TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR A PRACTICAL PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION IN MEXICAN GOVERNMENT CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT.

This paper outlines the highlights to develop a conceptual framework for a practical participatory evaluation contextualized in Mexican government spaces, in order to determine its general organization through the provision of a functional structure, which involves communication and coordination mechanisms.

In Mexico, the organization and management of knowledge are essential to help building a suitable administration with novel patterns of cooperation, especially in managerial units where nearly all administrative tasks are informational in nature, policy making is an official work, and the redistribution of knowledge with its particular domain, as a key asset, must be managed carefully, in order to make sense of specific situations linked to social, cultural, political and ecological settings to reach a consensus about further action.

Preliminary results such as the Participatory Evaluation role in the context of Decision/Policy Making and its practical functional structure are reported, through the use of System and Cybernetic approaches, which have permitted to organize different bodies of knowledge, language, perception, self-reference and reflection from members who in their diverse roles define purposes, planning stages and monitoring methods for an evaluation process through the establishment of communication and coordination mechanisms.

Keywords: Practical Participatory Evaluation, Mexican Government, bodies of knowledge, Conceptual Framework, Systems and Cybernetic Approaches, Knowledge Management.
Introduction

Increased discussion on the approaches, and therefore, methods to fulfill a Participatory Evaluation in public contexts has emerged as a result of various trends in academic disciplines, practical fields and policy (Engel & Carlsson, 2002; Hunsberger & Kenyon, 2006) Aref, 2010).

An overview of the literature, depending on the school of thought which the author is coming, shows differences in understanding the role of Participatory Evaluation (PE) and its objectives (Khakee et. al., 2008), not to mention differences in terminology and methodology (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; King, 2007; Aref, 2010).

For example, in the particular context of Mexico, PE is more often deem to public spaces and governmental organizations, where each actor consider its own conception of PE, from ideas of supporting decision making to democratize social changes, so attempts to value people's direct experience in knowledge, social justice and human rights can vary significantly (Cardozo, 2008).

In addition, there are also issues on how to conduct a PE from the practitioner perspective (Plottu & Plottu 2011). This situation becomes problematic, in terms to use the same common knowledge about what PE means, which complicate the employment of results received in different disciplines, and simultaneously hinder the relevance of PE per se and utility (Aref, 2010).

It is perceived for Mexican professionals and politicians that PE is not simply a set of methods but it is also not clear its role in a management process (Huenchuan & Paredes, 2007). Consequently, the organization of PE in government may be mostly based on the decision makers expertise, who have to deal with complex activities (Axelsson & Melin, 2008) related to the determination of approaches to ensure that participants work together, the definition of what is to be evaluated, the evaluation criteria and indicators to be used, the methods and instruments for measuring the chosen indicators (Pohjola & Tuomisto, 2011), and how to analyze, interpret and communicate findings for processes of decision and policy making, which includes organizational change, institutional learning, and transformative development and agenda (Freitas, 2012).

Besides, this situation is not only complex, but also plural, due to the involvement of planners, consultants, analysts, citizens, public authorities and elected representatives, who in their different positions, by one side, must be able to conduct the evaluation, have skills in data collection and analysis to begin with, as well as an understanding of the mechanism of achieving organizational change (Gallego, 2009). By the other side, it is also fundamental the acquisition of knowledge about the field it is required to assess, the
determination of a common terminology, not to mention the understanding in which participants operate (Santana-Medina et al., 2012).

Furthermore, concerns over costs, timing, and quality should be considered in order to improve decisions related to administrative actions (Grubbs, 2002). It is not surprising, that these circumstances hold an inability to manage and adequate PE, and frequently conducts to face discontinued or cancelled projects and programs, delays, over budget and complications among participants, just to mention some of the negative consequences that represent for public spaces the lack of counting with a suitable PE (Tobal, 2006).

The above mentioned situation creates a dilemma, firstly, because of the complexity goal structure with objectives and uses of the PE, second, due to the decision of mechanisms, as well as conditions to enable PE, and finally the involvement of people who initiate the PE, also trained individuals in evaluation and the pool of participants who represent the pluralism of a community (Pasteur & Blauert, 2000).

In government it is common to prevent such problems by developing institutionalized policies which are aligned to normativity, yet it is still not clear how to structure different bodies of knowledge created in different stakeholder knowledge domain, while being moderated by values and goals of other stakeholders. That is why, this paper aims to develop a Conceptual Framework for a practical PE, contextualized in Mexican government spaces, in order to determine its general organization through the provision of a practical functional structure, which involves communication and coordination mechanisms.

**Describing Participatory Evaluation in Mexican government**

This section synthetizes concepts, speeches and practices related to PE in Mexican government. It looks at relevant participation experiences which help to identify defined concepts associated with the central object of study in practical settings.

Mexican government is becoming increasingly complex as it must address wider goals and satisfy a wide range of services and claims of communities, and integrate operation of a large of loosely connected organizational units. There are three principal realms - Legislation, Public Administration and Justice – which have quite different features (SE, 2006). Then, there are the different levels to be considered such as the state, regions and communal entities as the cities and the villages. To this diversity adds a high specification of materials to be dealt with (Banco Mundial, 2004).

Diverse subject matters range from quite different topics such as environmental measures and health policies, transport infrastructure, energy policy and climate change which
frequently involve multiple interests concerning to ethics, policies, social, economic and ecological (Fig. 1), where it is known or perceived the direct and indirect relation with common wellness (Brown et al., 2012).

![Diagram of Overall community well-being hierarchy]

**Fig. 1 A simplified example of a hierarchy of issues for a community**

Emphasis in participation and evaluation were firstly acknowledged in Mexican health ambits. Additionally, in 1980 and 1984 was institutionalized a participation mechanism named National System for Democratic Planning, created to consult Mexican population in the stages of formulation, control and evaluation of aspirations and social demands to include in development plans (Cardozo, 2008).

During the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, surged the National Program of Solidarity (PRONASOL). This Program considered a consultation process organized by committees and Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) (Constitucion, 1998). Its product was well documented and became a valuable information source for policy makers. Hence, PE was viewed under a utilitarian approach for improving beneficiary involvement in government agenda.

In the next government period, social participation was recognized in documents such as the National Development Plan 1995-2000 and the Program to Face Poverty 1995-2000 (Banco Mundial, 2004). In spite of not showing big differences from previous programs, in political processes described by law, Mexican legal norms were standard vehicles of communication between participants, and quite often norms established only a framework that left leeway for interpretation and situation-bound decisions.

As a further consequence, consensus building and negotiation came in, especially as agencies worked via a complex issue of cooperating acting entities. All this meant a collaborative working mode as a strict demand and collaborative platforms supporting collaboration as necessary.
In the government from Vicente Fox Quesada, the National Development Plan mentioned that participatory processes should be “an open and permanent dialogue with citizens, politics and social aggregation, with other parties, and in general with society…. through the employment of mechanisms that allow the elaboration and evaluation of plans and programs…” (PNDS, 2002).

It is discerned that the above participation discourse presented an emphasis towards a more empowerment approach, strengthening civil society and the “awareness” of its situation (Fig 2). That meant that PE should be presented in all stages of a decision process, from prioritization of interests and necessities in government agenda, through quality and management, until design and implementation of policies and programs.

However, during that period, transparency and accountability were incipient, especially in control over the various stages of projects cycle and their impacts.

![Analytical cycle of policies and programs from a participatory evaluation approach](image)

**Fig. 2** Analytical cycle of policies and programs from a participatory evaluation approach

In that period, PE was conceived to empower people through participation in the process of constructing their own knowledge therefore, improving the legitimacy and relevance were important attributes of an effectiveness government.

In the case of the government of Felipe Calderon, references towards participatory evaluation were less frequent, but it was promoted to identify responsibilities among government and society, based on a form of self-reflection, or an action-reflection-action process for operational organizations and regional communities (PNDS, 2007).

Even there were not many approaches to PE during this government, beneficiaries and primary stakeholders were evaluators, which meant, plural profiles worked together, in the design of initiatives and social audits.
In today’s government by Enrique Peña Nieto, there is an increment in participatory processes, which include evaluations from international organisms to Mexican government, due to a possible recognition of economic growth, social development and the consolidation of democratic systems (PNDS, 2013). In spite that Mexico has move up in topics of legislation about participatory process, to the date, mechanisms to warranty effective participatory evaluation are still scarce.

Major discussions around PE in Mexican government refers to project or program evaluation, focusing either on the fulfilment of project objectives, and less on the evaluation of impact. Few of the documents tackle specific topics of the relationship between a development focus and the monitoring and evaluation design, although in Plans are mentioned the importance of a participatory approach at all stages of a project cycle, if participatory at the monitoring and evaluation stage is to be achieved.

The revised documents allowed to pose four conceptions of PE in Mexican Government:

- Governmental evaluations, with the objective to feed decision making, without taking in account social actors and not informing about found results.
- Similar evaluation as the previous one, but with the difference of including the application of instruments with pre-established questions to know some data and opinions from citizens.
- Evaluations that employ procedures focused on systematization of information, monitoring and follow-up.
- Evaluations that are fulfilled with the participation of a wide range of profiles from society.

The above conceptions give the notion of showing partially the complexity implied by the vast network of social, politic, economical, managerial and technical interrelationships in the development and implementation of a PE. Therefore, and in order to offer a more articulated definition of PE in governmental environments, it is necessary to identify functions and relevant components of a PE (Freeman, 2010).

Based on these four conceptions of PE, a comprehensive literature review was made on documents which are directly linked to judgments about the merit and worth of a program, project, and policy in government spaces.

Search strategy was designed to be inclusive and combined five groups of terms using “and” (terms that pertained to the presence of the four conceptions of PE in Mexican Government and Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation, which integrate a common terminology in Latin American documents). The Boolean logic of the search considered reviewed and full text articles in order to have sufficient information to adequately assess
quality according the purposes of this paper (study design, study objectives, usefulness and outcomes). It was identified the following relevant concepts that ought to be included in a PE in public spaces:

- **Planning and design of a PE**
  Evaluation must begin by clearly delineating the objective of the participatory research and of the evaluation itself. The focus of PE can be strategic to investigate whether the process achieves the intended results in line with the project or organization’s overall objectives; or operational to monitor the timing, costs and quality of the planned activities.

- **Temporality of the evaluation**
  This body of knowledge refers to the timing of the PE. It can be Diagnostic which determines the behavior in terms of the performance of a project, program or policy, and the attitudes of their integrants.

It can also be Ex-ante, at the emergence of public projects, policy, or program prior to its implementation. When PE focuses on its operation on how the outcome is produced rather than the outcome itself in order to improve the processes and build on strengths. It can be called formative evaluation.

In the case of Ex-post, at the implementation stage, determines the effects of the policy, project or program and is undertaken to demonstrate outcomes and to improve the design of future processes. It is called summative evaluation when it reflects on the aspects that went well, the aspects that went less well, and the things to do differently next time, with an emphasis on learning and knowledge accumulation.

- **Power and counter power**
  The exercise of power and counter power to meet the demands of increased control by the citizen of the public element and the demands for efficiency of the public services. On one hand, by encouraging the use of a counter power and, on the other hand, by limiting its effects, the principle of an increased participation of the population in decision-making is welcomed by the general public and decision-maker alike, even though they may not always see things in the same light.

- **Conditions enabling PE**
  A certain number of prerequisites necessary to ensure the effective functioning of a PE that is informing, motivating and training participants (particularly weaker interest groups) to take part in evaluation, allowing interest groups (including underprivileged groups) to construct a shared vision and ensuring conditions for a balanced expression of points of views, and the prioritization in the field of application are indispensable if participation is to be successful.
• Participant selection
OCR with high confidence:

OECD offers guidance on choosing different levels of public involvement covering the spectrum from the one-way flow of information from the decision maker to others to full community or stakeholder control of the process (roles are inform, consult, co-decide, delegate and support) (OECD, 2004). Of course, participatory ‘positions’ will also be determined by a combination of the substantive possibility (encouraging multiple perspectives improves understanding of the issues, and therefore the selection of appropriate solutions), instrumental possibility (encouraging collaborative relationships assists with implementation and with defusing conflict) and normative possibility (encouraging social and individual learning enriches both society and individual citizens) arising from active involvement by the public and stakeholders (Blackstock et al., 2007).

• Technical quality
OCR with high confidence:

Evaluation can be conducted as a participatory process, where those involved determine technical quality, in accordance to appropriate criteria, so that the focus of the evaluation can be realized, and sharing participants and sponsors have clarity in the process, context and outcomes. There are summaries of possible criteria for evaluation drawn from literature review, which are customized with respect to the group’s interest, the relevant area of consideration and the appropriate time-frame. This paper considers three of all identifies by authors, which are useful to measure processes and outcomes related to any research context.

Accountability- This criterion is also called Salience (Eckley, 2001), and is intended to reflect the ability of an assessment to address the particular concerns of a user. An assessment is salient to a user if that user is aware of the assessment, and if that user deems that assessment relevant to current policy or behavioral decisions. Contrary to accountability are reports that remain on a shelf in perpetuity, never referred to, not interested in answers, or heard from again.

Credibility- Tries to reflect the scientific and technical believability of the assessment to a defined user of that valuation. More credible assessments have done better at ensuring this sort of technical adequacy. Credibility can be gained based on the process by which the information in the assessment was created, or by the credentials or other characteristics of those producing the assessment. If a particular assessment is done by a well-known, highly regarded scientist, a user might be more likely to consider that assessment credible because of its source.

Legitimacy- This criterion is employed to measure political acceptability or perceived fairness of an assessment to a user. A legitimate assessment process has been conducted in a manner that allows users to be satisfied that their interests were taken into account, and that the process was a fair one. Participants must believe that their interests, concerns, views, and perspectives were included and given appropriate weight and consideration in an assessment if they are to grant the assessment legitimacy.
Other criteria are openness, completeness, accuracy, cost effectiveness, quality of information, social learning, transparency, recognized impacts, quality of decision making, capacity to participate, access to resources and leadership.

- Knowledge utilization

There are several ‘‘products’’ to an evaluation process, but the most important one, and the one that is a precondition to all others, is knowledge. In a government space, nearly all administrative tasks are informational in nature, and decision/ policy making is an official work to make sense of specific situations linked to social, cultural, political and ecological settings to reach a consensus about further action. Therefore, utilization of knowledge can be linked to liberation, emancipation, enlighten, empowerment, self-determination aspects.

Cognitive bases for a Conceptual Framework

In accordance to the identified bodies of knowledge, it is necessary to count with a general approach that allows to pose, orient and coordinate multidisciplinary efforts, in order to find solutions, in an interdisciplinary form. Therefore, it is proposed to employ Systems Approach, which provides means to conceptualize systems and understand relations among them, and Cybernetic Approach to visualize control mechanisms with the consequent definition of organizational structures, management process and planning for its fulfillment.

Complex social systems are generally defined as a collection of elements linked through reciprocal actions, where the conceptualization of a system is constituted by a set of interrelated components- subsystems in a form that the operation of each one, assures the functioning of the whole object (Flood & Jackson, 2002). Therefore, in a Systems Approach, phenomena both exert an influence and are mutually influenced; they are multifaceted and demand examination from within various perceptions and through a variety of concepts. A Systems Approach perceives the world in terms of contents and on the structural form, creating a whole that cannot be understood through a simple summary of its parts, but only through its parts and the dynamics between them (Gelman et al., 2005).

From this point of view, the other approach of Cybernetics allows defining diverse system and subsystem components, as different bodies of knowledge, and in the case of PE come from human resources who in their different roles define purposes, planning stages and monitoring, methods for an evaluation process through the establishment of communication and coordination mechanisms.
Then, Cybernetics deals with non-linear exchanges and processes of change and stability within non-linear systems, where the meaning of knowledge, language, perception, communication, and self-reference and reflection are set in subsystems which its well-defined borders are open to the environment, adopting knowledge, values, and norms that might create change by supplying them to different system or sub-system components (Levin-Rozalis, 2010).

In the following figure 3, it is shown the conceptualization of a teleological system, with the visualization of two subsystems, in the management and managed level, as well as information and execution relations (Rigaud et al., 2011).

![Fig. 3 A conceptualized teleological system under Cybernetic Approach](image)

In Fig. 3, the management level is constituted by Management Subsystems, which could be considerate as part of the General Management of an organization, with specific roles related to determine plans, take managerial decisions and coordinate decisions to be implemented in a managed level.

The above mentioned managerial subsystems relate themselves by interrelations of information and authorization in order to direct, organize and coordinate the operation and development of their coordinated subsystems, through a continuously acquisition of Information.
On the other hand and, in order to assure decision making become into actions, the subsystem requires transmitting them by Execution mechanisms. The execution of actions seeks to achieve changes on the Coordinated Subsystem behavior, as the responsible to perform the system’s work that is; from keeping and improving the managed subsystem under variable or invariable conditions. As a result, Information and Execution represent relations between both subsystems.

From this outlook, both scientific approaches help defining, in a sufficiently general form, an object of study as a system, considering the allowance to design the proper organizational structure and to elaborate the corresponding management process to assure solutions.

**Conceptual Framework for Participatory Evaluation in government contexts**

Figure 4 shows the construction of PE, as an object of study, under System and Cybernetic Approaches.

The system of PE exists to projects a set of values as a reference approach for a major System called Decision/Policy Making, and must accomplish the following:

![Fig. 4 Basic conceptualization of Participatory Evaluation](image-url)
a. Provide strength to decision making and public policy processes, as a social function. Thus, the role fosters the utilization of evaluation, considering that human resources enhance the relevance, ownership and consequently the utilization of knowledge and the provision of information to diverse organizations and entities.

b. Promote social changes, likewise empower individuals and groups with the purpose to create necessary conditions for reality transformation. This role aims primarily to empower individuals or groups through their participation in the evaluation process. It focuses on learning inherent in the process and on any social action and change that may result.

c. Improve the efficiency and appropriateness of traditional supporter-initiated assessment through increased beneficiary participation. In a strict sense, the function considers evaluation as an activity of monitoring and evaluation.

In order to accomplish participative judgments about the merit and worth of a program, project, and policy in government spaces, it is distinguished in Fig. 4 two subsystems; by one side Knowledge Production in the coordinated level, and the Management Subsystem, which includes previous defined bodies of knowledge.

Knowledge Production subsystem provides basis about the field and topics that are required to assess (projects, programs, policies). Effectiveness on the production of knowledge is manifested through the identification of the knowledge of people who have high professional knowledge and familiarity of the matter, and the collection of data for further analysis.

The other subsystem called Knowledge Management has the role to provide an adequate organization, planning, orientation and availability of resources through political, administrative and academic means, that consider institutional worries from political and public authorities, planners, consultants, analysts, citizens and elected representatives. Effectiveness on the management of knowledge is perceived by means of the identification of members who have high evaluation knowledge (Rigaud et al., 2009).

The concept determines that both subsystems are related by information and execution channels. These channels are represented by Human Resources, whom are the responsible to fulfill activities, through language, perception, self-reference and reflection, and which results are the establishment of communication and coordination involving mutual influences of members who in their diverse roles defined purposes, planning stages and monitoring, methods for an evaluation process.
Additionally, feedback is driven by the hierarchy existing between the knowledge resources of all parties. As noted power and counter-power can be perceived in a more equity manner, due the establishment of communication that results in trust, evolving in states of retro alimentation of information gathering, processing, and interpretation.

The achievement of roles the subsystems of PE and their basic objectives are developed through the accomplishment of fundamental functions for a knowledge management system, which are shown in Fig. 5.

![Detailed conceptualization of Participatory Evaluation](image_url)

**Fig. 5 Detailed conceptualization of Participatory Evaluation**

Functions from fig. 5 have the main role of managing the government’s knowledge by means of a systemic and organizational specified process constituted by several stages such as: initiation, generation, modeling, repository, distribution & transfer, use and retrospect, for acquiring, organizing, sustaining, applying and renewing tacit and explicit knowledge. As a result, not only members can enhance the evaluation performance but also create knowledge, expertise, and value (Rigaud & Delgado, 2013).

The above detailed conceptualization has permitted to develop a practical framework for PE in Mexican Government contexts, as shown in figure 6. In a PE, there are conditions such as time, technical capacity, cost constraints, Normativeness, even an organizational culture for evaluations that enable the success of an evaluation.
Nowadays, almost all Mexican Governmental Organs and Administrative Units are carrying out a PE from ascertain cost effectiveness and justifying resources to involved population to the wider role of PE for improving efficiency and appropriateness of traditional supporter-initiated assessment through increased beneficiary participation, and learning from errors and redirecting activities.

Whether a PE itself should part of a process of learning and developing, the proposal framework is encompassed to the Mexican reality considering that evaluation stages from diagnostic activities through collection of base line data collected from outset and regularly monitored, regular monitoring, and ex-ante to ex post evaluation. As noted in the figure, these activities overlap to include continuous evaluation through project cycles.
Fig. 6 Conceptual Framework for a Practical Participatory Evaluation in Mexican Government contexts
In relation to participants, this paper proposes that an outside evaluator can facilitate a highly PE, promoting institutional learning, self-reflection and adjustments of activities on the part of beneficiaries. Equally, this framework proposal considers that evaluations conducted at grassroots levels not necessarily are PE, if unequal power relations are restricting the expression of certain groups. This has led this paper to the idea that promoting a culture for evaluation, in which organizations are committed to self-learning and reflection for the improvement will allow effectiveness, transparency, equity, and other criteria related to PE (Kagan & Gaskell, 2003).

The organization of participants as viewed in fig. 6 allows undertaking practical and mutually acceptable solutions, which can then be adopted at a faster rate than if there is distance (in time and approach, not to mention physical) between information givers and decision makers.

In terms of methods, they can range from extractive methods where minimal necessary information is collected by an outside evaluator for the analysis of an externally devised hypothesis, to the other extreme of beneficiaries, who are empowered to analyze their own activities to judge their success at the need for changes. In between the two sort of methods are the consultative and collaborative procedures, which includes multicriteria decision making methods (Plottu & Plottu, 2009).

In general, methods look for display some configuration of the general interest or common well. In this way, evaluation expresses specific ‘visions’ of a local community [Brown at al., 2012], allowing a better combination of the distribution of costs and benefits starting from the trade-off between social, ecology and economic values [Pohjola & Tuomisto, 2011].

An important aspect is related to the IT maturity level in public realms, in terms of software and hardware/information systems to monitoring the process evaluation and the decision of mechanisms to conduct PE, from traditional methods to extract documents by means of intranet and adoption of personalized web-interface for customer processes to more complex techniques for empowering groups, multicriteria decision making methods and other action oriented research characterized by information and knowledge mobility across organizations, by means of advanced e-participation processes.

Conclusions

This paper has presented a practical framework for participatory evaluation in government and public contexts to fulfill an effective evaluation by providing a general functional structure of different bodies of knowledge based on Knowledge Management processes, and determining the opportunity to consider the participation of individuals, centered on the quality of their participation, and by suggesting its organization and general methods to achieve an organized access to information, and thus deliberation and decision making.

This proposal is designed for the context of Mexican government and offers the opportunity to respond adequately to concrete actions to foster knowledge among members who in their different roles define purposes, planning stages and monitoring, methods for an evaluation process through the establishment of communication and coordination mechanisms. The effectiveness of the proposed approach should be assessed in the long term and will be reported in future works.
The need of research and development sectors are becoming more specialized in Mexico, requiring approaches to evaluation from management and organization of policy field to be influenced, the own means and modalities of action, stakeholders, planning and decision making conspiring at the same time to knowledge gaps of specific settings, legal and political regulations.

To this end, and as described in this paper, PE in government arenas can be benefited by integrating concepts of Systems Theory and Cybernetics Approach in order to identify areas of development and support decision-making, in particular to initiate and strengthen areas of knowledge, through characterization, prioritization and optimization of the organizational change, institutional learning, and transformative development and agenda. Finally, it is highly appreciated the sponsorship of the Project PAPIIT IT102112, and feedback from members of a decentralized organ of the Mexican Department of Health.
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