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Capacity building for decentralisation in Mexico: a psychosocial approach

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to examine which competencies have to be addressed in individual training programs that can help government officials to implement decentralisation policies in Mexico. The paper is based on a psychosocial approach to training seeking to enhance knowledge and skills.

Design/methodology/approach – An extensive structured interview was held with a sample of 75 municipality and state officials, to survey the needs and difficulties experienced by officials in the realization of decentralization measures.

Findings – Results show lack of competencies and agency among the officials in various respects, such as fear of decision making and low self confiidence.

Research limitations/implications – The analysis is based on the perceptions and views of the participants. Further steps will be needed to develop and test an actual training program.

Practical implications – Lack of success of decentralisation is in part attributable to lack of relevant social competencies among officials. This can be addressed by training programs.

Originality/value – The article advocates a capacity building approach that addresses the individual as well as the institutional and policy environment. It focuses on specific beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and skills that enable kinds of behavior changes likely to facilitate decentralization. When individuals develop psychosocial skills, their competency to take initiative, and to confidently and responsibly deal with difficult situations (i.e. agency) is enhanced.

Keywords Training, Skills, Decentralized control, Competences, Mexico

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Decentralisation has been a been a key issue in recent discussions of politics and government in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America (Rocha Menocal, 2003). Policy analysts of diverse ideologies conceive of decentralization as a mechanism that could allow states or regions within a country to manage with greater freedom in the exercise of administrative and fiscal powers and to respond to demands more effectively at all government levels. The underlying assumption is that decentralisation can contribute to the shaping of a citizenship that will self-organize, pressure authoritarian institutions and actors, and be more responsible about matters that define their quality of life (Kulipossa, 2004).

Mexico has embarked in several decentralisation processes since the 1970s (Fuentes and Montes, 2004). So far these attempts have had only very limited success (Cabrero Mendoza and Carrera Hernandez, 2000; Carrera Hernández, 2005). These initiatives are not so much the result of a coherent and systematic policy, but rather have been advocated in bits and pieces by representatives of competing political parties. Dynamics at regional and local levels have led to a *de facto* exercise of state powers (Merchant and Rich, 2003). Different decentralisation measures were induced by different underlying motivations, leading to a combination of territorial, administrative and political forms of decentralization throughout the past decades (Dilla Alfonso, 1997; Pollitt *et al.*, 1998). As a result Mexico's government systems remain highly centralized. For example, Ornelas (2003) has described how educational policy continues to be centrally controlled, despite several administrative reforms. Also, the decentralization of funds has not always been accompanied by that of decisions (Cabrero Mendoza and Carrera Hernandez, 2000). It is believed that the recently created National Conference of Governors and the Revenue Conference, as well as the Law of Social Development -which was passed during the present administration- has opened the way towards more favorable institutional arrangements. However, the newly created institutions and systems carry the danger of reinforcing bureaucracy and maintain the current political dynamics, thus putting into question the extent to which reforms will add real public value through improving the quality of social services.

Scientific analysis so far has led to only limited understanding of these processes. Policy makers have focused on "the design and policy content and... tend either to overlook or downplay contextual factors and capacity issues in implementation" (Larbi, 1998, p. 3). Other social research has focused on the legal and normative frameworks, political context and the relations among government institutions as the main determinants of these processes (Giugale and Webb, 2000; Gómez, 2003; Rodríguez, 1997; Ward and Rodríguez, 1999).

Howlett and Ramesh (1995) have suggested that such an approach overlooks the role of the actors directly involved in implementing policies. Merino (2001) noted that informal decision-making processes and the role of mid- and low-level government officials in enacting (or ignoring) the official policies that mandate decentralization in Mexico have been ignored. Going beyond Mexico, authors like Campbell (2003) and Carrera Hernández (2005) argue that lack of human resources is limiting the scope of Latinamerican governments to deliver services efficiently, effectively and sustainably. In the same vein, research on decentralization in African countries has demonstrated that other constraints, perceived at a grassroots level, are being underestimated. Psychological factors, including mistrust, capacity constraints and clashes of organizational culture and personal interests are the main elements that public servants and civilians identified to be working against decentralisation and joint cooperation (Materu *et al.*, 2000).

Changes in administrative practices ultimately have to be implemented by individual officials in concrete work settings. Nowadays it is generally accepted that organizations should invest in increasing their human capital, i.e. they should assist staff in improving their competencies and professional qualifications, through further education and training (Aguilar *et al.*, 2005). The Mexican government (implying civil servants as well as elected officials) is no exception to this rule. However, the general principle by itself does not make clear how this should be done and what should be

included in training programs. Since the role of individual actors at micro-instutional level in decentralisation processes has hardly been explored the non-governmental organisation IMIFAP (Mexican Institute for Family and Population Research) experienced in developing needs based trainings that focus on psychosocial skills building that can facilate agentic empowerment, decided to start working towards a training program for state and municipality level officials who have to implement decentralization in Mexican public institutions.

The strategy that IMIFAP applies in program development and implementation distinguishes four stages:

(1) need assessment;

(2) program development;

(3) program implementation; and

(4) upscaling (Pick *et al.*, 2003; Pick and Poortinga, 2005).

For each stage aims have to be formulated and appropriate methods selected. Moreover, the strategy entails at each stage planned activities for advocacy and program evaluation.

The aim of the first stage of program development, "assessment of needs", is an analysis of the needs and problems facing municipality and state level officials. Since they are well educated and articulate they themselves are the best available source of information. Data collected at this stage should provide the program developers not only with an overview of needs, but also with insight in the contextual and individual constraints and opportunities for bringing about change in important behaviors on the job.

The main goal of the second stage is the "development of program modules", including simulation games, manuals, etc., on the basis of the information obtained in the first stage and informed by psychological theory and professional expertise. The third stage entails the "implementation of the program" to a group that falls within the target population. Interactive methods prevail during such a training. Group exercises give opportunities for self-reflection and for practicing skills and knowledge in a variety of situations of increasing difficulty. The aims of this stage are twofold: to have this group profit from the program and to obtain data needed to evaluate the program. The fourth and final stage of the strategy entails the "scaling-up" of a program provided it has been found to be effective in evaluation research.

Beyond the aims and methods to be realized at each of the four stages, the strategy has two further components, namely advocacy and evaluation. Advocacy is required to argue the need for training with the leadership of an organization. Also, potential clients have to be informed about the program and why it should be of interest to them. Activities at all stages of the development and implementation of program have to be evaluated. For example, at the end of the first stage it has to be evaluated whether the sample of informants to survey needs was large enough to make it unlikely that any major need has escaped attention. Evaluation requires accountability in all phases of a program as well as objective data on key target outcomes that can help to diagnose strong and weak points and ultimate program effectiveness (Shadish *et al.*, 1991; Wholey *et al.*, 2004).

Study design and methodology

The study described in this article was designed to conduct an exploratory interview study aimed at identifying psychological and socio-cultural factors that should be included in a training program for Mexican municipality and state officials.

For this interview study a sample of 75 municipality and state level officials in Mexican administrative institutions were gathered through "snowballing". Three parameters were considered to gain a sufficiently wide range of officials, namely region (state), level of seniority, and sector of public service. Interviewees worked in Aguascalientes ($n = 16$), Campeche ($n = 17$), Guanajuato ($n = 15$), Oaxaca ($n = 15$) and the Federal District where Mexico City is located ($n = 12$). Three levels of authority/seniority were distinguished: operational ($n = 15$), middle ($n = 25$), and leadership ($n = 35$). The sectors of of public service were education ($n = 27$), health ($n = 24$), and social development ($n = 24$).

A comprehensive questionnaire was designed with the help of experienced civil servants known to the authors. Pilot interviews were conducted before the final version was prepared. This consisted of 71 items, both open and closed ones. Most of the closed items asked for ratings on a two or four-point scale (yes/no; strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). Several of the items consisted of a series of questions, to each of which the interviewee was asked to give an answer. Most interviews lasted a few hours; interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on their answers. The interviews were tape recorded (with the exception of a few interviewees in senior positions) and comments were later transcribed. This elaborate procedure was followed in order to reduce stereotyped answers, or answers influenced by social desirability (Reynolds, 1982), to help in the interpretation of the quantitative results, and to provide materials for inclusion in a possible future training program.

Results

The main goal in the analysis of the results was to identfy themes and areas where interviewees reflected lack of knowledge, lack of skills, lack of confidence in their own competence, discomfort or stress. We also examined whether there were important differences in frequencies between subsamples. The most relevant findings are the following.

In response to an open item most respondents gave clear definitions of decentralization, such as "not concentrating resources and delegating them to the state level and from there to municipalities". However, many found decentralization confusing. For example, more than half ($n = 42$) indicated that authority and responsibility were not clearly defined, and $n = 51$ felt that there was excessive control by the state. For eight possible advantages of decentralization that were presented (e.g., more attention to the real needs of states/municipalities; more funds) the average rate of endorsement was 55 percent; for seven disadvantages (e.g. excessive control by the central government; states making decisions in isolation) this rate was 45.41 percent. Moreover, in a qualitative analysis of the personal comments, there were more that emphasized advantages ($n = 334$ in all interviews) than disadvantages ($n = 239$).

More than 95 percent of the respondents agreed that training aimed at increasing knowledge about various aspects could help to improve decentralization policies (although in about two thirds of all cases opinions about their own expertise and that of their own department in respect of planning, organization, effective communication

etc., were positive). When asked about sources of knowledge of decentralisation (including, decision making, legal procedures, rules about assignment of funds), respondents mentioned their own experience as the most important means of obtaining knowledge (38 percent), followed by documentary sources (31 percent), training (23 percent) and collegues (7 percent).

Sixteen factors were listed as possible impediments to decentralisation. The three factors that were endorsed most frequently ("I agree totally" or "I agree") and the three factors that repondents disgreed with most frequently ("I diagree" or "I disagree totally") are presented in Table I. From this table it appears that the organizational context is not conducive to more initiative being taken by individual officials (lack of flexibility, overlap in functions). In addition, though too a somewhat lesser extent, personal competencies to take responsibility seem to be lacking. Fear of doing something wrong and fear for making decisions, are seen as impediments to decentralisation by up to half of the interviewees.

In Table II frequencies are listed for the three most endorsed and the three least endorsed of 21 problems in the official's own institution or municipality. We have added in the table the results of three issues in psychosocial functioning (low self-esteem, fear to slip up, and lack of confidence) because of their direct relevance for training. Interpersonal interactions are a serious source of problems in the organizations according to the ratings in Table II, while social discrimination and prejudice are seen as virtually absent. By and large half of the interviewees see negative individual characteristics as problematic.

	Agree and agree totally		Disagree and disagree totally	
	N	%	N	%
Overlap in functions	58	81	14	19
Lack of flexibility	55	73	20	26
Supply functions inadequately	55	73	18	24
Fear of making decisions	42	56	32	33
Fear of doing something wrong	38	50	36	48
Fear of what others may think	25	33	49	65

Table I.
The three factors most frequently endorsed and the three factors least frequently endorsed as impediments to decentralisation in Mexico

	Agree and agree totally		Disagree and disagree totally	
	N	%	N	%
Envy	52	70	22	30
Power struggles	49	65	26	35
Competitiveness	47	65	25	35
Physical violence	2	3	73	97
Religious discrimination	6	8	68	92
Racism	7	9	67	91
Low self-esteem	31	41	44	59
Fear to slip up	39	53	35	47
Lack of confidence	41	55	34	45

Table II.
Eight out of 21 problems that are judged to be present in interviewees' own institution or municipality (three with highest rate and three with lowest rate of endorsement and three psychosocial issues)

From the answers to open items and comments made throughout the interview we derived some further salient information. In as many as 55 interviews we found comments to the effect that psychosocial aspects such as lack of motivation, low work performance and uncertainty affect quality and continuity of work performance within institutions.

In a data set with many variables it is inescapable that some statistically significant differences between subsamples are found. However, frequency distributions generally were similar across states and across public service sectors. Perhaps the most notable exception was a difference between sectors regarding specific decentralization obstacles, fear of making decisions ($\chi^2 = 6.200$; $p = 0.005$) and fear to commit mistakes ($\chi^2 = 9.361$; $p = 0.05$) which were more endorsed by the education sector, whereas prejudices against local governments ($\chi^2 = 9.473$; $p < 0.05$) was more endorsed by interviewees in the social development sector.

We expected the largest differences in the hierarchy of functions. Here we found that self-reported knowledge about decentralization processes such as resource assignation ($\chi^2 = 13.677$; $p = 0.05$), decentralized decision making processes (10.647; $p = 0.005$) and legal issues such as legal and administrative norms and processes ($\chi^2 = 10.451$; $p = 0.005$) increased with hierarchy.

Discussion

The findings from the interviews indicate that Mexican officials know what is meant with decentralization, but that they see its implementation as problematic. Unclarities about resource assignation, decentralization of decision making processes, and legal issues play a major role in this respect, as shown by our results. For example, the self-reported knowledge of decentralization processes revealed that unclarities of the process were frequent, especially among lower ranking officials. Elsewhere we report on the administrative implications of our findings (Ruesga, Pick and Xolocotzin, in preparation).

For the purpose of training the reports on psychosocial skills are the most relevant. In Tables I and II, fear of making decisions, low self-esteem, lack of trust or confidence, etc. are mentioned by half of the respondents or more.

Although we cannot compare this information with private-sector workplaces in Mexico or with state agencies in other countries, these results strongly suggest that difficulties in interpersonal relations may interfere to a significant extent in the operations of these agencies.

Overall, the results suggest confusion about the proper procedures for making decisions and formulating policy, and a mentality of fear and mistrust. Most likely, such qualities have been inculcated and exacerbated by decades of centralized rule, during which officials at all levels learned that pleasing their bosses was more important than making autonomous decisions. The need for training programs to improve personal functioning in addition to measures geared at better administrative policies seems evident.

Decentralization implies the enhancement of political and civil rights of both public servants and of citizens. It is presuposed that in a centralized system, both these are being excluded from decision making. According to O'Donnell *et al.* (2003) those excluded are "being denied their condition of agents" due to a generalized assumption that they lack autonomy and responsibility to engage in decision

making. Agency then becomes a relevant element for individual capacity and thus for institutional capacity.

This is an important consideration for the further development of a training program. IMIFAP's training programs follow a conceptualization based on developments in social psychology and education research (Pick *et al.*, 2003; Pick and Poortinga, 2005; Pick, 2006) that is in accordance with recommendations by the World Bank (2005) and WHO (1996, 1999). The main outcomes of programs are changes in intentions and actual behavior (e.g., Middlestadt *et al.*, 1995). These outcomes are obtained by providing trainees with knowledge and skills with which they can address concrete situations. Existing behavior patterns often have been acquired and maintained over large numbers of years. Thus, the primary target of training programs are concrete situations that have been selected on the basis of need analysis as being relevant to the target population and as offering scope for change. Experience in Latin American countries, especially in Mexico, with several programs of behavior change has shown that changes are reached most effectively, in interactive situations (including role playing and simulations) (Venguer *et al.*, submitted; Givaudan *et al.*, 2005).

Once trainees have gained competence in addressing for them problematic situations, this competence tends to generalize to other situations. Hence, it can be said that training programs can contribute to changing a person. There are numerous concepts that refer to a person's general capability to deal with difficult situations in a socially competent and confident manner. Among these are agency (Kagitcibasi, 2005; Sen, 1999), self efficacy (Bandura, 1997), self esteem (Baumeister, 1993), self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 2000), self regulation (Boekaerts, 1999), internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966), empowerment (Stein, 1997), autonomy (Assor *et al.*, 2002), and individualization (Crockett and Sibereisen, 2000). Of the concepts mentioned "agency" has the advantage of being part of both the psychological literature and the literature on socio-economic development. According to the economist Sen (1999) agency is the ability to define one's goals in an autonomous fashion and act upon them.

In summary, we argue that public servants and citizens need to feel capable of performing as agents in order to identify their options and choices to be made and to find the appropriate solutions to public problems. The interview data have shown which needs should be addressed in training programs for Mexican administrative officials who have to implement decentralization measures.

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