

Unexpected translations in urban policy mobility.

**The case of the Acahualinca Development
Programme in Managua, Nicaragua**

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Abstract

Implementation gaps between policy goals and outcomes are of increasing concern in practice and research. We explore the translation chains through which urban policies become mobile and are translated into practice. Informed by the city management and policy mobility literature, we conduct a case study of La Chureca, the rubbish dump and slum of Managua, Nicaragua, and its renewal programme. The Acahualinca Programme was implemented via translation chains enacted by many policy translators. It was translated into residents' and waste collectors' interests, its language packaged in artefacts such as prototypes in order to travel. It was made mobile via relational sites or situations providing safe and accessible connections with Chureca residents. Paradoxically, these places also allowed extraordinary connections between actors located in different scales and spaces, facilitating unexpected local community resistance. Although the Program ultimately remained almost unalterable in content, resistance unexpectedly transformed residents from passive policy transmitters into active policy actors in making the city. We conclude that policy implementation cannot be seen as the scripted translation of plans into reality, but as an uncontrollable process in which multiple translations twist policies and plans from below. The significant question is therefore not whether plans succeed, but how they succeed.

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Introduction

Both policymaking and research are concerned with the “implementation gap” between policy goals and how they are achieved. In practice, policies and their implementation are not separate categories; instead, as recent research into both policy mobilities and city management demonstrates, policy implementation involves the complex translation of goals, policies, and plans into life. Policies are moved and mutated (Allen & Cochrane, 2010; Cochrane, 2007, 2011; McCann & Ward, 2012, 2013), translated, changed, and localized in new organizational contexts (Czarniawska, 2002, 2010, 2013).

This paper aims at exploring the chains of translations through which urban policies are made mobile and mutable (McCann & Ward, 2012, 2013) – in other words, how urban policies work and are translated into practice. By combining the policy mobility and city management literatures (Clegg & Kornberger, 2006; Czarniawska, 2002, 2010; Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005; Kornberger & Carter, 2010), the paper also aims to bring together two research fields that share a relational understanding of space and organizing but that have so far remained separate communities of practice.

The paper is informed by the case of La Chureca, the rubbish dump and slum of Managua, Nicaragua, and its renewal programme, the Barrio Acahualinca Integrated Development Programme (henceforth, “Acahualinca Programme”), funded by the Spanish Agency for International Development Co-

operation and co-implemented by Managua municipality. From 2009 to 2013, the Programme sealed the open dump, constructed a new sanitary landfill, constructed a recycling station where many former informal waste collectors now formally work for the municipality, and built new housing for slum residents (Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2012a,b, 2013).

The paper demonstrates that, in the process of translation, the Acahualinca Programme both shaped and was shaped by the policy recipients. Despite initial compliance with the Programme, at the final stage of implementation, and under pressure to secure both households and jobs, local La Chureca actors enacted a myriad of unexpected small acts of defiance and resistance, changes, and transformations. The paper also examines the roles of local actors (e.g., politicians, local NGOs, municipal officers, slum dwellers, and waste collectors) acting as Programme translators, their translations, and the relational sites where the Programme is mutated and made mobile – in other words, translated.

Theoretical framework

Policy implementation involves the complex translation of goals, policies, and plans into life. To analyse and understand the terms and conditions of this translation, the paper is informed by a combination of the literature on policy mobilities from geography and city management and the literature on the travel of ideas from organization studies. Recent research in both organization studies and geography based on a relational understanding of both space and organizing has shifted the focus from policy transfer to policy mobility as this is “how policies move from one place to another, being assembled, disassembled, and reassembled along the way” (McCann & Ward, 2012, p. 43).

In both traditions, the travel of models and policies cannot be reduced to the simple compliance, assimilation, and appropriation of programmes transferred from, for example, North to South. Instead, policies are also locally contested and eventually localized, either overtly or covertly. Local actors (e.g., city managers and community leaders) can create new spaces in which to interpret, adapt, and twist these projects to local needs, meanings, and interests (Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2012b, 2014).

Policy planning and policy implementation entail connecting and stabilizing a network of collective actions, often intermediated by translators (Czarniawska, 2002), such as consultants who translate technique and knowledge into plans, or by politicians who transform citizen needs into policies. In development studies, development translators are “skilled brokers (managers, consultants, fieldworkers and community leaders) who read the meaning of a project into the different institutional languages of its stakeholder supporters, constantly creating interest and making it real” (Mosse, 2005, p. 9). Through translation, interests become interlocked, making development projects and policies, such as the Acahualinca Programme, become real. These translations can either shift or perpetuate power dynamics between and within global and local actors and can therefore lead either towards greater social, economic, and environmental justice (Zapata Cam-

pos & Zapata, 2013), or towards “tyranny from below” in which the “grasstops” (Briggs, 2008) and their leadership block progress and control or capture benefits intended for the poor, misusing them for private interests (de Wit & Berner, 2009). From this perspective, in the process of policy-making, new and unexpected circuits of knowledge, power, and identity emerge in these global “scapes” (Appaddurai, 1996).

Relational sites or situations (McCann & Ward, 2012, 2013) provide space for connections between actors and their actions and therefore for policies and plans to move forward. Moreover, plans and policies cannot travel until they are simplified, abstracted, embodied, and inscribed, as only bodies or things can move in time and space (Czarniawska, 2002). In the translation process, in other words, in the implementation of plans and programmes, an idea is disembedded from its institutional surroundings, packaged into an object, translated and unpacked to fit a new context, translated locally into a new practice, and then re-embedded (Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2014).

Methodology

This paper is based on a case study (Flyvbjerg, 2011) conducted in the La Chureca rubbish dump and slum and examining the Acahualinca Programme. The research was qualitative (Silverman, 2006), based on over one hundred semi-structured interviews as well as on meeting observation, workshop participation, and programme document analysis. We gathered our data during four field visits to Managua, i.e., December 2009–March 2010, December 2010–February 2011, July to August 2012, and November to December 2013, and in April 2010 we conducted field visits to some of the Madrid-based international organizations involved in the Programme.

On the first visit to Managua, our focus was on how La Chureca became the object of an international development aid programme, the Acahualinca Programme (see Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2012), to learn how the Programme was initiated and formulated and by whom. On the second and third visits, we concentrated on what had happened during the intervening time, more specifically, on how the Programme was translated to become part of the Managua’s city management during its implementation, by whom, and with what implications. When visiting the headquarters of the involved organizations, we concentrated on the relationship between the field offices and headquarters when formulating and implementing the Programme. When talking to residents and waste collectors, we focused on what the Programme meant to them and their context. On the fourth visit, we focused on what had and had not been done, what had been left out by the Programme, the Programme’s implications, and how new programmes have given continuity to the Programme.

Throughout our fieldwork, we conducted personal interviews with key actors related to La Chureca and the Acahualinca Programme, including local politicians, municipal and ministry officers, local and international NGO managers and mid-management functionaries, representatives of civil society organiza-

tions, local community members, community leaders, waste collectors, informal settlement residents, journalists, and consultants.

As we wanted to follow the policy's translations into practice, we used the "following the policy" technique (Peck & Theodore, 2012), conducting "investigations of those multisited social processes through which policy rationales, rationalities, and routines are constructed and reconstructed, made and unmade ... In practical methodological terms, this means connecting the (rarely pristine) places of policy invention not only with spaces of circulation and centers of translation, but also with the prosaic netherworlds of policy implementation" (Peck & Theodore, 2012, p. 25). The data analysis started with Acahualinca Programme implementation in Managua during the studied period. Then, as McCann and Ward (2012) suggest in their study of policy mobilities, we traced the connections of the Programme back in time to reconstruct how it became a programme, following how La Chureca was translated into words, images, and numbers by journalists, NGOs, and other carriers and travelled to other places and times. In the process, La Chureca was translated by a local action network from a local blight into a global representation of urban distress.

Following the translation process (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1996, p. 46), we focused on how the Acahualinca Programme travelled back from Madrid to Managua city management and then to La Chureca: how the Programme was disembedded from its institutional surroundings, packaged into objects, translated and unpacked to fit the new context, and translated locally into a new practice, i.e., re-embedded. In previous papers, we have examined the role of international and local NGOs, the City of Managua, and municipal officers as translators of the Acahualinca Program (Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2012a,b). In the present paper, the focus shifts towards the translations enacted by residents, community leaders, and other community-based organizations such as trade unions and citizen power councils (CPCs) in the final stage of Programme implementation.

In analysing our findings, the data were coded and categorized (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in line with the collective actions that we identified as interconnected in a succession of translations, whereby the Acahualinca Programme was disembedded from Managua city management practice and re-embedded in the La Chureca dump and settlement.

The case: La Chureca and the Acahualinca programme

This section describes the process of formulating and implementing the Acahualinca Programme (summarized in Table 1): first, La Chureca travelled and emerged as an NGO project; it then became an urban renewal programme of the Spanish Agency for International Development Co-operation (AECID); this AECID programme in turn became part of Managua city management practice; the initiative was finally translated into new houses, jobs, and infrastructure.

1990–	Local NGOs such as Dos Generaciones start operating at La Chureca rubbish slum
2007	The Spanish NGO Solidaridad Internacional starts a project in partnership with Dos Generaciones and funded by AECID
July 2007	The Spanish First Vice President visits La Chureca and commits to funding a development aid project
27 October 2008	AECID and Managua local government (ALMA) sign an agreement to fund the Acahualinca Programme
2008	Tragsa, a Spanish public engineering company, is entrusted with formulating the programme in detail
2008–2009	Two workshops for local stakeholders are held to support Programme formulation
November 2008	Municipal elections are held in Managua; new politicians and public officers are elected and appointed
November 2009	The ownership status of the land was clarified and Tragsa starts construction at La Chureca
December 2009	A new AECID Nicaragua general coordinator starts work
2010	New Programme leadership is appointed by ALMA; internal changes occur in AECID Nicaragua with the arrival of the new general coordinator
July 2011	The first houses are delivered to La Chureca dwellers
December 2012	The recycling station starts operating
January 2013	All houses are delivered and the old La Chureca slum is bulldozed

Table 1 Key events and actors in the Acahualinca Programme.

Translating La Chureca into the Acahualinca programme

Until recently, La Chureca was the open rubbish dump of Managua and home to about 300 families living in a slum named after the dump. Approximately 2000 waste collectors – women, men, and children – worked daily at La Chureca, exposed to toxins and contaminants. In addition, the conditions under which the rubbish was mismanaged at the dump caused heavy contamination of nearby Lake Xolotlán, affecting the health and environmental safety not only of La Chureca’s residents but of the whole metropolitan region of Managua.

Since the early 1990s, a number of international and national NGOs committed themselves to alleviating this situation of extreme poverty. Over the years, these NGOs succeeded in problematizing La Chureca in the national and international mass media (e.g., travel blogs, social media, television, and newspapers). In August 2007, La Chureca was visited by the Spanish First Vice President during a tour to the region, where she committed to “ending” La Chureca by funding the Acahualinca Programme. After that, La Chureca was officially put on the political agenda of Managua city management as a development aid programme (Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2012a).

In 2008 a long participatory process was conducted to help formulate the Acahualinca Programme. AECID entrusted the Spanish public engineering company, Tragsa, with the detailed formulation of the Programme and with constructing both the new sanitary landfill and the waste recycling station at La Chureca.

After municipal elections in Managua in autumn 2008, the mayor, councilors, and main public officers were changed and a new political team took over. In 2009, the new city authorities started a process of reformulating, appropriating, and taking ownership of the Acahualinca Programme. With the arrival of a new AECID Nicaragua general coordinator at the end of 2009, AECID came to support the change in city leadership and the transfer of the Programme to Managua city management. By the beginning of 2010, the Programme's execution, documentation, budget, and design were in the hands of the City of Managua. Through this process of taking ownership and harmonization, the municipality shaped the development aid programme to better fit Managua local government's needs and plans (Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2012b).

Acahualinca Programme implementation relied on the intermediation of NGOs operating in La Chureca, grassroots organizations such as trade unions, CPCs, the 12 elected community leaders, and La Chureca's residents and workers as Programme beneficiaries. These actors provided safe introductions to La Chureca for city planners, aid workers, and researchers (like ourselves) by giving guided tours, offering locations in La Chureca as safe spaces for meetings between locals and outsiders, helping contact the community, building trust in outsiders, and sharing knowledge of the cultural context needed in order to adapt and implement the Programme.

The Acahualinca programme and the community leaders

The "12 community leaders" had been elected in 2009 as representatives of La Chureca residents at the request of the Acahualinca Programme in order to have partners in the community able to communicate activities and design certain Programme activities. They were elected as representatives of various social groups: young people, elderly people, women, CPCs, and the CNT and Movimiento Comunal trade unions. They met as often as every 15 days when required by the Programme. Two community leaders were assigned to each of the five sections (50–60 residents each) in which the La Chureca residents had been organized. The community leaders also held meetings with residents to inform them of Programme progress, especially concerning the houses and the recycling plant.

Some international and national NGOs criticized the haste with which the community leaders were elected, arguing that they were not skilled as leaders and, in some cases, not representative of the community. According to many interviewees, the 12 community leaders were closer to constituting a top-down information dissemination mechanism than being truly participatory community-based representatives: the communications they handled occurred mostly in one direction – from the local government to the community.

However, in the four years of Acahualinca Programme implementation, the 12 community leaders grew into their new role. They acknowledged the need to improve their social and participatory skills and learned to surmount individual differences without conflict. They also gained the social and communication skills needed to deal with residents, municipal and aid officers, other community leaders, and outsiders.

As the Acahualinca Programme evolved, the latent conflicts between it and the community became more overt. The beneficiaries were worried that their income would decrease when the recycling plant started working: only one member of each family could work there (whereas all could scavenge at the dump) resulting in lower family earnings. They would also have to pay for basic services such as water, sewage disposal, waste collection, and electricity, which had previously been illegally obtained: “The house is worth nothing if I can’t pay for light and water. I prefer to stay in this hut and continue to have a job” (La Chureca resident). The residents and community leaders who had initially supported the Programme, acting as informants, voiced dissenting opinions when the Programme was approaching its end and houses and jobs had to be assigned, breaking with the initial discourse of uniform gratitude and harmony.

The community leaders who diverged from full compliance with the Acahualinca Programme challenged its manager’s authority in several ways. For example, the CPC representative complained to the city district political representative about how the Programme was being managed. However, the strong political ties between the Programme’s manager and the Sandinista Party elite derailed this attempt (interview with community leader and CPC representative). The community leaders were aware of the Programme’s long command and information chains, so some community leaders tried to get information about the Programme by circumventing them. For example, they tried to contact the former Spanish aid worker in charge of the socio-economic parts of the Programme, or even the AECID Nicaragua general coordinator, whom they phoned (to his mobile phone) to get further information when they were dissatisfied with how the Programme was being managed by the municipality. Programme management forbade the community leaders from contacting the former Spanish aid worker.

La Chureca’s waste collectors, organized by the FNT trade union, reacted with demonstrations and physical force to the implementation of the Acahualinca Programme. In 2012, when the house construction was delayed and the Programme’s manager did not inform the community as requested, the FNT together with several community leaders called a press conference to lobby the Programme’s management (interview with trade union representative). The FNT’s ability to mobilize the waste collectors to strike and demonstrate has been demonstrated several times over the years of Programme implementation, for example, when Managua was flooded with waste because the waste collectors prevented the trucks from entering La Chureca. The strength of the FNT is bolstered by its entrenchment in the Sandinista Party, which relies on the union’s mobilizing ability for national and local political activities.

In January 2013, 500 waste collectors started working at the new La Chureca waste recycling plant and 300 families moved into their new houses. Despite plans to close the landfill, part of it was temporally and informally still open (January 2014) for waste scavenging as an intermediate solution to compensate those who did not benefit directly from the new jobs. Although a two-metre-high wall has been built around the perimeter of the La Chureca landfill to deter illegal scavengers, over 300 of them continue working at the landfill. The police arrested some of them on various occasions in 2013 to discourage ongoing illegal scavenging. However, the workers at the waste recycling plant have gone on strike on several occasions in solidarity with the illegal scavengers, many of whom were former colleagues.

Discussion

Policy translators, translations, and relational sites

The Acahualinca Programme was put into practice via chains and circuits of translations enacted by a myriad of policy translators, such as local NGOs operating at La Chureca and Acahualinca, grassroots organizations, community leaders, trade unions, and individual residents (Czarniawska, 2002; McCann & Ward, 2012; Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2013).



Fig. 1. Photo essay, house prototypes, and a model of the landfill.

These policy translators (Czarniawska, 2002; Mosse, 2005) were mediators who could translate the meaning of the Acahualinca Programme into the institutional languages of the involved organizations and groups. In doing this, they

adapted the Programme to various interests and made it real (Mosse, 2005, p. 9). Each adaptation allowed the Programme to move forward in various forms. The local NGOs operating at La Chureca provided safe access to dangerous sites in the local community and initially legitimated the municipality when it started running the Programme. The Programme was translated in terms of the residents' and waste collectors' interests and language by various translators and using various artefacts and devices, packaged into objects in order to travel (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Fig. 1 presents a photo essay compiled by Chureca residents representing the Programme, diverse new house prototypes, a landfill prototype, and the settlement.



Fig. 2. *The La Chureca headquarter of the NGO Funjofudess as a relational site. Photo: María José Zapata Campos.*

The Acahualinca Programme was made mobile and mutable in relational sites or situations (McCann & Ward, 2012), such as local NGOs' headquarters at La Chureca, the "Blue House" (the Programme headquarters at the heart of the slum), or walking tours to La Chureca guided by local residents (see Fig. 2). These relational situations and sites safely and accessibly connected the Programme to the policy beneficiaries, as well as facilitating data collection for researchers like ourselves. These places allowed extraordinary connections between actors located at different scales, levels, and spaces – for example, when

the Spanish First Vice President met waste collectors in one of the poorest open dumps in Latin America, or when waste collectors regularly met the AECID Nicaragua general coordinator and had access to his personal mobile number (Fig. 3) – as “places constituted by assemblages of the near and far, the fixed and the mobile” (McCann & Ward, 2012, p. 47). The making of the city is reproduced by the efforts of actors located at different scales and levels, in different spaces (e.g., Madrid or Managua) (see Allen and Cochrane, 2007, regarding multiplex cities). Relational sites and situations provide the space for these connections and therefore for policy mobilities.



Fig. 3. (Above) a guided tour of La Chureca; (below) the “Blue House” seen from the house’s yard, towards La Chureca (note how the smoke forms a white wall outside the door). Photo: María José Zapata Campos.



Fig. 4. *The Spanish First Vice President Fernandez de la Vega and children at La Chureca in 2007. Source: El Mundo.*

Urban policy mobilities and unintended translations

The “12 community leaders” initially represented a mode of domination whereby the local community was politically instrumentalized by Acahualinca Programme management and the municipality. Development translators such as the 12 community leaders helped “construct and maintain social and professional identities and structures of power and authority” (Mosse & Lewis, 2006, p. 17). The 12 community leaders were initially submissive compliers with Programme management, community participation being instrumentalized to facilitate Programme implementation: “to offload public responsibilities, defuse protest, co-opt opponents, impose social control and mobilise communities” (Silver, Scott, & Kazepov, 2010, p. 455). Participation in the Programme thus became “a mode of ‘governmentality’ reproducing state power in new spaces” (Silver, Scott, & Kazepov, 2010, p. 455).

However as Acahualinca Programme implementation progressed, and in common with policy participatory processes elsewhere, it became evident that “the rules of the game, and thus its outcomes, are not set in stone; the plans of elite political actors can be disrupted” (Silver, Scott, & Kazepov, 2010, p. 467). Although the institutional pressures to comply with the Acahualinca Programme conditioned the pathway by which the Programme was moved and transformed, the trajectories of its implementation were not inscribed in stone (McFarlane, 2009). The Programme mutated and unexpected actions took place, for example, in the role of the 12 community leaders. These community leaders were initially believed to be mere transmitters of information, but when jobs and houses were to be delivered and the tension increased, they contested the Programme’s authority by trying to circumvent the chain of command, by political activism, demonstrations, and physical force, and by using the mass media. This finding is

coherent with previous research observing that, far from meekly complying, policy beneficiaries constantly attempt to remake programme activities to suit their own needs (Rossi, 2006).

Despite the resistance and contestation enacted by community residents in the last phase of implementation, the Acahualinca Programme remained almost unalterable in its content. However, the acts of resistance unexpectedly altered the self-perceptions of the community leaders and residents who, from passive policy transmitters, became active policy actors (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011). In other words, La Chureca residents and workers became city constructors, and were no longer mere passive spectators of the making of the city.

The implementation of the Acahualinca Programme shows how power emerges through organizing (Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005), policy mobility, and mutation – in line with actor–network theory, power is seen as the result of actions. The “12 community leaders” were created as part of an instrumental participatory process, sometimes verging on “window-dressing”, whereby actions/decisions and community participation were decoupled within the Programme. However, even ceremonially adopted structures, such as this participatory process, can have consequential effects on programme implementation, resulting in organizational change (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). In other words, imitation and compliance can eventually lead to performative processes (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 1996). The 12 community leaders ended up believing that they had been transformed, and accordingly contested the Programme by defending their interests as they now considered that “the programme was theirs” (interview with community leader). As has happened elsewhere in Nicaragua, the Sandinista Party encouraged community participation processes, grassroots organizations such as the CPC being highly politicized and embedded in the Party. Eventually these participatory bodies become empowered and were able to contest the doctrines of the Party itself: “I am a Sandinista, but ...”/“I love my Party, but ...” were phrases we heard very often.

Conclusions

This paper has examined, based on the case of the Acahualinca Programme, the chains of translation through which urban policies are made mobile and mutable (MacCann & Ward, 2012) – in other words, how urban policies work and are translated into practice (Czarniawska, 2002).

City making is reproduced and realized by the efforts of actors located at different scales and levels and in different spaces, such as Madrid and La Chureca (i.e., multiplex cities; Allen & Cochrane, 2007). Unexpected mutations can happen, for example, when the “12 community leaders” began challenging the Acahualinca Programme, as policy is not inscribed in stone, but mutates and shifts, sometimes surprisingly and unpredictably (Andersson & McFarlane, 2011). The easy assumption that international agencies and other powerful actors impose policy agendas on local governments in poorer country contexts was proven wrong (Robinson, 2006) in this case. Cities and parts of cities, such as La

Chureca, are assembled by the practices and imaginations of actors who are continually “attracting, managing, promoting, and resisting global flows” (McCann & Ward, 2011, p. xxiv). This was the case when local residents and NGOs had years previously started the journey to gain the resources needed to change and renew La Chureca. Later on they attempted to manage these resources and practices by participating in the Programme, which they eventually had to resist to contest the global policy flow.

The Acahualinca Programme contained social and policy practices that drew together all these diverse elements, such as resources and networks, into relatively stable and coherent assemblages (McCann & Ward, 2011; Prince, 2010). Assemblages such as La Chureca create territories beyond spaces: they have a stake, a claim, and are not fixed but in the making (Wise, 2005, p. xv).

The practice of urban planning and city development, as illustrated in the present case, is not about “putting plans in operation” but about “coping with daily problems (or managing, as the double meaning of the world in English astutely suggests)” (Czarniawska & Solli, 2001, p. 4). The organizing of the City of Managua through the implementation of the Acahualinca Programme illustrates how city development and the making of urban planning and policies are about muddling through (Lindblom, 1959) more than about the strict implementation of predetermined plans. The implementation of visions should not be seen as the scripted translation of plans into reality, but as uncontrollable and uncertain processes in which a myriad of translations twist policies and plans – with unintended consequences. The significant question is therefore not whether or not plans succeed to work, but how they work (Mosse, 2004, p. 646).

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