With this in mind, the challenge for similar experiences lies in analysing and devising ways in which institutional innovations can be effectively managed.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have argued that the governance framework is reshaped every day. This feature enables different stakeholders to interact in ways that, some time ago, were simply unthinkable. The participation of larger segments of the population in different networks, in combination with government arrangements that enable said participation, facilitate the transit towards modes of collaboration that can ultimately define and shape the policy process. A growing cross-sector collaboration, and the different ways to resolve the underlying differences amongst them, should deliver a more transparent, comprehensive and inclusive policy framework.

The case of Zacatecas as an example of collaborative governance –hence of strengthening and broadening the governance framework– constitutes a sound experience from which other innovative experiences can learn in order to form fruitful collaborations with other actors. We believe that the peculiarities of this experience can shed some light concerning similar initiatives that might be advocated in the near future amongst different stakeholders with a view to strengthening the governance framework.

The lessons derived from this endeavour give way to imagine different ways in which diverse types of partnerships can be established and consolidated. By focusing on the five critical variables (Ansell & Gash, 2008), in addition to the two additional variables we suggest, this sort of collaboration has a great potential of having an actual impact in certain policy processes. During this exercise, we learned that, in spite of being a rather long and difficult process, the ‘small wins’ we have been obtaining through this collaboration have managed to make an impact in the way it has been shaped and reshaped, deepening the trust and commitments of both parties with a view to have a real impact in the policy process.

The challenges and pitfalls are not easy to circumvent, but this type of initiatives, once underway, should be able to establish its own value before the public opinion, empirically justifying a persuasive narrative of change and improvement of the policy process (Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Lane, 2013).

To a large extent, said collaborations rely on the drive, capacities and vision of individuals or groups of individuals that might advocate for this sort of initiatives, even in adverse environments. Adversities notwithstanding, one small win at a time might pave the way for bigger wins in the future, allowing for all social actors, State and non-State, to contribute to address the many problems our society faces.

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