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Low-trust bureaucracy

AN EXPLORATION OF THE MECHANISMS AND COSTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS IN MEXICO

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Abstract

Latin American bureaucracies are notorious for their inefficiency and opacity, yet there is very little empirical research done on what exactly determines the ´bureaucratic experience´ for citizens and what the individual and collective costs of administrative burdens are. The notion of ´low-trust bureaucracy´ is proposed to describe the unreliable access to public services and the excessive levels of control towards both citizens and bureaucrats. An important consequence is that bureaucracies exacerbate social inequality rather than contribute to a societal level-playing field. This paper also adds new insights to the existing body of literature on administrative burdens and administrative exclusion. It suggests dysfunction is not merely a consequence of poorly designed bureaucratic procedures, but also of more structural causes in the administrative context, such as historical legacies and structural shortages in staffing and funding.

Keywords: administrative burdens; bureaucracy; inequality; low trust; Mexico.

Resumen

La burocracia mexicana es notoria por su ineficacia y opacidad, aun así, existen pocas investigaciones empíricas centradas en explicar qué exactamente determina la "experiencia burocrática" para los ciudadanos y cuál es el costo, individual y colectivo, de las barreras administrativas en la provisión de bienes y servicios públicos. Este ensayo desarrolla la noción de "burocracia de baja confianza", en la que el acceso a los servicios públicos se da a partir de procesos poco confiables y los niveles de control son excesivos. Quizás el mayor daño es que la disfuncionalidad burocrática puede exacerbar la desigualdad social existente y la desconfianza de los ciudadanos en el gobierno. Este trabajo también explica como la disfunción burocrática puede ser consecuencia de causas estructurales en su contexto, como legados históricos y la escasez de recursos y de personal.

Palabras clave: cargas administrativas; burocracia; desigualdad; baja confianza; México.

Introduction*

In the spring of 2017, Alejandro started the procedure for the re-inscription of his son in day care. Among the various required documents and proofs are several lab studies to show his son is in good health. The day care's paediatrician pressed a paper in his hands indicating which studies they required. The paper had the formal letter head of the public social services of which our day care is part of, as well as the name of the paediatrician employed by the same public institute. Naively, Alejandro assumed he could just go the one of the institute's laboratories and show them this paper. Instead, the paediatrician told him that he had to make an appointment at the local family clinic first. Apparently, this clinic was in charge of regulating the flow of clients to the laboratories, he thought —again naively.

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Instead, the appointment —which was only possible during office hours— was with another paediatrician who barely looked at Alejandro's son but took out an old typewriter to produce an almost exact copy of the paper he had received earlier from the day care's paediatrician. With this paper, he could now finally make an appointment at the laboratory. Making the appointment in the laboratory (fortunately located at walking distance from Alejandro's house) had to be done in person, again during office hours. He handed over the paediatrician's paper, which included a request for three studies for which he would need four small plastic lab jars. Instead, they only gave him one jar. "The rest you'll have to buy yourself at a pharmacy. We only give a maximum of one". They also gave him a time slot to hand in the samples and do an additional test at the laboratory in two weeks' time at 7AM.

To Alejandro's surprise, there were about 100 people queueing outside the clinic at the hour of the appointment. Apparently, the appointment was to stand in line. Inside the building, a constant flow of people was escorted through the building. First up was a desk to hand over the confirmation letter in exchange for a sheet with unique barcode stickers. After sticking these on the lab jars, Alejandro had to place the jars on various carts —one for each type of study to be done—. A final queue led to an employee who took a quick saliva smear from his son. Alejandro could pick up the results in one week —in person, at the local family clinic—. When he dropped by the clinic nine days later (again during office hours), he was told they had not received the results yet.

A week later Alejandro returned. Surely two weeks who be enough to process the results. By then, however, he was informed that "the doctor had already reviewed the results and placed them in a file". In order to access the file, he would require official identification (which he had not brought along) next to the bar code he received at the laboratory. The next day Alejandro returned with the required documents. "Now we just need authorisation from the director of the clinic to be able to give you the file with the results", a grumpy employee told him. The authorisation consisted of a phone call from the director —whose office was 30 meters down the hall— to said employee to hand Alejandro the file. After leaving behind an official identification, he received the file so he could make a personal copy of it in a convenience store around the corner of the clinic. On the bus back home he promised myself to go to a private laboratory again

next time. Sure, it costs you some money. But at least they can receive you during the weekend —without appointment!— and send you the results through e-mail in three days' time.

Bureaucratic burdens in Mexico

The aforementioned case is a rather harmless, though extremely common example of the way Mexicans experience their encounters with public service providers. The cost of bureaucratic burdens in this case is mainly the amount of time spent going through a procedure instead of at work. However, there is also a collective cost: the procedural inefficiencies add up to harm economic productivity as well as public resources. Furthermore, as we will see in the remainder of this article, bureaucratic burdens can place a fundamental restraint on social justice, social equality, and social mobility. What is at stake is the way citizens can access the public services they are legally entitled to, whether it is health care or a building permit. The mismatch between legal entitlement and practical access is what we will explore in this article.

Latin American bureaucracies are notorious for their inefficiency and opacity, yet there is very little empirical research done on what exactly determines the 'bureaucratic experience' for citizens. In recent years, the concept of administrative burdens has been developed to focus on the social impact of bureaucratic pathologies. It refers to the learning, psychological, and compliance costs that limit the ability of citizens to access the services they are formally entitled to (Moynihan *et al.*, 2015). Administrative burdens research focuses on citizens, how they experience bureaucracy, and how access to public services is organised (De Jong & Rizvi, 2008). By adopting this perspective, it is possible to develop an understanding of what makes the bureaucratic experience in a developing bureaucracy so different from a more developed one. Taken on face value, there seems to be little that sets them apart. Laws, regulations, and institutions are usually all in place. Below the surface, however, the bureaucratic underlife reveals a different story in which getting access is an often complicated and frustrating affair.

The first objective of this article is to formulate a theory as a starting point for further research on administrative burdens in developing countries. A second objective

is to contribute to a fuller understanding of why administrative burdens exist. Current research focuses on burdens as consequences of either benign neglect of the impact of dysfunctional procedures on citizen access or of deliberate political strategies, such as defunding the organisations responsible for implementing party-politically unpopular laws. The data presented in this article suggest a different explanation: structural and intractable characteristics of the broader administrative context in which public services are provided produce behavioural patterns that shift bureaucratic attention away from a fair and efficiency service provision.

This argument is constructed as follows. First, a theoretical exploration of the concepts administrative burdens and administrative exclusion highlights their value as well as two important shortcomings. Second, five short case studies from the Mexican context provide small windows on the mechanisms that make interactions with bureaucracies in this country often unpredictable and unreliable. Third, the concept of 'low-trust bureaucracy' is developed to grasp the nature of bureaucratic dysfunction in Mexico, and, by extension, in similar countries.

1. Elements for the study of administrative burdens

Burdens and exclusion

Condemnations of bureaucratic pathologies are as old as the study of bureaucracy itself. Early critiques, including Max Weber's, focused mostly on the effects of bureaucratic structure on the behaviour of bureaucrats and the performance of organisations (e.g. Merton, 1940; Crozier, 1964; Weber, 2006). Recently, attention has shifted to the more down-to-earth analysis of administrative burdens and red tape. Bozeman's (e.g. 2000) contributions to understand the origin and nature of red tape focused mainly on inter- and intra-organisational regulations, procedures, and bureaucratic behaviour that are unnecessary for the execution of an organisation's task. The study of 'administrative burdens' —"an individual's experience of policy implementation as onerous" (Burden *et al*., 2012: 741)— looks more specifically at unjustified compliance burdens for citizens that restrict access to public services or benefits (e.g. Moynihan & Herd, 2010). Moreover, it breaks away from the narrow focus on rules ('formalisation gone bad') as

the source of bureaucratic dysfunction. By looking at state-citizen interactions (Heinrich, 2016) through the perspective of citizens, we move beyond mere economic analyses of interaction costs to the question of access to social and political rights (De Jong & Rizvi, 2008) and how administrative burdens affect citizens' desire and capacity to apply for services (Moynihan & Herd, 2010).

As Brodkin and Majmundar (2010) have shown, formal processing rules, informal practices, and claiming costs at the street-level of public bureaucracies can lead to 'administrative exclusion': formal eligibility which does not lead to access of services (for instance, because people feel discouraged to apply in the first place) or leads to drop-out during a bureaucratic procedure. Moreover, administrative burdens do not affect all citizens equally. Disadvantaged groups with lower levels of financial, social, and human capital tend to be disproportionally hit (Moynihan *et al*., 2014). Especially in a country like Mexico, which has very high levels of income inequality — perhaps the highest in the world[1]— the importance of a bureaucracy that functions as a social equaliser can hardly be overstated. What we see, however, is that bureaucratic exclusion further exacerbates existing inequalities. Financial costs for a government service, travelling times, unfamiliarity with government programmes or procedures, having a bank account and official identification, or the ability to take hours off of work are just a few examples that can account for varying levels of exclusion among population groups.

The study of administrative burdens analyses the social impact of bureaucratic dysfunction. It thereby employs the perspective of the citizen or user of public services as a starting point. Problems such as administrative exclusion often remain hidden from sight from an organisational or managerial perspective. This is especially true for the functioning of public bureaucracies in developing countries, where the formal rules and regulations are – generally speaking – not what sets them apart from more developed bureaucracies. Instead, the operational level is where a large part of citizens' 'bureaucratic experience' is determined. Another aspect of bureaucratic dysfunction that can usually only be unearthed through a citizens' perspective is the way the

[1] http://www.oecd.org/social/inequality.htm

simultaneous but uncoordinated activities of multiple government organisations affect citizens (De Jong, 2016; 233-235). In the remainder of this paragraph, I will discuss three more elements for the study of administrative burdens, which have been underdeveloped in current literature.

Two types of burdens: unnecessary and unjustified

Important for studying administrative burdens is defining what exactly qualifies as an unjustified burden. As important as the citizen perspective is, it is not sufficient to pass judgement on whether or not a burden is unjustified. An experience may be onerous, but there might be good reasons for this, such as identification to prevent fraud and procedures to ensure equal treatment. Bozeman (2000) sought to distinguish between legitimate bureaucratic functions and bureaucratic pathologies, such as red tape, by focusing on rules that entail a compliance burden but "do not advance the legitimate purposes the rules were intended to serve" (Bozeman, 2000: 12). The downside of this definition is that, while it shows what is 'unnecessary', it does question the legitimacy of rules and regulations themselves. Moynihan and Herd (2010: 655) walk a different path by emphasising the 'unjustified' nature of compliance burdens. A rule may serve its purpose, but that purpose might not be in the interest of citizens. For instance, strict conditions for cash transfers in social policies serve the organisational interest of controlling expenditures, but can also cause disincentives for the most vulnerable citizens to apply for social services. An external criterion is needed to determine what qualifies as such.

Moore's (1995) notion of 'public value' is a good candidate for such a criterion.[2] His intention was to curb public bureaucracy's tendency to merely follow political mandates by inviting managers to look outwards to what their organisation contributes to society. Moore failed to offer a working definition, but we can follow Bozeman's (2007: 17) suggestion here: "Public values are those providing normative consensus about (1) the rights, benefits, and prerogatives to which citizens should (and should

[2] An alternative candidate is Stone (2002) and her framework of values to assess the government of communities: equity, efficiency, security, and liberty exist in trade-offs with each other and good policies strike a balance between them.

not) be entitled; (2) the obligations of citizens to society, the state and one another; and (3) the principles on which governments and policies should be based". This segmented definition includes convictions about the common good, but also intra-organisational aspects such as reliability and efficiency, the behaviour of civil servants (accountability, integrity, etc.), and the treatment of citizens (responsiveness, equality, legality, etc.) (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007) in their various roles of beneficiaries, clients, and obligatees (De Jong, 2016: 4-5).

Two types of costs: individual and collective

Moynihan and others (2015) have proposed to measure the impact of administrative burdens on citizens in terms of the learning costs (such as the investment in takes to find out about a government programme), psychological costs (including intrusive application processes and social stigma), and compliance costs (rules and requirements) that citizens face. These costs extend beyond material loss of time, money, and entitlements. Encounters with government also affect citizens on a more immaterial level, both in their "orientations toward the institutions and policies of government" (Mettler & Soss, 2004: 62) and in the consequences of administrative burdens for their social capital and participation (Wichowsky & Moynihan, 2008; Bruch *et al*., 2010). However, this approach tends to focus only on the consequences and costs for individual citizens.

The idea that public administration shapes citizenship (Moynihan & Herd, 2010) is pushed further by De Jong (2016: 6-7; 38), who claims that bureaucratic dysfunction leads to loss of value at both the individual and the collective level. The collective consequences of administrative burdens are the aggregated costs of denying citizens access to rights, treating citizens unfairly, and using public funds irresponsibly. Highlighting these collective costs, for both society and government, is particularly important for countries that suffer from structural defects in the provision of public services. The various perspectives on the costs of administrative burdens and administrative exclusion can be summarised in the following table:

Table 1. The costs of administrative burdens and exclusion

	Material costs	***Immaterial costs***
Individual costs	Time (learning costs, delays, etc.) Money (service costs, opportunity costs, etc.) Loss of entitlements (access to rights and services)	Procedural justice (fairness, responsiveness, etc.) Psychological costs (stress, stigma, etc.) Social capital (autonomy, participation, etc.)
Collective costs	Economic productivity Entrepreneurship Efficiency of public expenditures	Trust in government Social equality and justice Political and social participation

Explaining administrative burdens

A final building block for studying administrative burdens shifts attention from citizen experience to organisational origins. If we seek to explain their origins, we also need to focus on the 'policy roots' of administrative burdens (Heinrich, 2016: 406). So far, the literature on administrative burdens is underdeveloped in this aspect, both empirically and theoretically. Burdens are either seen as a consequence of simple negligence — failure of managers to look at the impact of their procedures and regulations on citizens (Moynihan & Herd, 2010: 664)— or as the result of deliberate political actions to render legislation ineffective through administrative means, such as defunding organisations charged with implementation or expanding local administrators' discretion to raise barriers for citizen access to rights (Lispky, 1984; Elster, 1992: 123; Brodkin, 1997; Hacker, 2004).

However, following De Jong (2016), burdens can also be explained by focusing on more systemic elements in public administration, such as legislation, policy paradigms, organisational design, and information technology. This perspective can be used to present a fuller theory for the existence and persistence of administrative

burdens. The following overview is not necessarily exhaustive, but is an attempt to both explain deliberate and accidental burdens, as well as highlight causes at street-level and system-level:

- Human errors (and their correction): mistakes made by bureaucrats or citizens in registration or documentation, and the effort necessary to correct them.
- Benign neglect (and its unintended consequences): lack of client orientation and attention for the impact of procedures and regulations on citizens, including the use of new technology and the existence of conflicting rules and catch-22 situations.
- Street-level discretion: discretionary space is used to introduce barriers, ration services, or treat citizens in a way that discourages engaging with the state (which can be a consequence of individual choices, organisational culture, administrative behaviour, or coping mechanisms for lack of organisational capacity).
- Political strategy: administrative burdens are the result of deliberate choices made at political level, which include decisions over the trade-off between efficiency and prevention of fraud, but also more malevolent efforts to defund organisations responsible for implementation of laws and policies.
- Administrative context: the structural characteristics of a bureaucratic context and administrative culture, such as authoritarian legacies, coordination between levels of government, and levels of formalisation, create behavioural incentives and disincentives that affect administrative burdens and exclusion.

2. UNPREDICTABLE, UNRELIABLE AND INSUFFICIENT: FIVE EXAMPLES OF BUREAUCRATIC DYSFUNCTION IN MEXICAN PUBLIC SERVICE PROVISION

Besides a few exceptions (e.g. Álvarez *et al*., 2008; Heinrich, 2016), most of what we know about administrative burdens comes from studies conducted in the US and Western Europe (ibid.: 408). Studies on the trajectories of democratisation in developing countries often focuses on political transformations and general administrative reforms (e.g. Arellano Gault, 1999; Pardo, 2010; Dussauge Laguna, 2011; Pardo & Cejudo, 2016), and less on street-level public service provision.

Furthermore, the lack of understanding of how bureaucracies work in developing countries may also limit the development of a more comprehensive theoretical framework. This article is explorative. The empirical data used to formulate the theory of low-trust bureaucracy comes from five small case studies of administrative burdens in Mexico.

Case studies are a logical research strategy for two reasons: it fits the need for citizen-based insights within the administrative burdens approach, and it serves the purpose of identifying plausible causal mechanisms to understand these citizen experiences (Gerring, 2007: 44). Furthermore, two or more cases enable the identification of comparative patterns (Yin, 2009: 60). 'Theoretical sampling' has been used for the selection of the cases – both in terms of topics and quantity. Data is collected for the specific objective to generate theory, not for population representativeness, as is the case with statistical sampling in hypothetical-deductive research (Eisenhardt, 1989: 537). This strategy is especially useful for describing and understanding "uncharted areas" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008: 145). The two main criteria for theoretical sampling are the usefulness of data for developing a theory and 'theoretical saturation' for determining how much data needs to be collected (Corbin & Strauss, 2008: 145). The five cases in this research are all examples of administrative burdens in Mexico as seen through the eyes of citizens.

The cases have been prepared by students of CIDE's doctoral and master's programme in public administration. The students were asked to select a case of administrative burdens from their own personal experience or from their own research projects. The cases meet the first criteria of theoretical sampling. The iterative process between the case descriptions and emerging theoretical patterns (Yanow, 2000: 84) has led to new insights in the nature of Mexican public administration. However, given the exploratory nature of this study, the point of theoretical saturation might not yet have been reached. Additional research can add significant new insights for the theory developed here. The cases were made according to the first three steps of the research method developed by De Jong (2016: 125-126) to study bureaucratic dysfunction from the citizen experience. The first step is the selection of a case of a state-citizen encounter that is exemplary for a broader problem or affects a broader target group. Second, a

narrative is reconstructed from the citizen perspective alongside a factual description of the process or procedure. And third, a broader understanding of the origins of the problem is developed through document analysis and several interviews with civil servants involved. The case narratives are presented below in a strongly truncated version. The analysis focuses on three elements: 1) the costs of the administrative burden and the public values at stake, 2) explanation for the administrative burden, and 3) citizen responses or reactions to their encounter.

Case 1. A labyrinth and a coyote – or: how bureaucratic opacity triggers informal workarounds

Jesús runs a small company that helps businesses with audio-visual material for websites and social media. Seeking to expand his business, he consults the website of a public fund for young entrepreneurs. Jesús creates an account and consults the information on the available funds. However, there seems to be no way to actually start an application procedure. Disappointed he decides to let it go. Only months later, after talking to some people with experience in applying for funds, he tries again. Again unable to find what he is looking for, he sends an email to the institute's helpdesk — only to be replied by what seems to be an automatically generated message.

During a new attempt six months later, Jesús learns he needs a fiscal identification number —a procedure he cannot do online and will take him a full day at the Ministry of Finance—. Furthermore, Jesús has to present a detailed business plan to apply for funding —something he has zero experience with—. When Jesús complains to a friend of his girlfriend about his experiences, he tells him that "I know a friend of a friend that can help you find your way through the bureaucratic labyrinth. It's easy", the friend says, "this sort of people arranges the funding for you and in return you pay them 50% as their fee". Jesús feels frustrated. "Why do I have to pay somebody 50%? Why do I need a 'coyote'[3] for something that should be a service?"

[3] Coyote' is a common reference in Mexico to people who help get access to places or benefits otherwise beyond reach, for instance because of bureaucratic inaction of procedural opacity. They are the informal fixers of bureaucratic complexity.

Analysis

Jesús faces several administrative burdens in his quest to obtain a public fund. Among those are failing technology (the website without application tools), lack of response to his questions, learning costs, and a general opacity of the procedures. The civil servants directly involved adopt a very legalistic attitude during the research. The organisation's focus is not the client, but the internal order of formalised communication with the outside world and detailed application procedures. The individual costs of these bureaucratic burdens are time wasted, inability to access funds to which Jesús is likely entitled to, and setbacks in expanding his business. If he decides to use the services of the 'coyote', he will also lose a large part of the financial resources he can acquire through the public fund. On a collective level, this sort of practices can affect economic productivity and entrepreneurship negatively. Moreover, the presence of 'coyotes' is likely to negatively affect citizens' trust in fair treatment.

Case 2. The devil in the administrative details –or: how unreasonable enforcement frustrates social impact

Tiberio has a dream. To one day open his own restaurant and do something more than work on his family's cow farm. He has very little education and lives in humble circumstances, just like the vast majority of the people in his village. At a government-organised fair, he hears of a fund for small businesses. "Why not give it a try?", he thinks to himself. He heads down to the fund's main offices in the city, where a helpful civil servant fills in the necessary forms to apply for a 100.000 pesos funding to open a restaurant. Five weeks later, he goes back to hand in several requested documents. Another few weeks later, Tiberio receives the decision that his application is approved. Two days later, the 100.000 pesos is on his bank account. Tiberio's restaurant is up and running in a matter of months.

Two years later, however, the unthinkable happens: the fund demands a full return of the 100.000 pesos. When Tibero handed over the invoices for the refrigerator and dishwasher he bought (as part of the fund's compliance criteria), he was informed that the product guarantee papers had to be included as well —which he did not have,

or at least could not find anymore—. "Honestly, I had no idea they wanted to see the guarantee", Tiberio recalls. When the fund came to check if Tiberio had spent his funds properly, they found a fully functioning restaurant with five tables, a cook, and two waiters. However, Tiberio was again unable to provide the requested guarantee papers, after which the fund officially demanded all the money back —leaving Tiberio in disbelief: "They saw my restaurant. They saw it functioning. And now they want all the money back because of an administrative detail. I am afraid they will take everything away from me, because there is no way I can pay 100.000 back. I can barely pay for a lawyer to handle the case".

Analysis

Government's ambition to make small entrepreneurs more responsible is translated into strict bureaucratic criteria of conditionality. Furthermore, the rigidity and unresponsiveness of the enforcement can be traced back to an organisational culture that defines its task in terms of rule compliance rather than social outcomes. Formally speaking, Tiberio did not comply with the conditions stipulated for beneficiaries. However, from a public value perspective the treatment of Tiberio is very harsh and counterproductive. First of all, Tiberio faces financial costs: he has to pay for a lawyer and might even be forced to pay back as much as he can. It is clear, however, that the costs extend far beyond that. The business and social mobility of Tiberio is at stake. He was left frustrated and scared. Entrepreneurship is broken in the button. And public resources are wasted, because similar lawsuits —over 13.000 cases have been filed in six years, or 37% of all beneficiaries— usually end in 'lost funds': a judge may formally convict the recipient of a fund, but it is practically impossible to reclaim money that is already spent. It was only when a new government came into power that all these cases —including Tiberio's— were dropped altogether.

Case 3. Bureaucratic inaction and collective muscle – or: how individual rights are crushed by bureaucratic discretion

In August 2015, a group of 150 domestic workers from across Mexico hold their first General Assembly to form a union for domestic workers. There are an estimated 2.4 million domestic workers in Mexico, most of them (around 96%) working without a formal contract. A union would allow them to bargain collectively over wages, benefits, and working conditions. The preparations for the General Assembly took about a year and would not have been possible without specialised legal expertise, which was provided by a German NGO. The only formal step left right now is a procedure known as 'toma de nota' (literally; 'take note'), which means that the local labour authorities formally acknowledge the receipt of all necessary documents.

The legal requirement for the 'toma de nota' is to have a minimum of 20 workers present proof of employment, along with the minutes of the union's founding General Assembly. The paperwork for this procedure is sometimes accepted without much ado. In other cases, verification of employment and identity is heavily scrutinised. This can include inspectors visiting worksites, sending back assembly minutes for failure to comply with a format, and even sending the list of employees to their employers, which (in extreme cases) can lead to the firing of employees. Especially for workplaces with a high turnover and no formal contracts, such as domestic workers or tip-only workers, long procedures complicate proving employment. In the case of the domestic workers union, months after the formal application no action had been taken by the local labour authorities. It was only after the mayor of Mexico City, for whom domestic workers are a target demographic for his social policy programme, publicly complained that the bureaucratic wheels were set in motion. The 'toma de nota' was officially granted on March 8, 2016.

Analysis

Establishing a labour union is a time-consuming affair and requires specific legal expertise. And even at the end, bureaucratic inaction can block the registration of a new union. Interviews with civil servants and people involved with the establishment of the

domestic workers union suggest that this type of administrative burden can be traced back to a lack of openness towards 'outsiders'. Unlike unions that have been operating in the system for decades, newcomers experience the procedures as opaque and are treated with suspicion by those who have controlled the system to their benefit and intend to continue doing so. This might be because newcomers are potential competitors, or simply because the bureaucracy sees them as disruptors of an internal order. In these cases, overcoming bureaucratic inaction is only be possible with enough collective muscle through which you can make yourself difficult to ignore by influential managers or politicians.

Case 4. Signatures and delays – or: how the slow wheels of bureaucracy cripple entrepreneurship

The research centre of one of Mexico's national universities has recently established an office for technology transfer. The office functions as an intermediary between researchers and businesses and helps researchers with patent registration and business plans. In this capacity, it helped doctor Arriaga, a specialist in genetics and molecular biology, obtain several patents and a budget of 2 million pesos for commercialisation activities from the national council for science and technology. After realising this, doctor Arriaga had not expected that the internal bureaucracy of her university would prove almost fatal for her attempts at commercialisation.

She intends to use part of the budget to hire researchers for further lab tests. For this, she needs a signature from her management, from the technology transfer agency, and finally from the general management of the university. When this is finally completed, the administrative department still has to transfer the resources to doctor Arriaga. Only then can she access the funds and pay her researchers. However, in order to quickly follow-up on the interest of commercial parties, she already hired several researchers. They were told in advance that their first pay check might arrive a bit later. After six months, however, she sees no other option than to start paying the researchers out of her own pocket. To get this reimbursed she will, ironically, have to go through

another procedure. Doctor Arriaga wonders if the possible gains of commercialisation are worth all this trouble.

Analysis

This case shows that delays and burdens can bite a citizen quite unexpectedly. Doctor Arriaga suffered most from the bureaucracy in her own organisation. The delays she faced to access her budget eventually led to financial costs and to income uncertainty for the researchers she hired. At a collective level, it can hamper innovation and the efficient use of public funds. This type of administrative burden can be traced back to excessive formalisation, which shows itself in various forms: the number of signatures needed, the lack of correspondence between procedural lead times and what reality demands, and the inability of users (such as doctor Arriaga) to pressure the organisation.

Case 5. Islands of responsibility – or: how government bites its own tail through fragmentation and formalism

Edgardo owns a small IT-company. For one of his projects —smart traffic lights to improve safety and reduce traffic jams— he works together with a public research institute. Together, they seek the financial support of a government fund. The fund's compliance criteria appear to be quite reasonable: show that you spend money only on necessary products and services, and that you will deliver on time. However, problems arise when Edgardo wants to buy technological equipment. Apart from the funds criteria, he also has to apply with government tender criteria and the research institute's procedures. First, Edgardo has to show the public research institute that the requested equipment was not already available and that its use would not damage the institute's facilities. Only after this procedure was completed would the institute make a request to check for available resources at the government fund. And then Edgardo still had to comply with public tender criteria, including comparing prices of various providers and submitting them to a government website.

A six-month delay is the result, which places a lot of pressure on Edgardo to complete his project in the period set for him by the public fund. After months of barely

being able to make progress, he now has to work day and night to meet the deadline. His partner at the public research institute tells him this happens all the time. He has seen various projects abandoned because of administrative delays. Edgardo is amazed that procedures are so poorly coordinated that it is virtually impossible to comply with all of them simultaneously.

Analysis

Edgardo found himself stuck between governmental regulations: a public fund determines compliance criteria, public tender criteria need to be followed for large purchases, and a public research institute has its own procedures. These formal procedures may be complicated by themselves, but especially cause problems because of the long and uncoordinated nature of their lead times. This leaves Edgardo in serious risk of not meeting the deadline of his project and thereby losing his funding. Governmental fragmentation and formalism creates 'islands of responsibility'. No single actor is responsible for the entire procedure or for the outcome. Burdens are pushed towards the user, who must be patient but also know how to improvise. It might also disincentive citizens to apply for available services. On a collective level, government bites its own tail: the efforts of one organisation are nullified by the regulations of other organisations.

3. LOW-TRUST BUREAUCRACY

Conceptualising low-trust bureaucracy

In all cases, bureaucratic procedures are highly unpredictable and unreliable for their users. What looks like a properly designed procedure, a functioning website, a successful application, or a clearly formulated law can be frustrated for a variety of reasons, including dysfunctional technology, rigid enforcement of rules, lack of coordination between agencies, poorly designed procedures, unresponsive and indifferent civil servants, or more deliberate administrative burdens to prevent unlawful use of services or overburdening of underfunded government organisations.

In the case studies we saw the following elements in the bureaucratic experience of citizens:

- Opacity and irresponsiveness: procedures and organisations are inaccessible and unintelligible
- Unreasonableness and legalism: internal rules and control take precedence over social consequences
- Discretion and inaction: privilege and collective muscle determine bureaucratic behaviour just as much as formal procedures do
- Delays and hierarchy: formalities get in the way of social outcomes and efficiency
- Formalism and fragmentation: lack of coordination and cooperation leaves citizen stuck between organisations

These administrative burdens cause significant costs for citizens in their attempts to access services —if they manage to get access at all. Burdens sometimes come in the form of compliance costs, such as the restaurant owner who is faced with strict conditions for a cash transfer, or in the form of financial costs, such as the researcher who has to pay her assistants in advance—. What is interesting, however, is that especially the psychological and learning costs are very high in every case. It takes time to understand opaque procedures and irresponsive organisations, such as the student trying to obtain funding. And it takes tenacity to deal with unpredictable and unreliable procedures, such as a labour union trying to overcome bureaucratic inaction. If we add up these compliance, psychological, and learning costs we see significant collective costs for both citizens and government. Entrepreneurship and innovation are crippled and public funds remain unused or are used ineffectively. Perhaps even more damaging is the harmful effect dysfunctional bureaucracy seems to have on citizen trust in government and on the ability of the state to reduce rather than exacerbate existing social inequality.

Therefore, I propose to understand Mexican public bureaucracies —and, by extension, bureaucracies in similar countries— as 'low-trust bureaucracies', which are characterised by an unreliable access to public services and high levels of control

towards both users and bureaucrats. They can be found everywhere where citizens and state interact over rights and obligations —ranging from health services to police and from municipalities to schools— and where these rights and obligations are subject to unreliable, unreasonable and unpredictable procedures and bureaucratic behaviour. More specific, a low-trust bureaucracy has two faces:

- Citizens cannot trust the bureaucracy to provide them with what they are entitled to: there is a high probability of encountering a barrier during a bureaucratic procedure that complicates or limits access to rights and benefits.
- The bureaucracy does not trust citizens nor its employees: there are high administrative burdens to maintain internal order and to check for illegitimate access or fraud by citizens and bureaucrats.

Low-trust bureaucracies are part of a broader cultural and administrative context. Following Fukuyama (1995), trust can be defined as "the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behaviour" (1995: 26). 'Low trust societies', in which behavioural norms are unclear and unpredictable, tend to emphasise family and kinship[4] over more impersonal economic and governmental institutions, which hampers their ability to develop collective action (Fukuyama, 1995). These societies are often associated with social inequality, corruption, and more general issues regarding the rule of law. Mexico qualifies as a typical 'low trust society' with only 12% of the population having faith in others, according to 2014 OECD data[5]

[4] For instance, about half of Mexico's working population is employed in the informal sector where small family businesses are most common (http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/americas/a-tale-of-two-mexicos).

[5] http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/8116131e.pdf?expires=1497981966&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=C2869EF0C34E815A85220B82233F0B2D

and a mere 24% having trust in government.[6] Especially low is the trust in politicians, police, unions,[7] as well as the state in general[8].

Trust is an important element in the functioning of public institutions. Proper functioning institutions are necessary to further societal trust: people feel more secure in their interactions with others when they know their rights, such as property rights and an independent judiciary, will be protected (Kaase, 1999). However, institutions also need the public's trust to properly function. Political participation, tax returns, and compliance with laws and procedures depend on people's trust in institutions to pursue public interests. Studies show that trust is negatively affected by institutional ineffectiveness, failure to meet citizens demands, corruption, and waste of public resources (e.g. Beramendi *et al*., 2016; Wang, 2016).

Operational mechanisms of a low-trust bureaucracy

Low trust as a defining characteristic of Mexican public bureaucracies shows that the administrative burdens that citizens face run deeper than human errors or benign neglect. Furthermore, the burdens also do not necessarily follow from political strategies or malevolence – even though corruption is undeniably a problem in Mexico's public sector,[9] and adds another layer of complexity (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016).[10] Instead, the cases suggest that low trust is a structural characteristic of public bureaucracies. Based on the cases and literature, three operational mechanisms can be identified to explain the administrative burdens produced by low-trust bureaucracies:

[6] See the Edelman annual trust barometer, which scores institutions based on indicators of citizen expectations regarding integrity, engagement, working for the public good, efficient and transparent operations, and quality output. Results for 2017: http://www.edelman.com/global-results/

[7] http://eleconomista.com.mx/sociedad/2016/11/27/hilan-siete-anos-bajas-credibilidad

[8] 67% of the population has little or no trust in the state, according to the 2015 Latinobarómetro: http://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp.

[9] Mexico ranks 123rd out of 176 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2016, (https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016).

[10] Corruption further adds to already low levels of trust of citizens towards bureaucracies and bureaucrats. However, there is also a circular relation: low trust bureaucracies constitute a moral hazard for corruption, since citizens will seek alternative ways of getting what they are or believe to be entitled to (see discussion of citizen responses further on in this paper).

- Control: the access to public services is subjected to strict forms of control and verification. Administrative burdens can be deliberately put in place to make corruption more difficult – such as prohibiting the direct payment for services to civil servants or introducing 'double' verification to prevent non-eligible people from acquiring services through befriended or bribed civil servants. However, excessive control can also be an expression of classic rule-bound and rigid bureaucratic behaviour, which places internal order over service orientation.

- Authoritarian legacies: the Mexican civil service was originally not designed for efficiency or universal access to public services. As is typical for many Latin American countries, authoritarian legacies continue to affect the functioning of the state, both at political and street-level (Méndez, 1997; Cesarini & Hite, 2004). Jorge Nef (2003), who denounces the 'culture of distrust' in public institutions, identifies five common expressions of these legacies:
    - Particularism: a tendency towards personal loyalties and personal favours instead of the bureaucratic adage to work 'sine ira et studio'.
    - Formalism: hierarchical and rigid behaviour as expressions of power and prestige.
    - Discretion: operational autonomy for functionaries to determine who will get a favourable treatment.
    - Corporatism: the bureaucracy as a means to 'capture' and control social groups/civil society, and where influence, employment, and access depends on group membership and collective muscle (such as unions or economic elites) rather than individual rights.
    - Centralism: decisions and responsibilities flow from the top downwards, implying, among other things, a culture of instruction and inward-looking.

- Coping with limited capacity: public bureaucracies, their managers, and their staff develop coping mechanisms for structural shortages in funding and

staffing. Administrative burdens are deliberately raised to manage overdemand. This includes asking for financial or practical contributions from users (anything from buying your own lab jars to providing food for relatives in a hospital), introducing waiting lists and queues to manage demand, and sticking to formal working instructions to prevent time-consuming interaction with citizens.

Citizen reactions to low-trust bureaucracy

In a high-trust bureaucracy, citizens can expect to get access to what they are entitled to in a fairly efficient way. This type of bureaucracy helps to level to societal playing field, because it treats all citizens in a fair and equal manner.[11] A low-trust bureaucracy, by contrast, turns state-citizen interactions into a highly unpredictable affair. As the case studies have shown, citizens deal with this unpredictability in a number of ways. These can, in turn, enforce the mechanisms of low-trust bureaucracy. With a nod to Hirschman's (1970) famous distinction between exit, voice, and loyalty as possible reactions to declining organisational performance, three different citizen responses to unpredictable and unreliable public services can be distinguished:

- Avoidance: citizens choose not to interact with public bureaucracies because of the expected administrative burdens or lack of trust that benefits and services can be obtained. For instance, fear of arbitrary enforcement can stop people from applying to funds, and crimes are not reported because of high administrative burdens and lack of trust that follow-up action will be taken. A different form of 'exit' occurs among the more affluent citizens: they avoid public services and opt for costly, but better and more reliable, private alternatives in health care and education.
- Resourcefulness: people seek alternative ways to obtain a preferential treatment when formal procedures are unreliable or burdensome. A first

[11] This does not mean that high-trust bureaucracies are free of administrative burdens. Just as low-trust bureaucracies are not doomed to produce dysfunctionality, so high-trust bureaucracies are not guaranteed to produce public value. We should not consider high-trust and low-trust bureaucracies as the only two possible categories, but rather place bureaucracies on a continuum from low-trust to high-trust.

strategy is the use of people who – for financial compensation – facilitate access to services because of their knowledge of complex procedures, personal contacts with civil servants, or use of bribery (cf. Becker, 2014: 10). Second, there are more obvious ways of fraud and bribery of (and by) street-level bureaucrats to speed up procedures, gain illegal access to services, or skip formal procedures. A third option is the use of collective leverage: unions, business elites, civil organisations or personal networks are often more successful in pressuring local authorities and getting access to benefits than individual citizens are.

- Acceptance: if avoidance and informal resources are not available or realistic (for instance, because procedures are mandatory), there is little left to do than accept administrative burdens as they are. Patience and perseverance are crucial 'skills' for dealing with a low-trust bureaucracy. Spending large amounts of time going through paperwork, visiting offices multiple times, and standing in line constitute the daily experience of citizen-state interaction for many Mexicans.

Conclusions

The concept of low-trust bureaucracy adds a new element to our understanding of administrative burdens and administrative exclusion. Structural organisational mechanisms rather than benign neglect or political strategies lie at the root of unnecessary and unjustified burdens. These are the tangible artefacts of an administrative context in which control and hierarchy rather than service-orientation is emphasised, in which unresponsiveness and indifference can thrive, and in which lack of funding produces a daily quest for organisational survival. The costs for both individual citizens and for society in general are high. In a material sense, low-trust bureaucracy costs large amounts of time, which is often also time not spent on economic productivity. However, the immaterial costs might be even higher. If citizens cannot rely on public bureaucracies to properly provide them with what they are entitled to, social and political rights, social mobility, and trust in government and the state will suffer.

Furthermore, the concept of low-trust bureaucracy fills a gap in our understanding of the specific nature of administrative practices in developing countries. Most studies in Latin American public administration focus on administrative reforms and political cultures. Instead, this article has focused on the experience of citizens with a low-trust bureaucracy. In the classic Weberian conceptualisation, bureaucracy's most important quality is predictability in process and outcome (Gajduschek, 2003). In traditional high-trust societies, such as in North-Western Europe, interpersonal trust and trust in government are enforced by strong institutions of the rule of law. These institutions level the societal playing field. They can be relied upon to give every citizen what he is entitled to, to enforce laws regardless of who you are, and to work in a fairly efficient and responsive way. In the Mexican context, the institutions of the state cannot be blindly trusted to produce unprivileged, universal, and equal treatment of all citizens.

The explorative nature of this article implies the need for further research to reach a fuller understanding of 'low-trust bureaucracy'. How much variety is there in

levels of trust and trustworthy service delivery, and what explains this variety? How does corruption fit into this general concept of low trust? And what are ways forward to improve reliability in public service delivery in Mexico and elsewhere? Currently, low-trust bureaucracies seem stuck in a deadlock situation: how to build a trustworthy system out of a system that cannot be trusted? An example of this deadlock are the bribes that transit police officers are known to take. Officers might engage in this behaviour for some extra income on top of their meagre salary. However, under the current circumstances, this practice is also in the interest of those being bribed. The alternative —having your car impounded and going through very lengthy bureaucratic procedures— is costlier than paying the bribe and being able to continue your journey. Collective action and systemic change is needed to alter these behavioural incentives.

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