



## Unexpected translations in urban policy mobility. The case of the Acahualinca development programme in Managua, Nicaragua



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### ABSTRACT

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

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### Introduction

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

This paper aims at exploring the chains of translations through which urban policies are made mobile and mutable (McCann & Ward, 2012, 2013) – in other words, how urban policies work and are translated into practice. By combining the policy mobility and

city management literature (Clegg & Kornberger, 2006; Czarniawska, 2002, 2010; Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005; Kornberger & Carter, 2010), the paper also aims to bring together two research fields that share a relational understanding of space and organizing but that have so far remained separate communities of practice.

The paper is informed by the case of La Chureca, the rubbish dump and slum of Managua, Nicaragua, and its renewal programme, the Barrio Acahualinca Integrated Development Programme (henceforth, “Acahualinca Programme”), funded by the Spanish Agency for International Development Co-operation and co-implemented by Managua municipality. From 2009 to 2013, the Programme sealed the open dump, constructed a new sanitary landfill, constructed a recycling station where many former informal waste collectors now formally work for the municipality, and built new housing for slum residents (Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2012a, 2012b, 2013).

The paper demonstrates that, in the process of translation, the Acahualinca Programme both shaped and was shaped by the policy recipients. Despite initial compliance with the Programme, at the final stage of implementation, and under pressure to secure both households and jobs, local La Chureca actors enacted a myriad of

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unexpected small acts of defiance and resistance, changes, and transformations. The paper also examines the roles of local actors (e.g., politicians, local NGOs, municipal officers, slum dwellers, and waste collectors) acting as Programme translators, their translations, and the relational sites where the Programme is mutated and made mobile – in other words, translated.

### Theoretical framework

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

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

Policy planning and policy implementation entail connecting and stabilizing a network of collective actions, often intermediated by translators (Czarniawska, 2002), such as consultants who translate technique and knowledge into plans, or by politicians who transform citizen needs into policies. In development studies, development translators are “skilled brokers (managers, consultants, fieldworkers and community leaders) who read the meaning of a project into the different institutional languages of its stakeholder supporters, constantly creating interest and making it real” (Mosse, 2005: 9). Through translation, interests become interlocked, making development projects and policies, such as the Acahualinca Programme, become real. These translations can either shift or perpetuate power dynamics between and within global and local actors and can therefore lead either towards greater social, economic, and environmental justice (Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2013), or towards “tyranny from below” in which the “grasstops” (Briggs, 2008) and their leadership block progress and control or capture benefits intended for the poor, misusing them for private interests (de Wit & Berner, 2009). From this perspective, in the process of policy-making, new and unexpected circuits of knowledge, power, and identity emerge in these global “scapes” (Appadurai, 1996).

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

### Methodology

This paper is based on a case study (Flyvbjerg, 2011) conducted in the La Chureca rubbish dump and slum and examining the

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

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

Throughout our fieldwork, we conducted personal interviews with key actors related to La Chureca and the Acahualinca Programme, including local politicians, municipal and ministry officers, local and international NGO managers and mid-management functionaries, representatives of civil society organizations, local community members, community leaders, waste collectors, informal settlement residents, journalists, and consultants.

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

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

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