Of Dreams and Shadows:

Seeking change for the institutionalisation of participation for natural resource management

The case of the Mexican regional sustainable development programme (PRODERS)

Jutta Blauert and Kristina Dietz

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CBO	Community-based Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CIESAS	Centro de Investigaciones y Enseñanza Superiores en Antropología Social
CONANP	Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas
COPLADE	Comité de Planeación y Desarrollo Estatal
COPLADEG	Comité de Planeación para el Desarrollo del Estado de Guerrero
COPLADEMUN	Comités de Planeación y Desarrollo Municipal
CRDS	Consejo Regional de Desarrollo Sustentable
CRM	Consejo Regional de la Montaña
DGPR	Dirección General de Programas Regionales
DfID	Department for International Development,
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IIED	International Institute of Environment and Development
INE	Instituto Nacional de Ecología
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NRM	Natural Resource Management
PAIR	Programa de Aprovechamiento Integral de Recursos Naturales
PET	Programa de Empleo Temporal
PM&E	Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation
PNARP	Programa Nacional de Atención a Regiones Prioritarias
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional
PROCAMPO	Programa de apoyos Directos al Campo
PROCYMAF	Proyecto de Conservación y Aprovechamiento Sustentable de Recursos Forestales en México
PRODERS	Programa de Desarrollo Regional Sustentable
SAGAR/PA	Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería y Desarrollo Rural/y de Pesca
SEDESOL	Secretaría de Desarrollo Social
SEMARNAP	Secretaría de Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca
SEMARNAT	Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (after Jan 2001)
SL	Sustainable Livelihoods
SLF	Sustainable Livelihood Framework
UAAAN	Universidad Autónoma Agraria "Antonio Narro"
UPISL	Unión de Pueblos Indígenas de la Sierra de Lalana

Executive Summary

Between 1996 and 2000 the Mexican Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Fisheries (SEMARNAP) developed and implemented an innovative programme for regional sustainable development: PRODERS. This programme was designed to be the anchor for Mexico's sustainable development policy, and was founded on the principles of participation, decentralisation and integrated development. With its objectives of reducing rural poverty, enhancing social wellbeing and halting the environmental degradation that characterises many of the priority regions where PRODERS was introduced, the programme was a new effort to challenge social and environmental deterioration. PRODERS also sought to establish the basis for a new institutional framework and for new forms of co-operation and co-ordination between different actors to promote sustainable development.

This report on the PRODERS experience is one of four country studies of attempts to institutionalise people-centred processes and participatory approaches for natural resource management. Through our research we obtained different stakeholders' views on PRODERS' performance between 1996 and 2000. We used participatory policy analysis to understand the successes and shortcomings of institutionalising participatory approaches in government and civil society organisations working in natural resource management at the local, regional and national level. Our main objectives were to identify bottlenecks and opportunities for such institutionalisation, and to provide lessons at these three levels for organisations trying to tackle poverty and achieve sustainable natural resource management.

While PRODERS encountered many challenges, and in many ways failed to live up to expectations, the experience raises some interesting lessons about implementing a national public policy of sustainable development and participation:

- Implementation at the regional level helps create visions and alliances, as well as spaces for regional debate and planning.

- Strategies for co-ordinating different departments and ministries for integrated and inter-sectoral institutional activities are essential.

- Efforts must be made to change the attitudes and behaviour of responsible officers in public and social sector institutions.

- The personal experiences and background of the team involved in policy-making, institutional change or organisational learning are critical: field-based, participatory practical experience is indispensable.

- The different scales of decision-making and management must be linked, anchored at the regional level: community transformation needs to be linked with an institution at the regional level for decision-making and management, set within a framework of national coordination.

Of Dreams and Shadows

1. Introduction

Between 1996 and 2000, the new Mexican Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Fisheries (SEMARNAP)[2] developed and implemented the programme for regional sustainable development: PRODERS. It was designed as the anchor point for Mexico's sustainable development policy, and was founded on the principles of participation, decentralisation and integrated development. Its central vision was to build on civil society's technical expertise and experience of participatory approaches, with an emphasis on the region as a political, administrative and socio-ecological unit. Encompassing objectives like poverty reduction and sustainable natural resource management in rural marginalised and ecologically important areas, PRODERS was essentially aiming for sustainable livelihoods,[3] and represented a change in policy towards tackling rural poverty and the use of natural resources in Mexico.

Reflecting the international debate on sustainability, PRODERS demonstrates the need to take environmental issues into account when tackling rural poverty and regional development. In this way it differs from previous practices in the field of regional and rural development policy and planning in Mexico. Hence the General Directorate of Regional Programmes (DGPR), as the responsible unit of the SEMARNAP,[4] challenged at the national scale the vertical, mono-sectoral and non-participatory practices of rural and social development in Mexico. It did so by incorporating into its programmatic steps three levels of government (federal, state and municipal) as well as a wide range of civil society actors. As a public policy and operational programme PRODERS aimed to promote, channel funds for, make effective and permanent – in other words institutionalise – new models and forms of

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2 Since 2001 the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) has been called SEMARNAT (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y de Recursos Naturales), as fisheries was moved to the ministry of agriculture and rural development (SAGARPA).

3 According to Chambers and Conway (1992, cited in Scoones 1998:3), a *sustainable livelihood* comprises: *'the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base'.*

4 The budget cuts and institutional changes made between 2001 and 2003 by the new Fox administration transformed PRODERS. Today it is a less operational programme given its reduced budget and limited regional extension. Through institutional changes within the ministry, PRODERS is no longer located within the planning under-secretary, but is an important part of the semi-independent agency of the SEMARNAT, the National Commission of Protected Natural Areas (CONANP), responsible for conservation and development work in protected and priority areas.

social participation for the formulation, operation, evaluation and follow-up of development projects at the local and regional level.

For the first time in Mexico's history PRODERS explicitly established collaboration in planning and implementation between local and regional actors from civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academics and local/regional/national government. Methodologies like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and actor analysis were explicitly included within the terms of reference for consultants in order to contribute to a more participatory planning process. Spaces were created for participation and decision-making – like the Regional Councils for Sustainable Development (CRDS) – to provide and strengthen a decentralised institutional and organisational basis for planning and programme management. Moreover the capacity of local and regional actors was to be strengthened to give them greater influence in planning and decision-making.

With its objectives of reducing rural poverty, enhancing social wellbeing and halting the environmental degradation that characterises many of the priority regions where PRODERS was introduced, the programme constituted a new effort to challenge social and environmental deterioration. PRODERS also sought to establish the basis for a new institutional framework and for new forms of co-operation and co-ordination between different actors to promote sustainable development. PRODERS thus caught the attention of international policy research teams since it fell squarely within an approach of policy design based on the sustainable livelihood framework (SLF) (Scoones, 1998; Carney, 1998), without ever having used the framework as conceived in the UK. As we shall see later, however, PRODERS also offers lessons about the bottlenecks encountered when trying to institutionalise such an approach, since several weak points existed in the links considered by the SLF (discussed in Section 4).

1.1 Learning from PRODERS

PRODERS' experience is relevant to other attempts to institutionalise participation, as it offers lessons – however limited – about the potential for institutional learning and the degree to which a government institution can create a participatory local and regional planning and management process (Thompson, 1995; Chambers, 1997). Moreover, PRODERS' experience helps us understand – from the perspective of the social and governmental actors involved – the new pathways needed on the route to a public policy of sustainable development and participation, specifically the importance of:

- the regional level for creating visions and alliances, as well as spaces for regional debate and planning;

- participation as a foundation for public sector activities, for the programmes that affect local and regional population, as well as for the negotiation processes between local, regional and national actors;

- achieving integrated and inter-sectoral institutional activities, as well as facilitating a change in attitudes and behaviour by those responsible within public and social sector institutions;

- the importance of the personal experiences and background of the team involved in policymaking, institutional change or organisational learning; and

- linking different scales of decision-making and management, anchored at the regional level: community transformation linked with the creation of an institution at regional level for decision-making and management, set within a framework of national coordination.

These lessons, and many more, will be described in detail later in this report.

1.2 Methodology and definition of key terms

This report emerges from a Mexico research project which was one of four country case studies focusing on the dynamics of institutionalising people-centred processes and participatory approaches for natural resource management (NRM). These were part of the international research programme 'Institutionalising Participation' initiated by the UK-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS).[5]

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5 This report draws together findings presented in the full Spanish project report, which itself summarises several very detailed regional reports and workshop discussions, as well as many group and individual interviews undertaken by a research team (see Blauert & Dietz, 2003). The whole project was undertaken by a number of researchers who came together for the IDS project in collaboration with the CIESAS in Mexico. It depended crucially on the generous collaboration by local people and staff of various public and social sector organisations, as well as the officials and staff of the SEMARNAP and PRODERS. Much of what is being summarised here is opinions expressed by all of these actors individually, in group interviews or in regional and national workshops. Given the extremely wide range of opinions, it is unavoidable that no single opinion group will see itself wholly represented in this text. We hope to have respected the diversity but also similarities in views expressed to the researchers.

Our **key research question** concerned people, processes and power:

What *conditions* allow participation to be institutionalised within social and governmental institutions and within the context of NRM and sustainable development?

Underlying research questions relate to:

1. Institutional conditions:

   • What is needed, and what potential is there, for transforming the policy and practice of public and civil society sector organisations?

2. Political and legal conditions:

   • How can recognition and legitimacy of new forms of and spaces for participation and decision-making be achieved, and what are the bottlenecks? Who controls and manages NR and programme or policy design?

3. Personal, operational and traditional conditions:

   • How do the attitudes and behaviour of officials and professionals change when they become involved in the use of participatory approaches, and how do they need to change in order to make participation real? What are the factors that encourage or bring about these changes?

Our work with the PRODERS team and local and regional actors took place during the final year of President Zedillo's administration. It allowed different stakeholder groups to review PRODERS' experience between 1996 and 2000.[6] The aim of our applied research process was to use participatory policy analysis to understand the successes and shortcomings of institutionalising participatory approaches in government and civil society institutions working for NRM at the local, regional and national level. The overall objectives (Box 1) were to identify bottlenecks and opportunities for such institutionalisation, and to provide lessons at local, regional and national levels for organisations trying to tackle poverty and achieve sustainable natural resource management.

For our analysis we used a qualitative participatory research approach, using methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participatory workshops.[7] Our

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6 The current administration's version of PRODERS is slightly different. It is undertaking its own review based on a framework of participatory learning through a national scale PM&E approach which was designed with external input based on lessons from this first study of PRODERS.

7 To frame and back up the applied methodologies and the defined research questions, we drew on some key approaches: the environmental entitlement framework (see Leach et al., 1997), the sustainable rural livelihoods framework (see Scoones, 1998) and social auditing (see Gonella et al., 1998). These conceptual tools allowed us to analyse complex and related issues such as actors and their capacity for action; the use and management of natural resources; the relationship between social development and environmental and ecological objectives; the influences of power relations; the institutional context and the wellbeing of the population; and social actor networks, etc. They also allowed us to see how these issues were dealt with in the daily challenges facing stakeholders – governmental or not – in decision-making and negotiation in this realm of policy action.

methodology took an eclectic conceptual and methodological approach, drawing on social anthropology, rural sociology, political ecology, participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) and organisational learning for accountability. This eclectic approach was felt to be appropriate given the complexity of PRODERS' programmatic and political workings and the diversity of those involved. Such an approach helped us to understand different issues from different perspectives. Another aim of the research project was to establish the basis for a future framework and system of PM&E.

Institutions and participation

The terms 'institution/institutionalising' and 'participation' have gained more and more attention recently: but what do they mean in our research context?[8] Although 'institutions' have always played an important role for social science and social and political research, Mayntz and Scharpf (1995:40) talk about a renaissance of 'institutionalism' (*Institutionalismus*) or the focus on institutions and their behaviour and roles. Different disciplines (political science, sociology, economical science, etc.) define the term in different ways according to their focus of research. In general the term 'institution' refers to rules and norms which influence or strengthen certain power relations, or societal relations more widely, in a formal way; this definition can encompass the definition of responsibilities, as well as the access and availability of resources and the relationships of dependence and authority.

We define 'institutionalising' participation as the process of incorporating participatory practice into existing institutions and organisations and consolidating or protecting that practice through norms and rules underpinned by changes in attitudes and behaviour. In some cases, where adequate institutions do not yet exist, this also means creating institutions, often temporarily, for which processes and structures are designed and practices enabled through incentives for transforming power relations and behaviour in a legitimised fashion. The end product of such stepwise processes (different steps involving learning, reviewing and capacity-building) is the praxis of participation in an institutional form, or 'institutionality' (*institucionalidad*). In PRODERS' case that means the institutionalising of participation, deliberation and

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8 The meaning of 'institution' is not the same in Mexican Spanish as in English: in the latter, institution (as opposed to the clearly delimited 'organisation') is a convention (like marriage, or market days) recognised by social cognition to become a legitimate social institution. Often however, the term 'institutional' (as in 'institutional learning') is used when referring to an organisation, often of the public or multi-lateral sectors; this is also the definition used in this document. In the Mexican context, institution refers to a governmental agency, such as a ministry and its national or local executing agencies. Thus we describe the regional councils created by PRODERS and the spaces they offer for participation as an institution in the making; Mexican political language would only call the governmental bodies involved as institutions within the council.

negotiation in different 'spaces' for policymaking and implementation. Thus, within the inter-institutional co-ordination and project-cycle planning inside the SEMARNAP and the DGPR an attempt was made to extend participatory practice toward other governmental agencies, such as the ministries of social development and agriculture, and to state governments. For example, a key tool created by the DGPR for extending vertical and horizontal learning and democratic practice across different sectors and social networks was the multiple-stakeholder councils at the regional level (see later).

Participation: While 'participation' has different interpretations, for PRODERS it meant co-responsibility – usually between the public sector and local actors. However, civil society organisations expected it to imply giving greater decision-making powers to marginalised sectors of society: civil society organisations, local government and, especially, poor farmers and indigenous populations in rural areas.

For this study we took participation to have a transformative meaning: changed power relations and changing decision-making and accountability practices. Thus, in this report we define participation as the *voluntary involvement of people who, individually or through organised groups, deliberate about their respective knowledge, interests and values while collaboratively defining issues regarding policy and practice affecting them, developing solutions and taking – or influencing – decisions, as well as implementing and evaluating activities emerging from such decisions.* In this process, the locus of decision-making power can change; space and opportunities for social learning can be provided and evolve further (Korten, 1990). Whether hitherto consultative spaces may have thus been turned into deliberative and decisive spaces is affected by and in turn influences social learning and the trust that may exist between actors, or indeed their ability to question underlying social values, institutions representing or enforcing them, and the power relations of which they are a part (Pimbert and Wakeford, 2001:23-8). In this case, we are looking at 'spaces created from above', or invited spaces (Cornwall, 2002) created by the state in order, apparently, to change policy and bureaucratic practice into a transformative and co-responsible process. It is the constraints, however, that invited participation contains in terms of legitimacy and competition with 'spaces from below' which – as we will see later – affect the effectiveness of social learning and institutionalisation of transformative participation.

1.3 Report structure

We begin by summarising the vision, operation and achievements of the PRODERS programme under the last administration. We then explore opportunities and bottlenecks relating to the key research questions and to applying and

institutionalising participation more generally. We give special attention to the regional councils and internal and external conditions that influence their functioning. We also explore the bottlenecks and opportunities for the institutionalisation of participation *within* the public sector agency, in this case the ministry of environment and the DGPR themselves. In the last section we draw conclusions of wider relevance than the specific case of PRODERS in Mexico.

Of Dreams and Shadows

2.   PRODERS: Some background

In this section we first take a brief historical look at PRODERS, and its objectives and principles. We then consider to what extent the PRODERS approach signified a conceptual and methodological break with conventionally centralistic, vertical and sectoral approaches to planning, and the potential it offered for institutionalising participation in NRM.

2.1 A brief history

To understand PRODERS as both a new concept and a policy for rural and regional development, the programme must be examined in the light of its non-governmental, academic and international influences (see Figure 1). As already indicated in the introduction, the PRODERS proposal emerged at a time when sustainability was becoming an accepted concept at both international and national levels. Mexico had recently ratified the Rio agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and, crucially, Agenda 21, and the international financial support available for sustainability initiatives facilitated the genesis of PRODERS as a political proposal.

In 1994 Mexico had also adopted a new national development plan that included sustainability as its overarching philosophy. In addition, decentralisation attempts by the Mexican state by strengthening local autonomy, for instance through funding mechanisms such as 'Ramo 33', opened the way for policy change towards rural regional development.

However, it was the Programme of Integrated Use of Natural Resources (PAIR – *Programa de Aprovechamiento Integral de Recursos*) – PRODERS' immediate precursor – that influenced the arrival of an essentially academic team at the environment ministry. PAIR emerged in 1984 as an academic vision for environmental issues and rural development to guide the operation of public institutions. It focused on social participation as one central strategy for sustainable development. The programme undertook studies and activities in four different priority regions,[9] selected according to certain criteria (ecological differentiation and

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9 Montaña de Guerrero (Guerrero), Chinantla (Oaxaca), Meseta Purhépecha (Michoacán) and two municipalities in Durango.

representation, level of poverty, environmental deterioration, institutional presence, etc.) which were later echoed in the definition of PRODERS' regions. The PAIR philosophy was the rational use of natural resources alongside a new public policy for rural development, where the environment and production were given equal emphasis. Again, this objective was reflected in the PRODERS proposal a few years later (see also Carabias et al., 1994).

In parallel to the practical field experiences of the PAIR team in these regions, environmental and ecological issues were being increasingly acknowledged within the Mexican government. The implementation of a new legal framework[10] for environmental issues in 1988, the creation of the National Institute of Ecology (INE–Instituto Nacional de Ecología) in 1992 and the legal institutionalisation of the concept of sustainable development in 1993[11] were characteristic signs of a slow but noticeable political change. One of the PAIR coordinators, Julia Carabias, a biologist with the national university, became the head of INE, indicating the political importance and legitimacy accorded PAIR and its researchers. With the creation of the first ministry for environment in 1994/1995 and the formation of the DGPR, several PAIR members, all with a background in opposition, entered the Zedillo government[12] and Julia Carabias then became the Minister of Environment. Her team was not associated with the political party that had governed Mexico for almost 70 years, the PRI (Party of the Institutionalised Revolution), nor had it held office before or been elected and moved up through parliamentary experience. This, coupled with their experience at community level and their team approach to work, gave them considerable legitimacy among civil society and the scientific community. However, it reduced their political weight within traditional political interests, particularly the powerful finance and agriculture ministries. For the first time in Mexico, there was an opportunity to convert experiences from outside government institutions into public policy; in other words, PRODERS.

2.2 Objectives and principles

PRODERS was conceived in 1995 by the SEMARNAP to reduce rural poverty and to establish a new and more sustainable approach to the use of natural resources, mainly in marginalised rural regions (see Box 2). PRODERS shared some general objectives with the concept of regional sustainable development and the planning approaches that emerged internationally in the mid-1980s and early 1990s.[13] These

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10 Ley General de Equilibrio Ecológico y Protección al Ambiente de 1988 (LGEEPA).

11 Reform of the law on human settlements (Ley General de Asentamientos Humanos) and incorporation of the concept of sustainable development (INE, 2000: 16).

12 Mexican President between 1994 and 2000.

13 Useful summaries and contributions are to be found in: Wong, 1998; Boisier, 1996; Rodríguez et al., 1996; Fürst, 1997, and for the PRODERS context, Dietz, 2002.

- Promote sustainable development in poor rural regions.

- Mainstream environmental issues into policy sectors such as rural development and poverty alleviation.

- Improve production and social wellbeing and reverse environmental deterioration in priority regions.

- Concentrate efforts on top priority regions with high levels of poverty and biodiversity richness.

- Transform regional development policy by decentralising decision-making processes and improving participation of social and producer groups.

objectives included the reasonable and responsible use of natural resources, social and regional equity, and poverty alleviation and sustainable economic growth, among others. Characteristic of these approaches was that the territorial and spatial dimension of economic and social development, as well as participation by civil society, were increasingly taken into account.

PRODERS was on the one hand a programme for sustainable regional development, but on the other a conceptual approach to transforming national policy and local development practice. PRODERS was guided by the following concepts:

Sustainability

Sustainability was understood by PRODERS as combining economic growth with environmental health, as well as eliminating poverty and social inequalities. This would be achieved by consensus between different actors, and by transformation at the community level.

The region

For PRODERS' creators the region was seen as the most appropriate unit for the economic transformation necessary for sustainable development. It was seen as the best space for the different political sectors to come together and for reaching consensus between different actors. It was also felt to be the right unit for development planning and economic, political and administrative decentralisation:

'For PRODERS the region is considered to be a territory socially and economically constructed within history, expressed through socio-cultural formations of the population and the way in which this population assumes the environment and identifies itself with resources and economic and political

processes and finally creates political–administrative units voluntarily from below. (SEMARNAP/PRODERS, 1996:3).

A PRODERS region is either an existing and already defined region, such as a protected natural area, or a newly defined space situated geographically and administratively (a) between the municipal and the state level or (b) between the commune and the municipal level, known as a micro-region.[14] PRODERS identified the priority regions for its programme – eventually limited to 24 regions across 18 states and 312 municipal authorities, covering almost 10 million inhabitants – based on the following criteria, which were applied with some flexibility in order to respect local and regional idiosyncrasies (Toledo and Bartra, 2000:31):

- the unit of municipalities or communities sharing common characteristics or processes

- rural areas of high marginalisation and poverty

- historically recognised territories, such as the Huastecas

- areas clearly identifiable for their biological importance or their ecological, geographic or ethnic characteristics, such as the Selva Lacandona, Mariposa Monarca or Meseta Purhépecha)

As one of PRODERS' analysts stated, the programme tried to 'reinvent' the regions: *'the regions as spheres of development do not exist, they are created gradually in a process of trial and error; exercises that can be based on… diagnosis, communication between stakeholders and shared planning, but also – and often so – on the back of clear emergencies'* (Bartra, 2000:73). It is this process of trial and error, as well as the inevitable risk of imposing regions where no such identity or vision exists, that makes PRODERS of interest to those seeking the right scale of initiative for policies for sustainable development, NRM and poverty reduction.

Decentralisation

According to PRODERS' creators, excessive economic, political and administrative centralisation hinders the participatory and emancipatory approach of regional sustainable development. Decentralisation allows strengthened regional and local entities to take their own political, economic and ecological decisions. However, decentralisation can, under certain conditions, give rise to new forms of centralisation, only at a more local level.

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14 Only rarely does a region coincide with the boundaries of one or two municipalities, such as Chimalapas. In the case of the Montaña de Guerrero, for instance, over seven local municipal governments are involved.

Integration

The concept of integration combines inter-sectoral co-ordination and collaboration with intra-sectoral co-ordination and collaboration. In the PRODERS context this means finding integrated, consensus-based ways of deciding about budget spending, public investment, etc.

Participation

One of PRODERS' key concepts, participation, implies that different social, private and political actors should get involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of regional development programmes.

At the core of the new ministry was a team of biologists who had worked in marginal regions with local authorities and communities. Their commitment to political participation – as opposed to functional consultation or provision of labour in governmental projects – had been evident in their work before they came to power. These political convictions were set within the wider national discourse on 'social participation' that imbued Mexican politics after the focus on 'solidarity' that had reigned in the preceding administration. The SEMARNAP's understanding of participation was in line, therefore, with the guiding document for all ministries and programmes, the five-yearly National Development Plan and the Constitution. Article 26 of the Mexican Constitution obliges the state to set up a system of democratic national development planning, which involves canvassing the population's needs through the participation of different social sectors, so as to weave the former into the actual plan and programmes of development. Solidly located within the corporatist practice of the post-revolutionary Mexican state and notions of representative democracy, it is 'organised civil society' rather than individuals and informal groups that the National Planning Law envisages as having a right to express an opinion in this process (Art. 20 and Art 1, Para IV).

The leadership of this new ministry was determined to move beyond the rhetoric and the practice of consultative participation that the Public Administration Law granted it on its creation in 1994/5. Instead the objective was to allow for greater involvement in policy and programmatic design and oversight by civil society, while creating experience and informed opinion in different sectors.[15] However, by the end of their

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15 The emphasis was on inviting in scientific expertise from academics and conservation specialists in particular; in itself not surprising given that the minister's team was essentially made up of biologists and that in previous years Mexico's environmental policy and programmes were often more driven by party political interests than knowledge of environmental or social factors. However, non-Western traditional, indigenous and local knowledge were often excluded from the knowledge and decision-making base of the ministry's programmes and offices; a political issue that would cost the ministry's staff much legitimacy in its later years. For a wide discussion of the issues of power, knowledge systems and environmental policymaking see Holmes and Scoones, 2000.

term of office, the emphasis shifted to 'co-responsibility' or co-responsible participation. This caused a degree of scepticism among some critics and raised questions as to who shared the responsibilities and the decision-making powers. The minister viewed it as follows:

> 'Co-responsible social participation cannot exist by decree; it is a gradual process… it is not only the expression of opinions and proposals but essentially the intervention during the process of decision-making and in the oversight of the compliance with agreed actions. And, society's participation in this decision-making process, in the implementation and evaluation of environmental policies, is a necessary condition to give legitimacy to all these actions and to create appropriate conditions for their implementation'
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> (SEMARNAP, 1999:8–10).

SEMARNAP had spent its first year of life consulting widely to shape the design of the environmental law (LGEEPA) that would govern its activities and that still governs most programmes in Mexico's current administration. The law's fifth chapter covers participation in planning, implementation, evaluation and oversight of environmental policy, and in Article 159 states that 'consultative' bodies need to be created by the SEMARNAP in which public sector agencies, academic and social and private sector organisations participate with advisory, evaluative and follow-up functions.

In summary, PRODERS was conceived as a decentralised approach to regional development planning, characterised by broad social participation, autonomy and democracy, an agreement between government institutions and communities and social organisations and concentrated in top priority regions. Some practical steps to achieve these objectives included the creation of:[16]

1. *A Regional Development Programme:* Created to promote the transition towards sustainable development through the conservation of natural resources and regional social and economic development. The vision was for a long-term development programme based on agreement and commitment between governmental institutions (from all three levels) and CSOs on mid- and long-term goals for the future of the region as desired by a diversity of actors. Each long-term programme would function as a framework for actions based on annual operational plans (POAs). The programmes would be developed, implemented, evaluated and followed up at the regional level under the supervision of the regional multiple stakeholder councils.

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16 A set of various planning and analysis methodologies was used to develop and implement these components: preliminary analysis, workshops and sector meetings, Geographical Information Systems (GIS), community management planning, technical assistance, education and dissemination, monitoring and evaluation, etc.
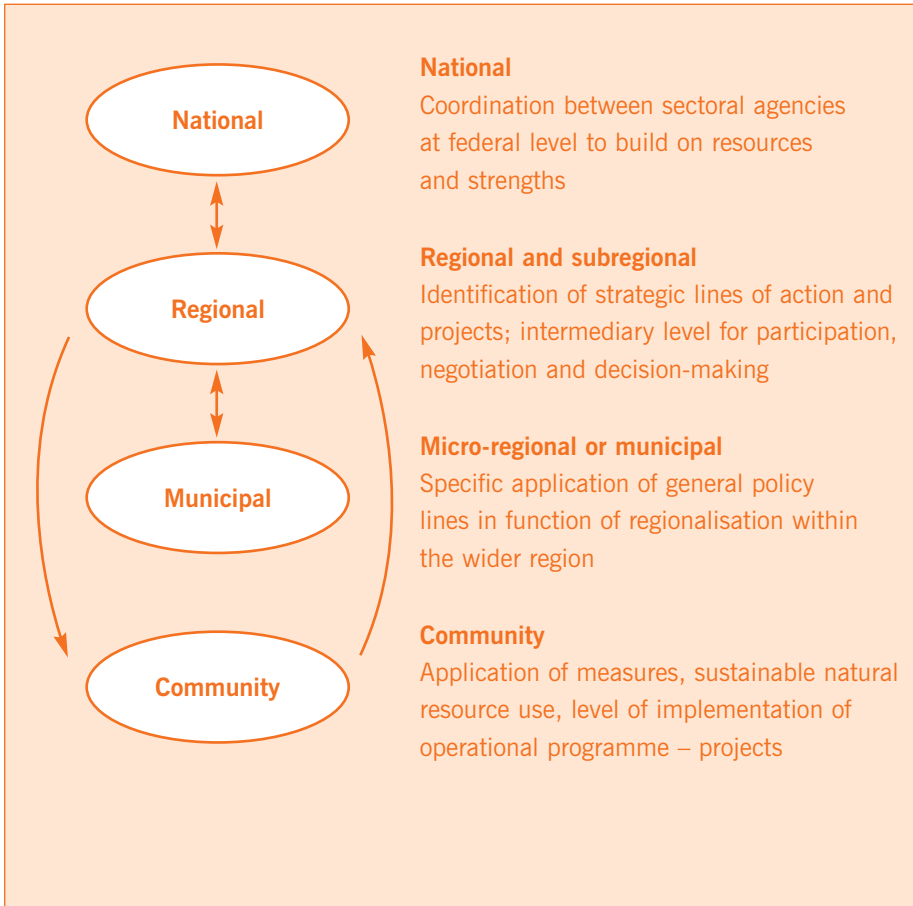
2. *Regional multiple stakeholder councils:* These were envisaged as autonomous entities responsible for the whole process. They were to be spaces for deliberation and negotiation for establishing consensus between different actors and divergent perspectives and positions. These effectively constituted 'invited' spaces for representative participation at the regional level. Another core responsibility of the regional councils was to design an annual budget and agree it with regional planning authorities and state and federal ministries. The councils also had to periodically assess the performance of the budget.

3. *Regional Investment Programmes:* To enable the region to actually implement a regional integrated and sustainable programme, PRODERS always underlined the importance of regional consensus on the size and allocation of the planned budget. Of equal importance was that a regional plan was to be legitimised and funded by an integrated investment programme agreed by different sectors in response to such a plan. No longer was competitive and often contradictory funding to be 'on offer' by agriculture, environment, health or education ministries for communities or regional organisations to fight over or to have to apply for with each different agency.

4. *Institutional co-ordination at all levels (inter and intra):* One of PRODERS' tenets was that sectoral programmes can never achieve sustainable development if they are implemented in isolation. Therefore PRODERS pursued an integrated strategy that benefits from the synergy between the different sectors (economic, ecological and social). It attempted to link the different sectoral dimensions within its host ministry (SEMARNAP), as well as linking other governmental and non-governmental institutions outside SEMARNAP.

These general objectives, concepts and specific components demonstrate that PRODERS was designed as a multi-level programme. Although PRODERS focused on the region as the most appropriate level for political transformation and institutionalisation of participation (through the multiple stakeholder councils), it also highlighted the importance of institutional co-ordination, not only at the regional level and outside the SEMARNAP, but also within its own walls and at the national and municipal level. Furthermore, it also recognised that the regional level can only become effective when it has direct communication with the community. Thus PRODERS operated principally at four levels, but with greatest emphasis on the regional and local levels:

• the national level (inter and intra-institutional co-ordination, institutional transformation)

PRODERS' operational levels and linkages

National

National
Coordination between sectoral agencies at federal level to build on resources and strengths

Regional

Regional and subregional
Identification of strategic lines of action and projects; intermediary level for participation, negotiation and decision-making

Municipal

Micro-regional or municipal
Specific application of general policy lines in function of regionalisation within the wider region

Community

Community
Application of measures, sustainable natural resource use, level of implementation of operational programme – projects

- the regional and sub-regional level (application of strategies and general training projects, technical assistance, information and dissemination, financial programmes, commercialisation, investigation and evaluation)

- the micro-regional or municipal level (adapted strategies to the conditions of sub-regions, links with the local and regional government)

- the community level (level of integration of inter-institutional actions and processes of social management)

FIGURE 2

Location of PRODERS within the ministry
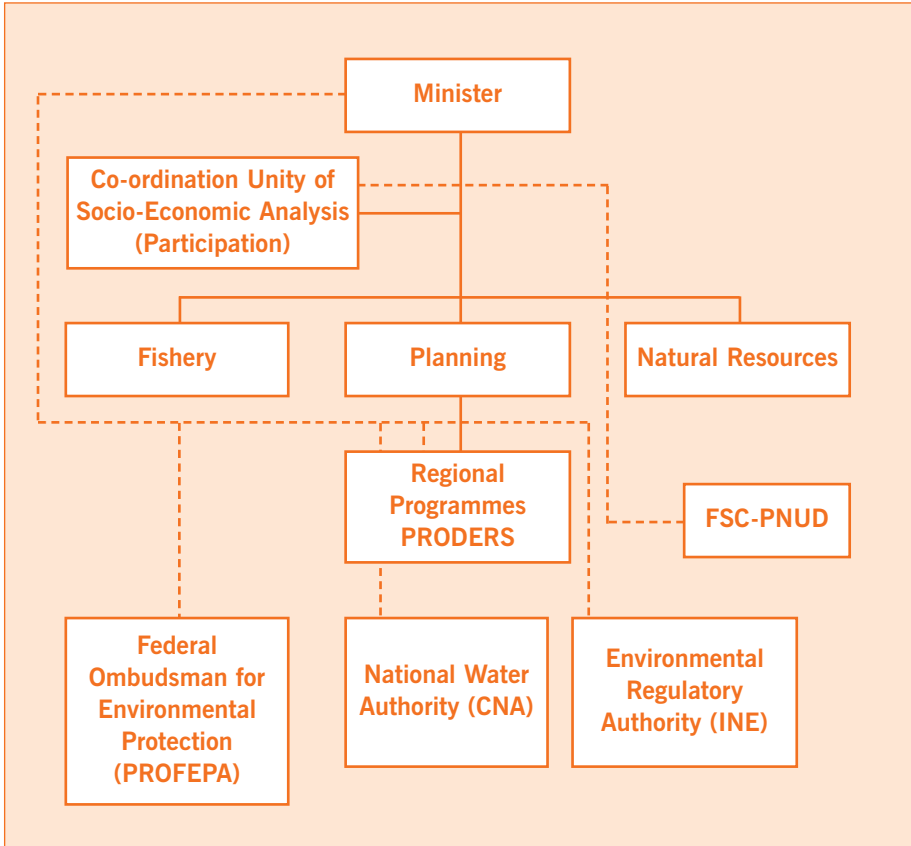
The PRODERS proposal thus sought to create the institutional conditions for decentralised planning. PRODERS' designers hoped to achieve sustainable development and a new, nationally coherent policy

> 'through new mechanisms for the administration and management of recourses that amplify the regional capacities for planning and decision-making processes and achieve that decisions over resource investments and public spending would be taken on the basis of consensus and co-ordination, considering the existence of different social, economic and political actors that need to be incorporated since the elaboration, implementation and evaluation. The idea is that PRODERS would be an instrument of conciliation between these different sectors' (SEMARNAP/PRODERS-UAAAN, n.d.; SEMARNAP-PRODERS, 1996).

FIGURE 3

PRODERS: Principal actors and entities, communication and co-ordination
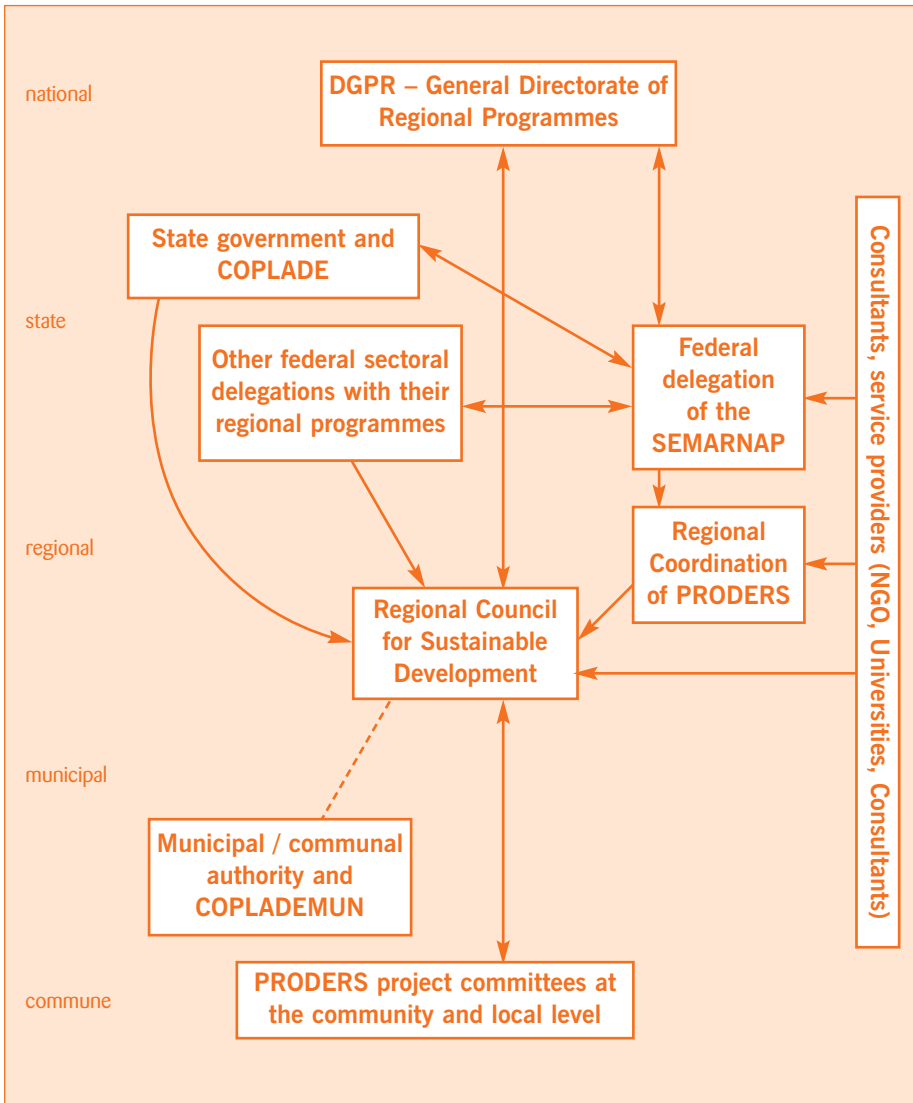
The programme's role as mediator was made even more explicit through its institutional location within the SEMARNAP: PRODERS was the principal programme of the General Direction of Regional Programmes (DGPR) located within the planning unit, a strategic position for achieving inter-sectoral collaboration within SEMARNAP (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 4

PRODERS' planning process
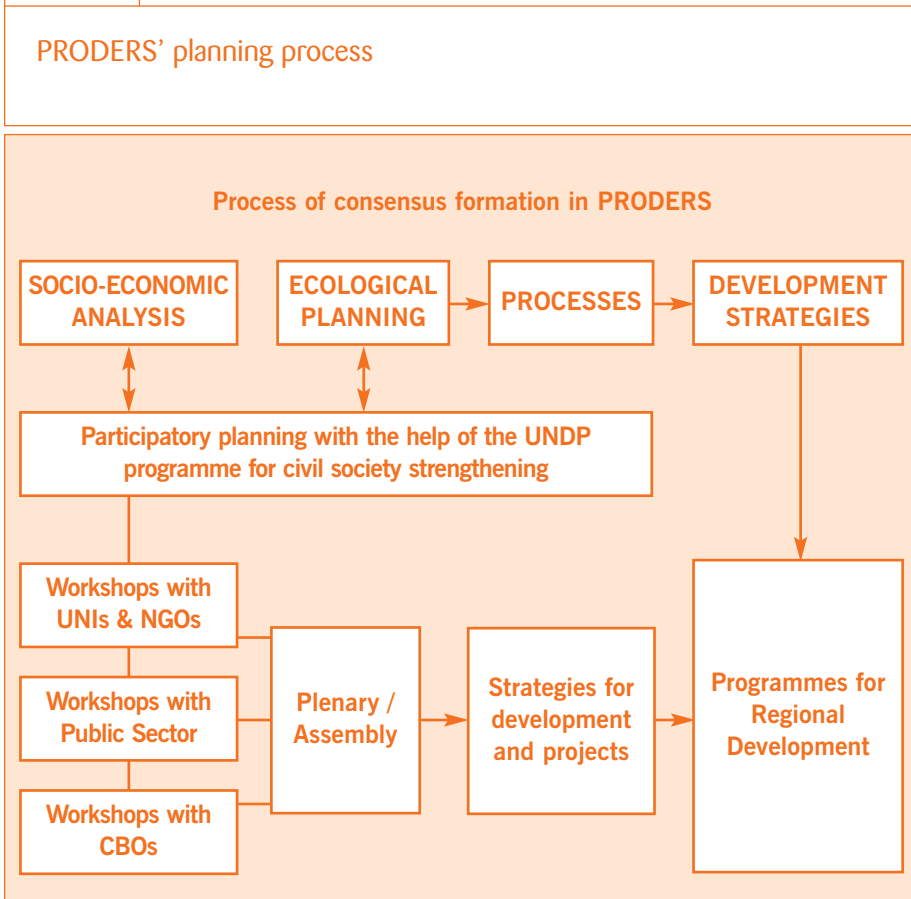
Source: PRODERS/SEMARNAP (1998) Programas de desarrollo regional sustentable, powerpoint presentation

But PRODERS was also able to mediate between different sectors within the SEMARNAP. The programme was to be a point of communication, networking and co-ordination between different sectoral policies as well as between different operational levels. Figure 3 illustrates the new institutions created by PRODERS and the relationships between them. Official, civil society and private institutions and organisations all play important roles in the wide-ranging but clearly focused planning process (see Figure 4). The central role given to the multiple stakeholder councils at regional level highlights their key role as a space for cooperation, participation and deliberation by differing interests. However, the direct line to the DGPR is rather idealised in this figure, since this degree of communication and co-ordination was rarely achieved in practice.

2.3 Operational range of the programme

PRODERS' initial operational phase was between 1996 and 1997. Although this period was characterised by financial bottlenecks, it did define the first 11 and later 16 priority regions. More than 30 planning meetings were held at the regional and communal level. These first two years of operation allowed for soil conservation, agro-forestry, water and forestry projects to be implemented in 180 communities across 16 states. Much of this work was undertaken in collaboration with the social development ministry (SEDESOL) and agriculture ministry (SAGAR). In the following years, funds were broadened to include evaluation studies, though late arrival of funds for contracts and project work continued to cost the programme legitimacy and undermined its agro-ecological and socio-economic targets.

At the end of 1998 a national programme known as the Agreement for Inter-institutional Collaboration (BCI) came into effect. Its aim was to co-ordinate the actions of initially eight, but later 10, key ministries for poverty reduction in the poorest regions in the country. This further enhanced PRODERS' effectiveness at inter-sectoral co-ordination and increased regional actors' negotiating power with federal and state agencies.

Above all, PRODERS offered an idea that had already been implemented and discussed with the two key ministries keen on having new approaches to reducing poverty. The SEMARNAP thus had a strategy for how central government could respond to plans emerging from society at the regional level, by means of a regionally integrated budget which should facilitate negotiation by the regional population with governmental institutions. Moreover, the DGPR could make use of other fiscal resources, such as one of the few subsidy programmes allowed in Mexico, the Seasonal Employment Programme (PET), which could pay people in marginal areas for work undertaken within the framework of public works (here environmental, water conservation and agro-ecological production). However, the resources at PRODERS' disposal – an average of $24 million pesos over 1996–2000 (some US$2.4 million) – were insignificant in comparison to the funds at the disposal of the non-ecological subsidy programmes under the agriculture and social development ministries (see Section 3).

By late 1999, PRODERS was operating in 24 states, with over 40 regional councils created and projects active in some 300 of the most marginalised rural communities across the country (see Figure 5).

2.4 PRODERS as an opportunity to institutionalise participation in NRM

In summary, with its objectives of mitigating rural poverty, enhancing social wellbeing and halting environmental degradation, PRODERS represented an opportunity to put

FIGURE 5

PRODERS regions in 1999

Source: **PRODERS/SEMARNAP IBID**

the theoretical concept of sustainability into practice. Social participation was seen as a key precondition for this ambitious goal, but the institutionalisation of participation through transforming the operation and behaviour of bureaucracies and operational branches of the public sector was not an explicit objective. Despite this, as it was conceptualised, PRODERS would ideally have led to a new institutionalised form of social participation for the development, implementation and follow-up of regional sustainable development programmes and associated policies by means of the following concepts:

- decentralised institution-building: multiple stakeholder councils at the regional level, committees at the local level

- inter- and intra-sectoral co-operation: new forms of political co-operation, co-ordination and communication

- capacity-building at the commune level to empower local populations for programme design and management

- the community as the strategic base

- scaling-up of decision-making, from bottom to top

- deliberation and consideration as principles for decision-making

- indirectly: institutional transformation as an asset (intra-institutional co-operation and co-ordination)

- regional investment programmes: to channel efforts by different sectors and achieve responsiveness by government to local and regional planning

However, as we shall see next, putting these ideals into practice was hindered by the bottlenecks caused by the norms and rules of bureaucratic machinery. The SEMARNAP under Julia Carabias was not intended to be a bureaucracy, though it had to fashion itself on systems already in place and regulatory mechanisms demanded by the existing administrative and finance systems. Expectations among different groups of stakeholders were high that a newly created ministry with a popular minister in charge would be innovative and democratic and manage to transform institutional practice for sustainable development. Inevitably, many of these expectations were not fulfilled; a fact that does not diminish, however, the importance of the opportunities still existing and the foundations laid by this first PRODERS administration.

3. Institutionalising participation: From theory to practice

As noted earlier, the underlying objective of our applied research in Mexico was to identify and understand the conditions that allowed or worked against the institutionalising of participation, deliberation and co-ordination within SEMARNAP, SEDESOL, SAGAR, state governments and decentralised, regional multiple-stakeholder bodies. In the previous section we summarised PRODERS' main characteristics, principles and objectives. The question arising now is: how and under what conditions could such a proposal be put into practice to bring about a change in institutional and political traditions, as well as in attitudes and behaviour?

Our analysis of PRODERS between 1996 and 2000 shows that certain conditions have influenced the process more than others, with both positive and problematic results. In particular, we shall consider here the need for enabling processes and institutions able to make a policy framework reflecting the sustainable livelihood approach. We also explore how the legitimacy and recognition of such initiatives influences the effectiveness of institutions at regional level. PRODERS' experience has shown that a combination of key factors is necessary for institutionalisation, including the legitimacy of core participating organisations, institutions and individuals (see Figure 6). Also of particular importance is the recognition of endeavours by civil society as well as governmental actors to change their practice, attitude and behaviour towards a more inclusive, just and sustainable management of resources and decision-making.

To establish a policy like PRODERS that aims to change institutional decision-making at different levels (community, local, regional and national) and within different policy arenas and actor groups, and which claims to be participatory, requires an institutional, political and administrative setting that can respond to the demands and needs of community, local and regional actors.

DelVecchio (1998:50)[17] states that 'true participation – if it is expected to lead to even loftier ideals like ownership and empowerment among local people as subjects of development and, ultimately, to the strengthening of civil society vis-à-vis the state

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17 DelVecchio (1998) draws his conclusion from research into Integrated Pest Management (IPM) in Thailand (Selected Fruit Trees Project).

FIGURE 6

Core factors for effective
institutionalisation of participation
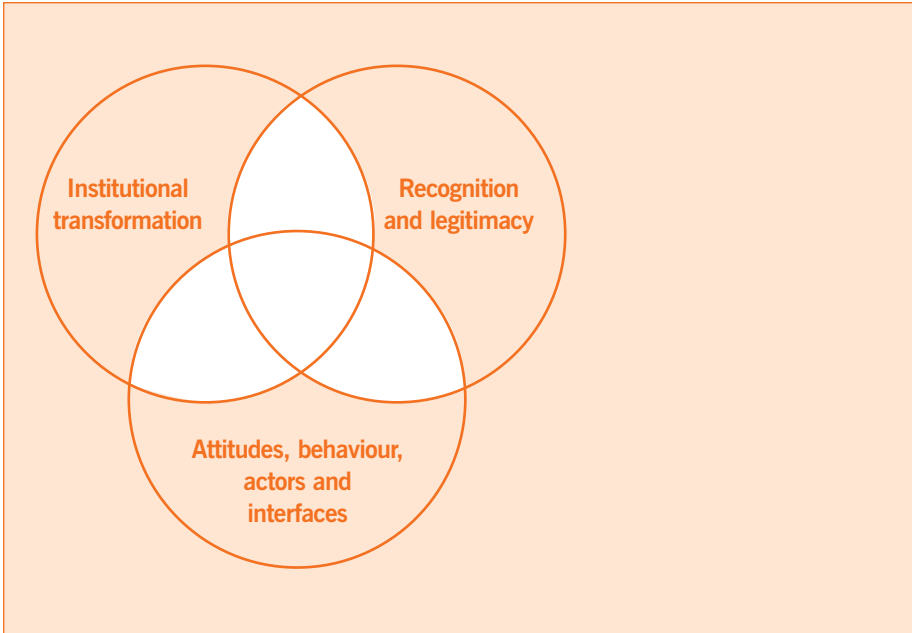
– often requires profound changes in social decision-making processes which are
embedded in the structure and culture of the respective political system and its
institutions'. According to DelVecchio, then, participatory approaches generally
require a deep transformation of social decision-making processes embedded within
the political system and its institutions. Looking at institutional conditions, the
recognition and legitimacy of new decentralised and participatory spaces of decision-
making and power relations, as well as attitudes and behaviour of different actor
groups, we will explain if and in what way PRODERS' implementation, and in this
sense the institutionalisation of an explicitly participatory approach, required – and
still does require – institutional, administrative and behavioural changes.

3.1 Institutional transformation: Needs and opportunities

Institutional frameworks, culture and hierarchies need to be addressed when
participation in development projects at any level are proposed. Participatory
approaches at the grassroots level need to be linked with institutional changes at all
governmental levels towards greater vertical and horizontal coherence and towards a
broad participation by different institutional sectors and actors. DelVecchio

(1998:50) emphasises that *'staff from all levels have to be convinced of the benefits of participation. Only their own experience will convince them of the advantages of a participatory approach for achieving developmental objectives'.*

To bring about a paradigm change for addressing poverty eradication and natural resource management, Griffith et al. (1999:39-40) underline two institutional areas that need to be tackled:

- *Intra-institutional management:* capacity building, and changes in approach and attitude. These areas must be addressed in order to increase the likelihood that coherent strategies will be adopted and properly implemented.

- *Inter-institutional co-ordination* of policy development and vertical integration. These areas must be addressed to develop achievable and coherent strategies for poverty reduction which can be monitored and managed.

Addressing the first arena – intra-institutional co-ordination and co-operation – in PRODERS' case means primarily focusing on power relations and institutional hierarchies within and outside the operating institutions:

- the SEMARNAP, as the new environmental ministry and administrative home of PRODERS; and

- the DGPR, as the responsible sub-unit within the SEMARNAP and the home of the PRODERS team.

As we shall see later, the role of regional staff, in particular the Regional Coordinators, was to be a key element in achieving subsidiarity, communication and legitimacy.

Intra-institutional issues

The SEMARNAP: A vehicle for transformation?

The opportunities created by situating PRODERS within a young federal ministry included:

- a new federal set-up without ossified structures and therefore with room to try something new

- a young minister with similar experiences and background to the PRODERS team

- a young, progressive and academic team with field experience and determination to mainstream environmental issues within development policy and to decentralise decision-making processes

- links with civil society and national actors with roots in the regions, and with academic institutions willing to engage, as well as an international vision that gave associations a higher legitimacy in the eyes of the government

But at the same time PRODERS' situation raised a number of institutional limitations and bottlenecks:

- the SEMARNAP lacked a strong political lobby, and as the environmental ministry, represented a rather weak political sector

- the DGPR did not hold much power within the SEMARNAP

- there were unequal power relations between different sectors within the SEMARNAP

Thus the opportunities available to PRODERS as a young and progressive team were tempered by its struggle with the ministry's own political weakness and internal divisions.

The creation of the SEMARNAP in December 1994 challenged a long and stable institutional tradition of a vertical and top-down political approach, guided by the most powerful administrations within government. For several decades previously, the responsibility for rural development and environmental issues had been held by ministries and state agencies with a strong political and traditional culture. Issues like social development and environmental protection only played a secondary role, if any, within economic development and agricultural export projects (Dietz, 2002).

At the end of the Zedillo government (2000) the SEMARNAP had made important advances in the sustainable use and conservation of the environment and natural resources, yet its image among civil society was poor, with criticisms made of its protectionist approach. In other words, although the SEMARNAP managed to make important steps towards environmental care, within Mexican political society it hadn't earned respect as a solid institution that would defend the interests of the marginalised or bring sufficient support to their initiatives or funds for their projects.

In summary, while the SEMARNAP stood for a new political culture that served national and international political priorities (sustainable development), it lacked the strength to change the institutional and political culture, given its structural weaknesses in the face of politically and financially stronger actors.

DGPR: Decentralisation versus centralisation and unequal power relations

As stated above, the SEMARNAP'S history meant it was not a homogenous institution, and was instead hampered by unequal power relations and divergent

priorities. The SEMARNAP was formed from various sub-units of other organisations, for example SARH[18] and SEDESOL,[19] imposed above the former structure of the very traditional ministry of fishery. The extensive effort needed to bring together those different parts did not make a stronger whole. Instead of creating synergies and strength by joining the three key natural resource and environmental spheres in the ministry (fisheries, water, forestry), an atmosphere of competition developed.

Furthermore, although the ministry was rather a young institution, its staff came mostly from the three original agencies. That meant that although there should have been space for new performance in terms of policy and practice, personal prejudices often worked against this, so that the emergence of a new institutional culture was difficult. The inequalities in power did not only appear horizontally between different sectors within the SEMARNAP but also vertically between different administrative or governmental levels, which – especially in PRODERS' case – were involved differently in the implementation of new environmental policies and programmes.

Considering PRODERS' objectives of addressing environmental issues as well as social and economic issues, the sectoral thinking and competition within the home ministry did not help PRODERS' institutional operation nor the much needed alliance-building outside the ministry.

The institutional evolution of PRODERS between 1995 and 2000 illustrates not only the difficulties of different power relations within the PRODERS team but also within different ministries and therefore within the government. It also illustrates how a series of normative and financial bottlenecks worked directly against decentralisation, participation and long-term financial commitment.[20]

Centralised decision-making

Throughout PRODERS' implementation, despite different approaches by the DGPR, one important constraint remained constant: the centralisation of decision-making, especially in the first two years of PRODERS' operation.

The decision-making processes for the programme in this first and important phase were centralised, using academic and theoretical arguments to convince representatives of lower administrative levels (state and municipal level) that the new approach was the only acceptable and valid way to bring about sustainable development. The urgent need to demonstrate tangible achievements was another

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18 Ministry of Agriculture and Hydrology

19 Ministry of Social Development

20 All key elements for institutional transformation as outlined by Thompson (1995:1544) when evaluating successful experiences with institutional change in government bureaucracies in Sri Lanka, Kenya, and the Philippines.

justification for this top-down approach by the DGPR, as was the heterogeneity of the SEMARNAP as an institution (described above). Another factor was that the state environmental agencies were generally not perceived as legitimate and also did not have the political or financial strength to be politically recognised at the local or regional level.

Thus this first phase was characterised by the drive to establish the programme, and bring about its acceptance. The following aspects were therefore co-ordinated mainly through centralised decisions:

1. Defining PRODERS regions

2. Developing regional work programmes with specific projects

3. Organising workshops to establish the programme at the regional level and to form the regional councils

4. Defining terms of reference for the analysis and regional programmes and for integrating the work teams at regional and central level

From the perspective of the DGPR, the practice of centralisation, especially during the early years, was a reaction to the political climate within a new governmental institution and was not originally planned. They felt it necessary to centralise decision-making while at the same time trying to build capacity in the regions and legitimacy because their vision of what PRODERS could offer was not shared elsewhere in the SEMARNAP, nor with state governments or other ministries.

Over the following years (1997–99) the DGPR, with the help of subsidy programmes, intensified its operation at the regional level through the regional council, delegating functions and operations to lower administrative levels (state level and regional co-ordination office). However, the DGPR still maintained control over budgets, resource allocation and reporting.

However, this institutional centralisation did not strengthen the decision-making powers of the lower administrative levels, nor did it generate trust amongst representatives from the central, the state, the regional and the municipal level.

With the establishment of the Regional Councils (see below) the programme became more decentralised, and together with regulations to establish the roles of each area, the SEMARNAP became more and more consolidated. Nonetheless, the DGPR maintained a vertical approach to decision-making. However, by the end of the Zedillo government (2000) regional actors' opinions were accepted, though not always heard.

According to Finger and Finger-Stich (2003:10), based on their research on NRM in Europe, centralised control over natural resources does not only depend on internal or external frame conditions and institutional visions. They claim that the state will rarely abandon its control over natural resources, *'as natural resources constitute one of its main competitive advantages, particularly in the age of globalisation'*. In PRODERS' case, this hypothesis suggests that DGPR's centralisation, and up to a certain point, control, was not only a natural reaction to the lack of a common vision, but also a strategic decision in order to limit the states' influence. In any case, the centralised, top-down approach was criticised by many people.

Budget and funds: Drivers for operation and recognition

Other factors also limited PRODERS' participatory approach. Logistical as well as political and bureaucratic procedural factors worked against transformation:

> *'It is hard to quantify the degree of equity within the institution; however, one can say that there [was] an attitude of trying to be equitable, considering the job descriptions or positions and responsibilities had, payment or fees paid. On the other hand, the normative regulations and system of contracting staff in two categories – as unionised staff with open contracts but low salaries, or contracted staff, 'trusted', with no security of contract or social security payments but more prestige and higher salary – made difficult to practice intentions, attitude and use possibilities for equitable treatment. A reform and revision of the structures, norms and work relations with the SEMARNAP is more than urgent'*   [former state delegate of the SEMARNAP].

PRODERS' first two years coincided with a national financial crisis which began in December 1994. Hence, the DGPR had few financial resources for implementing PRODERS and instead concentrated on promoting and selling the programme within other departments and inside the SEMARNAP. DGPR presented a preliminary analysis and investment proposal for 1996. The failure of this strategy was evident when none of the other operative areas took up this proposal, nor dedicated resources in their annual budgets to PRODERS.

Generally, the PRODERS' budget had always been limited, the idea being for the programme to obtain co-investment from other ministries. For example, for its operation and investment during the five years (1996–2000) of implementation in the 24 priority regions, PRODERS operated with an average annual budget of approximately $24 million pesos (equivalent to US$2.4 million). In comparison, a similar programme with similar objectives for the management of forest communities received ample international funding and operated in only one year and in only one

state (Oaxaca) with a budget of $16 million pesos. Other SEMARNAP areas also had much higher approved budgets in 2000. For example the protected areas programme was allocated $147 million pesos and PRONARE[21] $327 million pesos.

PRODERS' limited budget directly influenced its power relations with other government institutions. But communities and civil society organisations (CSOs) also stopped taking PRODERS so seriously when it could not promise large funds. The history of paternalistic relations and political manipulations through public sector handouts for manual labour had not prepared many communities for a programme that aimed to facilitate a shared regional budget and additional funds to be negotiated between local and regional actors rather than with itself as a funding agency. For some projects, communities or CBOs, the experience was useful in terms of direct funding:

> *'With PRODERS it has been different: the money is being given to us so that we can administer it as a community enterprise'*   (CBO member)

The agricultural ministry's subsidy for subsistence maize producers, PROCAMPO, for instance, offered cash payments for each hectare planted; a very tangible though not sustainable and politically problematic direct subsidy with which farmers constantly compared PRODERS projects.

> *'What we noted there was the institutional incompetence: on the one hand, there is the 'PET' programme for agricultural labourers paying out all over the place, and on the other hand there is another programme of the SEDESOL, paying out, including PROGRESA; and there is us, with our small programme PRODERS which is a solitary light within the community, trying by means of capacity-building to raise consciousness, sensibility and strengthen participation and the whole process gets disrupted. It gets disrupted simply when other agencies' programmes arrive and give them everything for not doing anything. So there, the tree nursery is closed, no more funds arrive, everything collapsed.'*   (regional staff)

Furthermore, PRODERS was able to offer few incentives to change the institutional culture and the behaviour of officials, other than political commitment and '*la mística*' or myth and commitment to the team and the wider political vision of transformation. Those who did not share the same experience as the PAIR team, or did not come from a similar NGO background, or simply those recently recruited, often found it difficult to share much of this 'mystique' and to communicate the

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21 Programa Nacional de Restauración Ecológica: National programme of ecological restoration.

relevance of PRODERS beyond its technical aspects, or to put up with logistic and bureaucratic obstacles with ease and determination.

Thus, operational staff, as well as policymakers in the central offices, were fighting battles within the national bureaucracy which the vast majority of actors outside the capital or a governmental institution could or would not know about. Battles over posts, over funds and over approaches or responses to participatory planning had to be fought on an almost daily level. Often mid-level managers, whether at central or regional offices, were frustrated in their decision-making and responsiveness to civil society actors, as well as in their relations within their teams when earmarked funds and urgent demands from 'above' in the ministry could stop the whole process at any given time.

> *'The emergency demands from above ['bomberazos'] do not help participation [internally].'* (mid-level manager, DGPR)

> *'Budget allocation is done from outside the region, and funds arrive already earmarked.'* (regional actor)

> *'The impact [of participatory praxis and processes] has been relatively insignificant. When there has been an impact, it was because of personal initiative of mid-level managers who promote change in organisational processes or procedures within their institutions or departments, but without achieving anything in terms of changes in norms and regulations.'*

> *'The search and contracting of 'trust' or term-contract staff was undertaken by officials immediately above the vacant post; sometimes there was an open job advert and competition, so staff already known for their experience and approach or strategies were appointed. On occasions internal staff were promoted who had shown commitment, skills and ability to respond to the challenges of the post.'* (former state delegate)

Inter-institutional issues

As mentioned earlier, according to Griffith et al. (1999), institutional change requires action in two different areas. Apart from intra-institutional co-operation, inter-institutional co-operation and horizontal coherence between line ministries are needed when addressing the multiple dimensions of rural and regional marginalisation. *'Both inter- and intra-institutional actions must take place concurrently to promote coherent development processes capable of effecting sustained poverty reduction'* (ibid:40).

In principle, the PRODERS philosophy depended on achieving co-ordination among different policies and programmes operating within marginalised regions. One of the most important achievements in which PRODERS played a part was the national collaboration agreement (Bases de colaboración) for the National Programme of Action in Priority Regions (PNARP), signed first in 1998 by eight, and later 10, ministries. This was eventually converted into a national policy of presidential priority. The benefits of such a collaboration included macro-economic stability, efficiency in service delivery, transparency and quality of operation and management. In the year 2000 it was noticed that *'a habit of communication, exchange of information and programming of joint actions between different sectors of the federal government was occurring, [and that] spaces of planning had been created [to allow for a joining] of development visions between the three levels of government; also, participation by civil society in decisions that affect the development of the regions has been promoted which is conducive to an appropriation by communities of this kind of joint working'* (DGPR, 2000c). The challenge was to make sure that these first achievements would lead to *'community participation transcending administrative–governmental periods, and that it would guarantee the continuity of efforts for an integrated social development'* (ibid).

Yet the tangible results of the 'Collaboration Agreement' were extremely few within the regions themselves and inter-institutional co-ordination continues to be a true bottleneck for PRODERS and other government programmes like it. Inter-institutional co-ordination requires political commitment to integrated policymaking. But the constraints are many and include unequal power relations between line ministries and traditionally vertical and sector-orientated political behaviour, which will only be challenged through well-intentioned discourse. In the regions, few agencies and political actors, be they from federal or state government, want to relinquish ther political influence gained through funding operational programmes. In addition, within the regions different programmes tend to overlap, often having similar goals and target populations, but different approaches. All need to maintain their raison d'etre. Decision-making and budgetary timetables vary between different levels of government and often within agencies, especially as much funding for sustainability, anti-poverty and participation projects comes from non-governmental or multilateral funding sources with their own schedules and demands for targets, evaluations, times for release of funds, etc. Confusion is often rife, therefore. Coordination between funders is also rare. A regional institutional actor in one of the most successful PRODERS regions illustrates the point:

> 'There exists a mismatch between periods of programming or budgeting by the federal agencies (July–August) and those of the states, which start in January. The regionalisations don't coincide: PRODERS operates in Oaxaca with five priority regions [used by the SEMARNAP and PNARP], the state government talks of its eight administrative regions, and through the planning coordinating commission, COPLADE, of 75 micro-regions for urgent anti-poverty action in the state. The SAGAR then has its programme for PRODERS in the Papaloapan, which does not coincide either with the Chinantla, etc. This is a basic difficulty in the task of regional planning.'

In summary, the DGPR and the SEMARNAP managed to set in motion a coordinated approach to regional development but this was hampered by bureaucratic processes, unequal power relations and institutional rivalries, a limited budget and a centralised approach to planning. The principal role of a regional programme should have been to co-ordinate different sectors at the national and sub-national levels, rather than centralising operations. This problem derives partly from the fact that the initial PRODERS team saw themselves as an implementing and executing team and not as co-ordinations between a variety of relevant actors.

A mid-level manager in the DGPR commented that he had a hypothesis that guided his work and that also described the life of the DGPR from the inside: *'if you do not feel well in your body you cannot work in line with your theoretical visions and principles towards the outside'*. Several representatives of the SEMARNAP recognised that the institution itself, as well as the DGPR, had intended to operate differently within this new institution *'with a pure mind within a pure body'*, but they had had to face multiple obstacles. Some would say that unfortunately the DGPR never achieved that purity of body required to institutionalise its model of participation – still far from any radical participatory ideal – but that the intention was valid. What should be remembered is that neither the DGPR nor the SEMARNAP had sought in this, their first term of office, an institutional transformation as such. For some observers and actors alike, however, the endeavour to institutionalise a new way of operating in concert with other agencies, to invite participation in broader forms than most other ministries had done, hand in hand with CSOs, already signified some transformation, however limited, toward a participatory ideal. It was, perhaps, the pressure for centralisation combined with weaknesses within the institutional life of civil society and the regions, which led to the 'invited participation' to disintegrate into a scramble for resources and only in a few cases, some constructive, if sometimes temporary collaboration (such as in parts of Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Michoacán, Las Huastecas).

3.2 Levels and spaces for participation

For participation to influence an institution a programme needs to have recognition and legitimacy within both the state (legal and political recognition) and civil society. Approaches to participation (e.g. whether representative, transformative, functional) need to be adapted according to the level of government and unit of action involved. PRODERS' implementation has shown again that different understandings of what participation means usually prevent full transformation. And the likelihood that policymakers and officials will embrace different participatory practices depends on a participatory programme earning respect and legitimacy.

Mexicans are used to ample official discourse on concepts such as solidarity (the government's flagship programme for social development in the late '80s and early '90s), participation, progress, development and, nowadays, transparency. In this context, the use of the word 'participation' is often seen as a cynical manipulation of the population involved. PRODERS therefore avoided writing its programme objectives in terms of participation, instead emphasising its socio-economic and environmental objectives. Participation was considered a means to an end, for achieving political involvement and co-responsibility in the programme, and for eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development.

The DG of PRODERS decided on *four key arenas for participation* (Figure 7) reflecting the underlying principles of practising participation in all *phases of the project and policy cycle*, including that of budgeting. The degree to which participation would occur here, however, is perhaps questionable.

It proved a constant challenge for PRODERS to strike the right balance between the differing interpretations of participation. The interpretation of participation for decision-makers and advisors during the different phases of the programme was quite different say, to that of grassroots organisations at local, regional or national levels. For the DGPR, participation effectively meant 'invited' participation to achieve co-management in the medium term, rather than allowing local adaptations to emerge and gather a momentum of their own. The control by state institutions over the process of designing the programme often raised objections within different states and regions where PRODERS was introduced (see below). Another key difference in values was the acceptance of non-Western scientific knowledge in the composition and decision-making or advisory roles of regional councils or in the work of technicians, which clearly favoured Western scientific knowledge.

The principle of multiple-stakeholder spaces, so fashionable and necessary since the early 1990s, was applied consistently and fervently by the national PRODERS team,

FIGURE 7

**Project and policy cycle with key arenas
for participation**
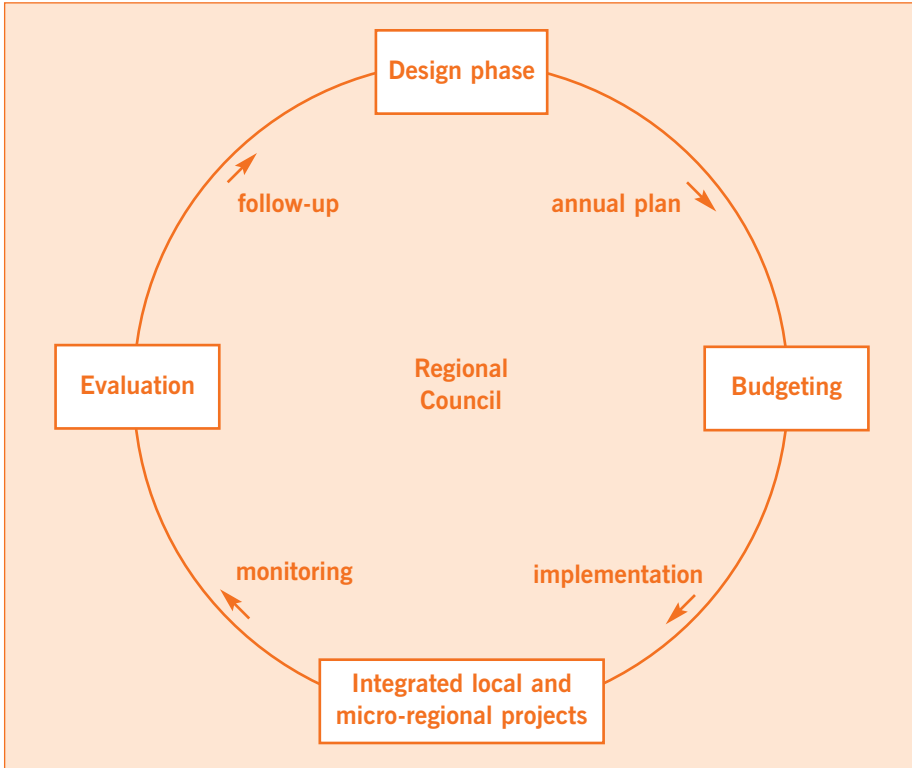
but too often with pressures that did not relate to regional dynamics and conflict situations. However laudable, this also proved to be a serious constraint in the effectiveness of the regional councils, as the following section will show.

**Regional Sustainable Development Councils:
Bottom-up or top-down participation?**

The Regional Sustainable Development Councils (CDRS) were spaces created at the regional level for deliberative participation, skill-building, communication and negotiation between civil society and authorities from different administrative levels. This was a new approach, especially in its attempt to bring all stakeholders to the same table, with equal voice.

According to Toledo (1999) the regional councils were to have been a space for seeking convergence and negotiation between governmental and non-governmental

FIGURE 8

Regional Councils
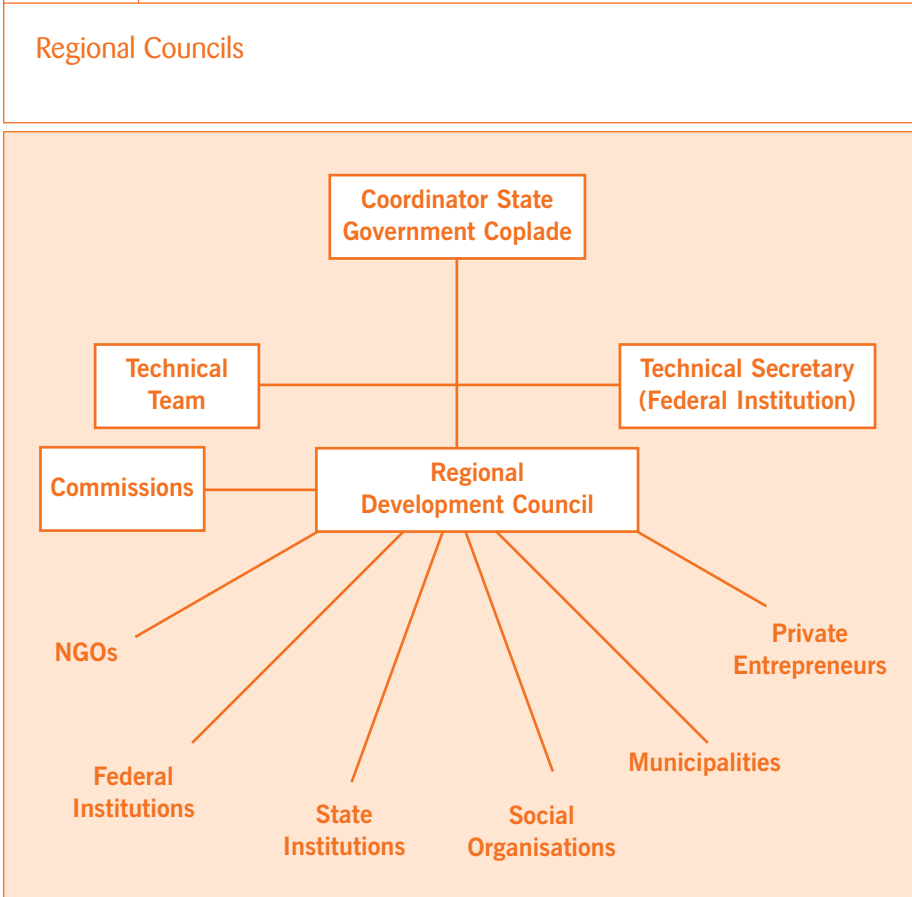
[Source: Toledo, 1999]

representatives within which social participation would be pluralistic, democratic, inclusive and based on autonomy. The councils were to be the spaces for deliberation and decision-making for the design, agreement and monitoring of long-term and annual plans, budgets that would combine funds from different line ministries and state government, or indeed non-governmental funding, evaluation and follow-up. Participants should come from federal and state agencies, local government, CSOs, academia and private sector (see Figure 8).

Indeed, though under the chair of the state government, the councils were to bring together actors from all the key society groups, though the hierarchical structure is clearly visible. The attempt was to find a locus for the councils within the regional level of government which reflected Mexico's federal structure. If this had not been the case, the councils would have represented a threat to state governors, ministries and planning authorities and would not have been allowed to exist.

The experience with the councils, however, revealed a range of problems:

- approximately 60 councils across the country were created, but there was no legal framework to formalise them as institutions;

- existing legal tools in state level planning committees (COPLADE) were insufficient;

- political conflicts between members of councils prevented agreement being reached. Such transaction costs increased during election time;

- government representatives often tried to control CSOs and councils; and

- many CSOs were prevented by their own internal problems from participating effectively in the councils, or timing did not conform to their needs.

The absence of a legal framework for these councils undermined their credibility and legal influence among public and private actors. This was felt to be a key problem by the ministerial staff. Since other ministries had often also set up councils in the same regions, there was an overlap between councils and thus resources in terms of time, energy and funds. In addition, the fact that councils had no legal basis meant that they could not receive any funds, whether from the public sector or international aid. This resulted in funds frequently being channelled through NGOs participating in the councils, often creating jealousy and accusations of mismanagement of funds.

Furthermore, the fact that the creation of the councils was partially top-down led to objections from regional and state-level staff, particularly those from the south of the country where a solid civil society or sufficient experience in conservation for development work already existed. The argument was that participation needs to be built up from below and not dictated, or invited, from above. The concern was that where political problems existed and trust was lacking, then government representatives could not be included in such a space if ownership of the process and the political space was to be created. This reinforces the need for learning about participation, negotiation and co-responsibility; a task which the programme had proposed itself but had overlooked in its search for success at the national level:

'The issue of what it means to set up regional councils has not been analysed properly. This needs to be seriously addressed, so as to avoid the creation of powerbases, lack of representativeness... and to avoid breakdowns in communication or in decision-making' (AOC)

Realists, aware of the need for change in institutions, however, argued that:

'The regional council is nothing but a Utopian dream of some officials who talk about pluralistic participation, and integrated planning... well, all of these are paradigms which cannot be applied in those agencies...'

[civil society organisation]

On the other hand, the programme was more effective in the regions where NGOs had long-standing experience and relevant technical and socio-economic expertise and where there was political commitment to communities and to the negotiations with different actors that the planning process required. Thus, in the Michoacán region, or in the Chinantla, for instance, PRODERS' legitimacy was strengthened, or some argue even created, through a combination of good collaboration between a regional NGO and a local CBO, the state-level delegation of the SEMARNAP and particular conditions of identity and socio-political as well as ecological contexts.

Other problems were noted: the process of inviting CSOs to the council was often managed in an untimely fashion. Organisations were told of meetings without much warning, and then when they did not turn up were not registered as members. In some regions the initial diagnostic study did not include a realistic stakeholder analysis and did not mention or consider as legitimate or relevant a number of CSOs:

'The lack of a democratic and participatory process – really participatory – in the creation of those councils seems to me to be an act against their very function as being the local driver of PRODERS, and therefore perhaps it is necessary to restructure them by focusing on that process.'

[community member]

A further obstacle was the preparations for the presidential elections in 2000 which were to bring about a change in the ruling party for the first time in 70 years. The young ministry and new programme were faced, after only two years of effective funding and three years of operation, with a fight for survival. Thus staff energies were devoted to achieving programmatic targets and attracting international funding to allow programmes such as PRODERS and its associated participatory natural resource management programmes to continue with funds from multi-lateral grants.[23] Party politics, therefore, particularly in the most combative regions, did not make the councils any more constructive in their critique or conducive to collaboration in planning or budgeting; and community political factions so often simply echoed these divisions at the regional or national level. This caused divisions in several of the councils, such as in the Montaña de Guerrero (Box 3), where the competition between the different factions often wasted energy and lost PRODERS its

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23 Such as the Three Ecoregions Programme, funded with support from the Global Environment Facility, and Indigenous Biological Corridors, funded with support from the World Bank.

The example of the Montaña de Guerrero council illustrates the opportunities and bottlenecks faced by the regional councils.[24]

In the Montaña de Guerrero, as in many other regions, the PRODERS strategy at regional level centred on promoting participation in the Regional Sustainable Development Council, the Consejo Regional de la Montaña (CRM), the first CRDS in the country (though never legally formalised). The creation of the CRM was a result of efforts by staff from the DGPR, SEDESOL and regional CSOs, academics, local authorities and others. The fact that such a range of actors, with very distinct ideologies, should invest so much in a new space for participatory decision-making confirmed the relevance of PRODERS' philosophy. It also indicated the readiness within civil society for engaging with new policy approaches. Between 1996 and 1999 over US$2.18m were received by the CRM from government or international funds, mostly for specific projects, meetings and capacity-building, though not for a coherent regional development programme as such.

However, influenced by state governor elections, from late 1998 the CRM started to suffer from internal divisions along party lines. When the new governor viewed the work of the SEMARNAP and the CRM critically, and started to strengthen the state level inter-sectoral coordinating and planning body, COPLADEG, the CRM became a battleground for control between federal and state-level forces, effectively excluding groups not in agreement with state policies or controlling factions under civil society leaders leading the council. Nevertheless, in the first phase of its life, between 1996 and 1999, the CRM made considerable achievements:

Capacity-building. Participating in the council's activities and negotiations in itself constituted training in several aspects: planning, regionally and locally; negotiation with different sectors; analysis of and search for solutions to regional problems; cooperation in joining forces for regional initiatives. The creation in 2000 of the COSPAM, Coordinator of Social Organisations and Peoples for the Autonomy of the Montaña, made up of some eight CSOs and CBOs who were[?] part of the CRM, showed the commitment to search for development alternatives for the region, based on the important experiences in the council.

Regional Planning. Four proposals for sustainable regional development were designed, several drawing on the inputs from the PAIR team in preceding years, and encouraged by the DGPR. Although these proposals were not agreed by all members of the CRM and did not receive direct support from different agencies in terms of funding or training, the process of designing proposals and analysing technical information and the willingness of the new state government to take up the proposal and to disseminate it in late 1999 under the authorship of the COPLADEG were all valuable experiences.

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24 Information about the Montaña de Guerrero council was taken from the regional report on Guerrero (Yaschine et al., 2000) and is also based on results of field work in the region in 1999–2000.

'In the planning team we fought a lot for the council to consider … regional projects, of regional impact…; we arranged for several fora to analyse the situation and work undertaken… where we contributed with many ideas; though, sadly, these were left to lie around, that is they are good planning documents but the trick is how to turn them into reality…' (former municipal president)

Inter-institutional Coordination. One aim of the CRM was to achieve greater coordination, or at least negotiation, of development activities between different governmental agencies operating in the region. While results were limited, the mechanisms for coordination have been well established and demands by civil society for such have increased and are being voiced more clearly.

In spite of these achievements, however, some CRM members comment that over much of this period the council operated essentially as a governmental agency with clientelistic relations rather than as a participatory planning space or one that could create a joint budget. After all, funding decisions taken in the council were essentially for funds to be given to small projects, and not related to participatory budgeting for regional planning. Nor did the CRM develop a training strategy or become an evaluative space for policy or development activities in the region.

Expectations thus had been raised considerably, but unrealistically; for the crisis the CRM suffered from 1999 put an end to the first difficult but useful 2.5 years of creating a space for learning and decision-making between different actors; more time was needed, certainly. The elections for council president later in 1999 put an end to the first phase of the council and the CRM lost legitimacy altogether when organisations not aligned with the politics of the state government, including the SEMARNAP, were slowly marginalised. After the presidential elections in 2000, the new environment ministry slowly dismantled some of PRODERS' operational roles, including the councils; trust in this space was eroded anyhow for local governments or CSOs to take up the cause again. Nonetheless, the CRM sowed the seeds of interest amongst regional actors to seek out participatory and coordinated action for regional development.

legitimacy because its efforts were considered more frequently to be attempts at managing social conflict rather than defending transformative participation.

Participation within different phases of the project cycle

Besides participation through the councils, there are other phases of the project cycle where participation was to be institutionalised, both within and outside the councils.

Design phase

As Toledo (1999)[25] described, the first key element, *the design* of regional processes and proposals, tended to be conventional, using scientific knowledge to determine

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25 The following points are taken from the presentation by Carlos Toledo, Director General of Regional Programmes and hence of PRODERS, at the international IIED-IDS workshop, India, Dec 1999.

criteria for assessment and initial funding decisions. The process taken was usually as follows:

a. Interdisciplinary studies, including:

- initial appraisal

- problem and process identification

- setting objectives (general and specific)

- setting goals and indicators

- identifying lines for strategic action

b. Studies by academic institutions

c. Technical documents as inputs for participatory process of programme design

d. Workshops for programme design with stakeholders from all social sectors

After the first three years of PRODERS' operation the DGPR had to acknowledge that these steps were not helping to strengthen social participation in this phase. First of all, the studies were generally done by outsiders and did not always reflect the reality of the regions and/or were not appropriated by local and regional actors uninvolved in the study. Furthermore the mostly technical studies did not translate easily into local knowledge and culture. And finally the planning documents emerging from local/regional community planning did not correspond to the structured planning of public institutions because of differing planning logics and languages. Other limitations within the design or planning process – which was supposed to be both technical and participatory – showed up in many regions:[26]

> *'The SEMARNAP never has consulted the community or organised groups about the objectives and types of productive projects that might interest them… Neither has there been a follow-up of the work undertaken, nor technical assistance, nor training by the SEMARNAP … The projects never have been made together with the community; they design them in the office and then they bring them to us.'*   [community member]

The dominance of technical studies undertaken by academic or NGO consultants[27] was to cost PRODERS dearly in money and loss of legitimacy, especially where projects resulting from these studies failed to fulfil the promises of participatory

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26 However, some experiences were starkly different to this view.

27 Often contracted by central offices in an attempt to either speed up the process or to avoid conflict with state-level institutions or charges of local contractual problems.

FIGURE 9

Regional Budgeting Cycle

Year 1
May-July

**First Projection
Elaboration (POAR)**

Year 1 August

**First Project
Presentation
(POAR)**

Year 3 (1)
January-April

Regional Evaluation

**REGIONAL
COUNCIL**

Year 1 September-
November

**Budget Project
Elaboration**

Year 2 January-December

Performance

Year 1 December

Approval
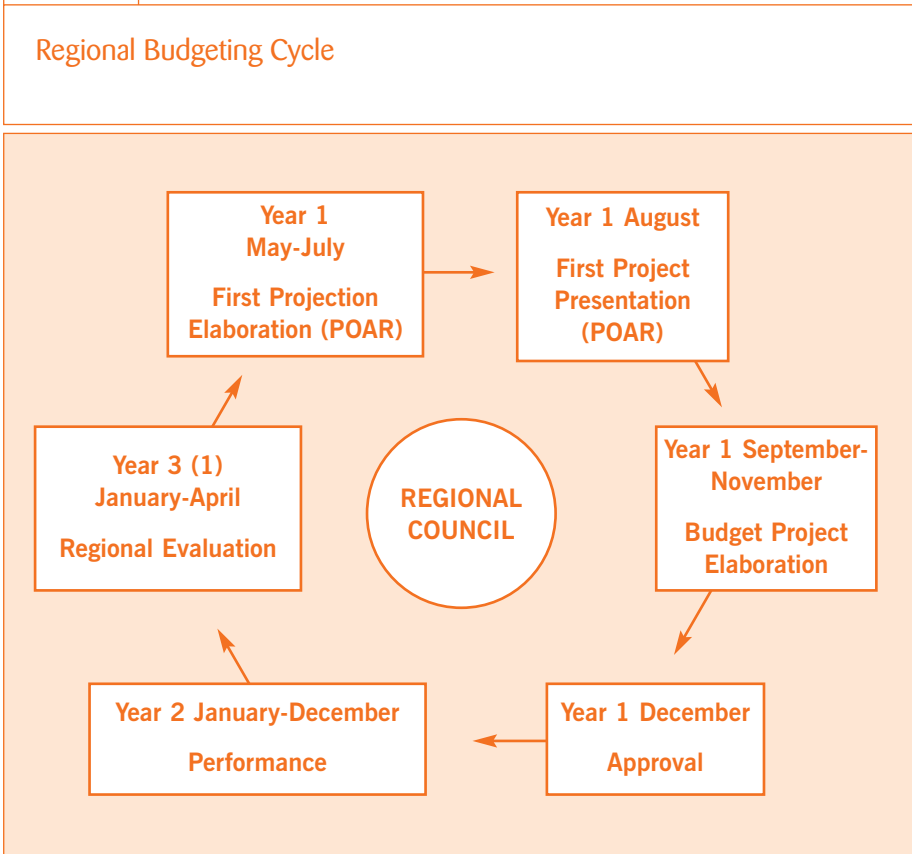
[Source: Toledo, 1999]

design. The great range of experience, though, makes judging PRODERS a risky enterprise, and is a pointer to the weight of local organisations and advisors, and their standing and commitment in the region. In addition, technological 'packages', albeit of the agroecological type, suggested by the ministry or by academics and technicians often insisted on products whose production requirements and marketing opportunities had often not been studied sufficiently in the context of a specific region. The results were often more damaging than helpful, as the following quote (from another region) indicates:

'In 1997 the funds arrived for the study of the pita plant and its production; nurseries were made and planting took place; as well as maintenance the following year; then in 1999 the plants gave no harvest and the project closed and is now abandoned... No one here wants to invest work now

because there are no funds, yet they need work for some income at least to maintain the family...' [community member]

Budget planning

The annual budget planning process (Figure 9) aimed to design a budget that would integrate all relevant governmental sectors, following the guidelines set in the long-term programme design.

Yet in practice the budget was mostly designed by government institutions and only presented to councils for discussion and formal approval. Periodically the councils had the task of assessing the performance of this annual investment plan.

In some cases, such as the Costa Grande CRDS in the state of Guerrero, councils effectively drew up an annual budget and negotiated it with state institutions. But the lack of responsive funding from state institutions limited the legitimacy of the same council and discouraged further involvement in it by member organisations. The PRODERS team and its programme also found itself undermined: on the one hand, council members felt misled by the PRODERS initiative when its lack of political power in convincing other, stronger, line ministries to respond to decentralised planning and budget initiatives was brought to the fore. Similarly, the state government institutions lost faith in PRODERS since no funds of any weight were flowing into the state. Having been denied the recognition as a programme, its policy reach was limited. Without significant funds of its own, PRODERS could not attract recognition easily from these different actors either.

> *'In 1997 we defined several priority proposals, but there was no response [to them by government]. I remember that we submitted the documents in COPLADE, with copies for the other institutions, but then the agencies said that they had not received such documents; this we had to inform our community about; then some authorities made use of that to say that we were the problem and were obstructing things, so that the council died away.'*
> [community council member]

Joint budgeting thus never took off, and faced additional ingrained problems:

- In spite of decentralisation policies, the legal process for public budgeting was still too centralised and sectorialised and regional criteria were not included in central budgets.

- Rigid norms and regulations for sectoral programmes were often incompatible with the objectives of the different regions.

- CSOs often lacked the technical skills for budget design tasks; hence they frequently refused to participate.

- Clientelistic relationships: some representatives of federal and state institutions were reluctant to engage in this planning framework, and preferred the discretional use of public funds. Conversely, some CSOs preferred to receive financial resources from political associates (often local bureaucrats).

Neither the finance ministry nor the national planning law had been adjusted to allow the councils to play a management and decision-making role. This made any semblance of fiscal decentralisation impossible. The PRODERS councils often appeared as impostors to the other ministries, and confused actors in the region. This was most marked in those regions where several ministries had their councils.

Integrated local and micro-regional projects

The integrated local and micro-regional projects were PRODERS' chief tool for promoting participation, sustainability and integrated action by different actors, and for recognising the rights of local actors in determining a vision of how to use natural resources on their land, or on land that they were living on. As outlined previously, this involved action by different sectors with community planning and capacity-building being a central element. The principal characteristics of these projects were (see Figure 10):

- local scale: integrated projects located in or near protected areas and other pockets of high biodiversity;

- participatory planning at community level;

- focus on institutional collaboration in resourcing and operation; and

- PRA for territorial and ecological land use planning.

As noted earlier, achieving coordination between different sector programmes within the SEMARNAP was difficult enough; but control over resources and votes made coordination at the micro-regional and regional level immensely difficult. We can only speculate what might have happened if the finance ministry had recognised the budget-holding right of councils and had allowed appropriate funding of PRODERS' programmes.

The insufficiency of financial resources did not allow local people to see the impacts of the use of agro-ecological resources and successful livelihood strategies. Conflicts within communities and regions over land rights or resource use, as well as political

FIGURE 10

Integrated attention to communities
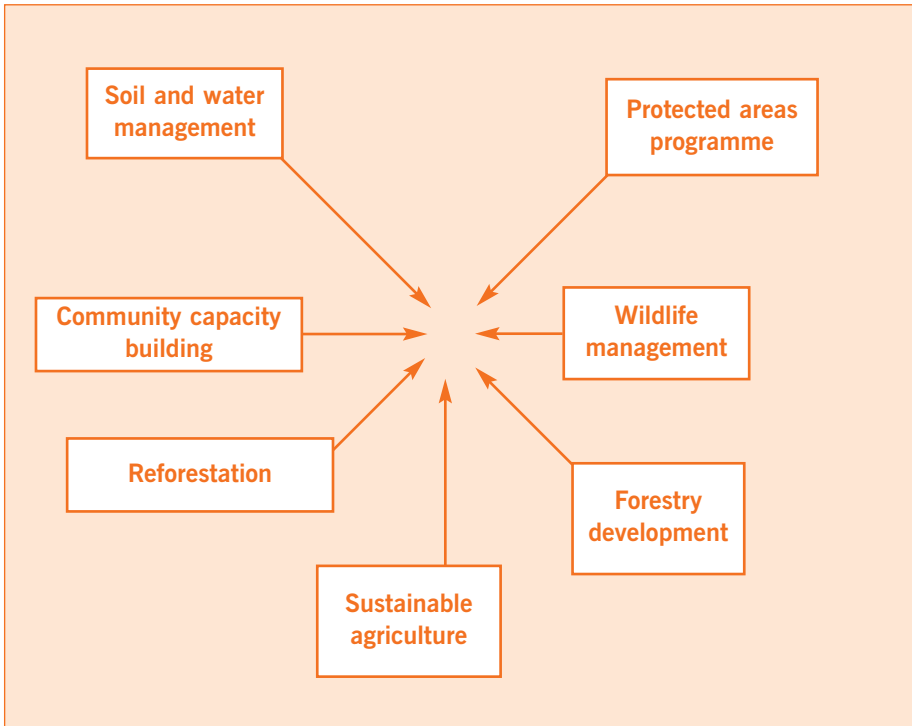
differences, caused rifts that made the creation of visions for the mid to long-term development of a community's territory, or a wider region, quite impossible.

Although local governments were included in the planning and financing process, often these tended not to be municipalities, but rather authorities of smaller units, hamlets (*'comunidades, agencias, aldeas'*) subordinate to the larger municipal authorities. This sometimes proved problematic as municipal authorities did not necessarily defend the plans made, nor push for them in meetings within COPLADEMUNS (regional municipal planning committees). COPLADEMUNS had been established by central government as part of the policy drive for decentralisation. In deference to the principle of decentralisation (at the state level), the DGPR had decided to mention the COPLADEMUNS in the original policy document, but effectively ignored this level of local planning by locating PRODERS at the state level within the planning authorities of the state government (COPLADES, or development planning committees, integrating different ministries at state level). This was done because it was felt that COPLADEMUNS had not yet become effective

in enabling local authorities to design a joint vision or plan and negotiating with ministries. Rather, meetings of the municipal committees and of the COPLADEMUNS were commonly used by governmental agencies in the same way as previous single ministry meetings offering particular programmes to local authorities. In other words, some community representatives and municipal authorities might have arrived with a wish list from several communities, or with an interest in keeping their particular privileges, political connections or positions alive.

> 'Local governments did not want to consider the regions; it was said they [local governments] were like small kingdoms, like small presidents. That is why many municipal authorities did not want to participate: they said: this does not respect the autonomy of the local government, and things like that.'
>
> [community member]

Whatever the intentions of the DGPR and associated agencies and NGOs, integrated approaches to development and investment in the regions was rarely attempted and joint planning was not encouraged or facilitated by the organisers or these meetings of the COPLADEMUNS. It could have been argued that PRODERS could have made an effort to transform these spaces for negotiation created by the central state into a space for participatory planning by and for municipal authorities in the regions. The DGPR, however, decided to focus on the space of most influence over and interest for state governments, i.e. the COPLADES. By focusing on these more powerful – but rarely effective – institutions, PRODERS acknowledged the importance of the state governments but also gave up much of its own identity along the way. This was done on purpose according to the DGPR, since it did not want to be seen to be domineering 'from above'. Nonetheless, the legitimacy of these state level institutions was even weaker in most of the regions given their lack of inclusivity and transparency in many cases.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of PRODERS' programmatic aspects had been written into the original policy document, in recognition of the value of critical self-evaluation and learning for improvement and participation by regional actors in the assessment of the programme's effectiveness. However, the proposed M&E focused in a rather general way on only two aspects:

- annual impact assessments, and

- indicators agreed in the long-term programme.

The mid-term evaluation of PRODERS was carried out between 1997 and 1998. It was a mixture of monitoring and evaluation work, undertaken by external consultants and not done as a participatory exercise. However, DGPR's disposition to change this is highlighted by its commitment to the applied research undertaken by this project, for instance, and its preparation for different practices in the future (the next administration). This indicates quite a singular openness by a governmental institution.[28] Some echo of this trust in learning through the process was provided by one of the community actors from Chiapas:

'Although it is difficult to measure, [one of the positive impacts has been] that one can see that the idea of caring for resources now, for the future of our children, is to be found amongst people. Some programmes (organic maize, intensive pasturing) have had some impact on daily practice, as the pilot trials have been good.'

'Yes, it helps us a lot and it will be of use to us in the future too; what happens is that we have hardly begun yet, it is just a first step.'

[community member speaking about agro-forestry plots]

There were several factors which limited participation in M&E. According to Toledo there were three key limitations:

1. With no official tradition of public policy impact evaluation in Mexico that sought qualitative assessments and analysed these in a transparent way, let alone a participatory approach to such assessments, neither government nor civil society actors quite trusted PRODERS' proposal for M&E, nor knew how to engage with it. There was little inclination by government actors to respond to a participatory evaluation by implementing identified changes. Civil society, on the other hand, was not accustomed to praising what had gone well or critiquing problem areas and making suggestions for improvement. Often monitoring and simple output reviews were the only inputs expected of people even in the work undertaken by the PRODERS team in its last year of operation, 2000. There was little thought given to a feedback loop.

2. There was little technical capacity to monitor indicators at the regional level effectively and accurately. Even at the community level this skill, and the faith in the potential benefits from such an exercise, have still to be built in most regions.

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28 The DGPR actively supported and participated in the research project reported on here, and took a specific interest in participatory monitoring and evaluation. From 2000 onwards it also received funds and collaboration from a DFID-funded bilateral project on institutional capacity-building in participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) of its programme, although the first year of that project did not entail participatory approaches as such. Between 2001 and 2003, the participatory aspect of this project has been considerably extended with pilots of PM&E designs and applications initiated in three regions at community and regional level.

3. CSOs or local governments were often not able to follow up the process and to ensure that government and non-government actors use the information gathered in a constructive and confidential way. Also, these organisations were more concerned with immediate demands than with broader issues, and PM&E is often an additional activity, the benefits of which are intangible at first. Interest in M&E of long-term plans is therefore even lower among many CSOs and unclear as yet to many local governments.

The path toward effective M&E and in particular a participatory praxis in M&E was, then, a difficult but courageous one for the DGPR.

These were not the only challenges, opportunities and bottlenecks experienced by PRODERS, but they offer some of the essential arenas for reflection and would benefit from precise but also flexible suggestions for improvement. Many of those alternatives are being implemented already in several of the regions and communities where PRODERS was active, with or without PRODERS. Experiences from other countries, be they Colombia, Nicaragua, Bolivia or Senegal, are also valuable. It is too early to put aside the experience and vision of PRODERS 'version I'; it will be valuable to apply the lessons of civil society and government from that phase and from other, similar programmes to the current, and hopefully future, versions of PRODERS.

4. Lessons learned – of conditions and visions

'It is difficult to imagine (…) changes within governmental bureaucracies in the foreseeable future. There are too many vested interests, particularly relating to individual power and corruption' (Griffith et al. 1999:39, citing Robert Chambers). Chambers focuses on the need for personal change and a new kind of professional, committed to reversing paradigms and fundamental attitudinal change if democratic participation in NRM and sustainable development is to be achieved.

The PRODERS experience raises a range of lessons that confirms Chambers' statement. PRODERS also proves the complexity of social and political dimensions that need to be addressed when seeking institutional – and through it paradigmatic – changes. Change will inevitably require time, something that the key actors who promoted PRODERS within a highly competitive political atmosphere certainly did not have. This is especially so when you consider that traditionally the lifespan of a government programme corresponds only to the period of administration of a president, i.e. six years. Whilst this is often also the case in other countries, the fact that PRODERS still exists today – albeit with a spatial focus on protected natural areas – is noteworthy. However, much of what made the PRODERS idea innovative – a decentralised and participatory model of poverty reduction and NRM – has been taken out of the current version.

Nonetheless, in relation to the need for personal changes in attitude and behaviour as one key element in the whole complex arena of change and transformation, PRODERS reflects the importance of social networks and of understanding the interactions between individuals and organisations. Many analysts have highlighted these already (e.g. Long and Long, 1992), and in our view such understanding needs to enrich policy design and analysis frameworks like the sustainable livelihoods framework (see Box 4).

To assess the impact of a policy for sustainable livelihoods and development, and to scale up the arena for such action to the regional level, involves understanding and measuring a complexity of contexts, of different types of capital and institutional processes. It is this complexity that PRODERS tried to acknowledge in its policy design, but without allowing time for adequate understanding of each of the components or elements of the sustainable livelihood framework (SLF – see below), and without looking at its own organisational processes and issues. Neither were the mediating institutions and organisations that affect the actual implementation of the policy considered. Policy analysis that wishes to offer tools for policymakers and civil society alike to improve implementation and impact needs to take into account the non-linear way that policy is implemented in countries like Mexico (see Shankland, 2000), and the lack of information and knowledge, or lack of trust in the information disseminated, which prevents people from using opportunities created.

For instance, PRODERS' national and regional staff repeatedly commented that four years after the programme began there was minimal knowledge of its objectives and even its existence among the communities or regions, local or regional governments and civil society. Information flow had been too limited, and bureaucrats, politicians and operational staff had problems describing the distinguishing characteristics of PRODERS beyond its objective of participatory planning and inter-institutional coordination. It was not enough to announce the programme and start getting people and planning or design processes in place so that actors understood this was not just another government programme where rural people go to meetings or work in the fields for a labourer's daily wage. Building up such knowledge, and creating trust in the government and non-government staff promoting or supporting PRODERS and communities and their organisations, was a long process. After all, these communities and regions were the most marginalised in the country, often very isolated, without access to computers, and programme material was not available in local languages. Neither were PRODERS teams inclined to 'sell' the programme since this was to be a non-partisan and non-self-promotional programme.

Given its regional scope and conceptual breadth, the PRODERS case shows that where the policy in question already includes most of the elements of the SLF, ie. contexts, conditions and trends; livelihood resources; institutional processes and organisational structures; livelihood strategies; and SL outcomes, policy analysis could benefit from taking an SL approach. It is the focus on power relations and structures, and on the mediating institutions, as Shankland (ibid) confirms, that affects the translation of policy into action and the use by local people of different types of assets and entitlements.

We propose that carrying out a systematic and highly graphical analysis of policy processes and power relations or mediations with local and regional actors using the SL framework would structure and systematise the policy evaluation process in a way that would strengthen the state-initiatied process of participation. Simply creating indicators to set up M&E systems that provide information for the government organisation will not reveal power relations and how policy is made or designed. In addition, as several actors pointed out at national level, PM&E is only effective where it combines both quantitative and qualitative information; it is difficult to win arguments in terms of impact over livelihoods with outsiders who do not yet understand qualitative indicators which are highly specific to a context or a person. Pragmatism needs to be combined with the recognition and validation of the subjective – duly triangulated – and the qualitative detail.

Thus, as we saw earlier, the DGPR relied heavily on its social and political networks. And these were not established through party politics or years of involvement in bureaucratic practice and creation of patronage within one institution or government system. With the advantage of having come into office as 'outsiders' to the public sector, and with experience well beyond both their academic background and their commitment to sustainable resource management, the ministry at central and regional levels could benefit from its personal credentials. It also benefited from a climate in which civil society was demanding changes, and in which government and international cooperation discourse were favouring both sustainable development and participatory approaches.

There are several critical factors that created opportunities for transformations within PRODERS, despite these not being realised to the full:

- leadership

- ability to learn from previous experience

- disposition to take risks

Leadership was considered to be legitimate at least in the first three or four years of the life of the DGPR. This was based on the personal history and commitment of the key actors at different levels of the institutional hierarchy. Despite the criticisms of PRODERS and the SEMARNAP from many quarters, recognition was given for a difference in style and intention. But this also meant that bitterness was more keenly felt when expectations were dashed and grassroots or regional initiatives were seen to be obstructed. Leadership was also limited, some critics say, by the naivety of imagining that an idea such as PRODERS, which emerged from a team of academics and NGO collaborators, could be translated to the level of public policy from the origins of the PAIR.

'Swimming against the current' was the slogan that emerged in later interviews with different actors. The core team of the DGPR was certainly proud of this self-image and much of the loyalty that existed and still exists in some regions amongst staff was based on this view, i.e. that PRODERS at all levels was trying to do something novel and challenge ingrained structures and patterns of behaviour. What won the programme its respect was this commitment to take integrated approaches to rural development well beyond those of the 1970s and 80s, while building on experience gained by researchers, politicians and civil society organisations in the meantime and trusting in broad alliances formed over time irrespective of political party affiliations.

As part of PRODERS' challenging of the mainstream (while desperately wanting to become part of it, to the detriment too often of basic values of participation and

decentralisation), the DGPR and collaborating groups demonstrated their disposition for taking risks. They were prepared to move beyond the obvious boundaries of safe bureaucrats – with the inevitable exceptions – and dared to make mistakes in the process.

What has to be recognised repeatedly, however, is the diversity in responses by regions and between regions in terms of uptake, democratic planning and implementation or use of new programmes and spaces created for participation. This points to the importance not only of varying resource and skills bases, but also of individuals from government or the NGO sector and the strength of CSOs in that region. The case of the Chinantla shows this clearly: here the farmers' organisation UPISL worked hand-in-hand with an Oaxacan NGO and the Oaxaca delegation of the SEMARNAP to use PRODERS in the most constructive sense. Here funds were administered by the group with great transparency, information flowed and collective oversight was applied in different phases of the project cycle and the wider programme. However, in a nearby micro-region where no such organisation existed, internal conflicts and personal power struggles laid waste to the first three years of the programme. But even in such a situation a learning curve was observed, confirming again the importance of the opportunity given by this unusual programme, whatever its clear limitations through its centralised and often utilitarian approach to participation.

In particular, then, it is worth highlighting the following additional lessons, appropriate also for the current context of policymaking:

• Institutions and people do matter

• The importance of the regional level

• The usefulness of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

4.1 Institutions and people

Institutions are not simply government bodies (as defined in Mexican political language), but are also the core of social capital as well as the organisational space and arena for action that facilitates or obstructs both sustainable livelihoods and participation (see Scoones, 1998). Both preceding and parallel policy developments in Mexico (e.g. the solidarity programme) and the origins of the PRODERS and SEMARNAP teams, as we have mentioned on several occasions, allowed for new types of networks between social actors to develop. No longer was it only the political class or patronage and party line that made for an understanding of the proposition or opinion of the other: here there were policymakers and field staff who had worked

previously in NGOs or in universities who were now running most of the work with communities. They brought actors from civil society into the policymaking and evaluation process – albeit in a limited fashion at this stage – such as through the councils and the planning process. In other words, PRODERS could not have achieved what it did without the social networks to draw on and without the technical and socio-political knowledge that existed in civil society and some sectors of government in relation to sustainable NRM and participation. Yet power was also considered to have corrupted many of the nownew? government actors in the SEMARNAP; they were seen to have become overly reformist and statist in their work and thus in some sense abusive of their networks. On the other hand, within CSOs and the SEMARNAP themselves, as we saw, there was frequent institutional resistance to collaboration and few incentives for changes in attitude and behaviour. For many outside the government machinery, nonetheless, the fact that some of their former colleagues had now become part of a government institution which was seeking them out to work together made them interested in such an organisation.

It is appropriate to note yet again the importance of understanding such organisations and institutions in terms of the people within them and their battles, be it with others or with the factional procedures imposed by other agencies. Understanding these factors would have made some of the actors in the regional councils better able to use their existing networks effectively or build upon the opportunity offered by PRODERS. Thus, rather than multiple-actor councils, single-actor councils might have considered adopting a farmer-to-farmer approach or one of slowly incorporating different actors in their deliberations, in the style of 'future search conferences' practised elsewhere. Farmer school networks might have been proposed to build on some experience in transforming communities, to build regional collaboration as well as a shared identity, and increase the opportunities for benefit sharing well beyond the simple attendance at council meetings.[29]

4.2 The importance of the regional level

For participation in NRM at the regional level to be institutionalised, and for sustainable development to be achieved, several conditions need to exist. Whereas PRODERS can be seen to have responded to many of the lessons learned internationally and nationally in terms of participation and development, and to have offered an opportunity for policy innovation along the lines of the sustainable livelihoods framework, it could not achieve all of its objectives because of a number of limitations. Some of these bottlenecks, such as financial resourcing and legitimacy

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29 See for example, the experience of Mampong Valley Social Laboratory in Ghana, in the late 1980s
   (Yaw Owusu, 1993).

of institutions and organisations at regional level, are not unique to Mexico or this programme. As the international literature proves (see for example, Thompson, 1995; Farrington and Lobo, 1997; Hinchcliffe et al., 1999) such a practice of participatory NRM needs to exist in the first place, whether at regional or local level. And as lessons from attempts to scale up participatory watershed development in other parts of the world have shown, funds need to be channelled to local organisations or legitimate regional organisations or institutions with as few intermediaries as possible (e.g. Hinchcliffe op. cit.).

Also, capacity-building needs to be co-ordinated, preferably at micro-regional or regional level, by a legitimate agency or institution. Equity issues and the needs of local and regional institution-building need to be addressed in terms of access to power in the form of legitimate participation in decision-making bodies, with clarity in roles and responsibilities of different actors, so as to delineate clearly those of the state and of civil society actors. Clarity about these roles is important, particularly in the early phases of trust-building in multiple-stakeholder spaces, while flexibility is needed once confidence, trust and skills have been built.

4.3 Learning and transformation

Finally, transformation is not possible nor sustainable – at the individual, group or organisational scale – if learning from practice and a disposition to revise one's way of doing things is not occurring. How stakeholders can learn, individually and as groups, at local, regional or national level, is widely debated at present and many different approaches are taken. During our research for this project, the project coordination and PRODERS teams could not form learning groups at regional and national levels, unlike some of the other case studies. The regional councils had proven to be too conflictive or too ineffectual and creating independent, additional groups at a time when the councils themselves were being contested was simply too difficult. However, the idea of forming learning groups is now part of the current administration's version of PRODERS. A participatory M&E system has been based on lessons learned from this first phase of policy analysis. Yet even now piloting learning groups at local and regional level offers important lessons for government staff and advisors alike. Clearly, learning in the regions requires a coherent approach to capacity-building but also a deep and broad practice of PM&E, with government (local, national, state) and CSO commitment to respond actively to lessons drawn from such exercises. DGPR staff suggested, for instance, strengthening intra-institutional learning by picking up on practices that the PAIR group had brought into the SEMARNAP and the DGPR:

'What is needed is also to return to the practice of having exchange workshops and reflection meetings between and amongst SEMARNAP teams as well as other agencies. This would allow again the sharing of experience, the joining of resources and exchange of theoretical and practical knowledge.'
[mid-level manager and support staff, DGPR]

PRODERS as a specific policy for participatory rural sustainability and as a programme for regional sustainable development was designed and implemented by a young team that did not belong to the federal government; people who had the energy to take risks in offering a range of opportunities that were hoped to bring about the required changes within government entities when promoting decentralised decision-making, local and regional self-responsibility and participation. Nonetheless, as some of its most committed critics said, PRODERS grew from an NGO or academic background that emerged from the experience of contestation; to become a national policy, and a praxis within institutions and organisations, its proposals and implementation need to be constructed in phases if negotiating power is to be attained. After all, change in both national and regional bureaucratic process, as well as individual and institutional learning, does not happen in a linear fashion and in the arenas of agroecology, biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation, successes rarely occur quickly. Reviewing advances made and bottlenecks encountered, adjusting actions and decisions on the way, and showing institutional willingness to critique and learn, were identified as key factors for civil society organisations and individuals to gain confidence and trust in the policy process and the adaptability of politicians and technical staff to local and regional dynamics.

We should remind ourselves that the DGPR was not born with the explicit objective of transforming the government apparatus: in this case the SEMARNAP and its counterparts in other political sectors. Its mission was to promote a model of NRM and poverty reduction based on social participation in the context of sustainable development at the regional level and within priority regions. Yet, as we have seen, the expectations of this new body within the SEMARNAP were high, not least because of the personal experiences and progressive attitudes of the DGPR members. We need to remember that even though it was not the main intention of the DGPR – through PRODERS – to achieve an institutional transformation of the ministry beyond sectoral co-operation, such a transformation was essential for PRODERS' objectives to be fully realised. The two processes and visions need to go hand-in-hand, as mentioned earlier: a new concept of participatory policy and practice needs institutional transformation. It is this which makes the implementation of such an essentially integrated concept, and one which attempts to address or reflect the

complexities of sustainable development, so challenging under the predominating administrative and political conditions in Mexico and elsewhere.

PRODERS' 'life history' cannot be told or analysed in such a short report; it is worth a number of doctoral dissertations. But the few snapshots we offer here do illustrate the relevance of PRODERS' original aims and the importance of learning from, and building on, the opportunities it offered and the disappointment it also brought. PRODERS offers certain dreams which may be reformist in nature but represent one way forward in the search not only for sustainable NRM and livelihoods, but also for participatory policy evaluation and design. Those swimming against the current will always encounter shadows and risks, but they deserve to be praised as long as injustices are not committed in the process. The SEMARNAP and DGPR or PRODERS teams have not been given another chance in this current administration to respond to the criticisms expressed in evaluations and analyses like this project. However, lessons are being learned and are being applied with greater flexibilty by other programmes, CSOs and teams in the states and regions that are committed to the underlying principles that PRODERS took to the centre of the Ministry of Environment in Mexico.

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