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Lessons from collaborative governance and sociobiology theories for reinforcing sustained cooperation: a government food security case study

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This research aimed to understand how cooperation and collaboration work in interagency arrangements using a case study of the public management of food security and nutrition in Bogotá, Colombia.

Study Design: This study explored the available scientific literature on Collaborative Governance within the Public Management body of knowledge and the literature on Cooperation from the Sociobiology field. Then, proposals were developed for testing on the ground through an action-research effort that was documented as a case study. Finally, observations were used to test the proposals and some analytical generalizations were developed.

Methods: To document the case study, several personal interviews, file reviews and normative reviews were conducted to generate a case study database.

Results: Collaboration and cooperation concepts within the framework of interagency public management can be understood as a shared desirable outcome that unites different agencies in committing efforts and resources to the accomplishment of a common goal for society, as seen in obtaining food and nutrition security for a specific territory. Collaboration emerges when the following conditions exist and decreases when they are absent: (1) a strong sponsorship that may come from a central government policy or from a distributed interagency consensus; (2) a clear definition of the participating agencies; (3) stability of the staff assigned to the coordination system; and (4) a fitness function for the staff, some mechanism to reward or punish the collaboration level of each individual in the interagency effort.

Conclusions: As this research investigated only one case study, the findings must be taken with care and any generalization made from this study needs to be analytical in nature. Additionally, research must be done to accept these results universally. Food security and nutrition efforts are interagency in nature. For collaboration between agencies to emerge, a

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minimum set of characteristics that were established during the merging of the public management and sociobiology fields of knowledge and validated by means of a case study must be accomplished.

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Introduction

In 2010, the Colombian Government, through its Agency for the protection of families and their well-being (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar – ICBF), published the Colombian National Poll on Nutrition Status with the goal of finding the principal determinants of the nutrition problems in the Colombian population. This poll estimated that, although Global Malnutrition in Colombia is only about 3.4% in children less than five years old, food and nutrition insecurity affect up to 42.7% of the population.

The goal of transforming the well-being of Colombians to include food and nutrition security is a big endeavour. These kinds of goals are not the responsibility of a particular agency but of the entire society, which makes it easy to understand that an extensive use of interagency network efforts is needed. For Colombia, the coordination of interagency efforts for food and nutrition security is a significant topic in the public health agenda. This research investigated how collaboration works in interagency settings for the food and nutrition security policy of Colombia, specifically in Bogotá.

Methods

The research strategy used was the case study recommended by Yin¹; when a contemporary construct must be explored, it is difficult to separate it from its context and the research starts with asking why or how, looking for answers that are complex in nature. This study explored the available scientific literature on Collaborative Governance from the Public Management body of knowledge and the literature on Cooperation from the Sociobiology field of knowledge. Then, proposals were developed for testing on the ground through an action-research effort within the framework of a consultancy process that was documented as a case study using several personal interviews, file reviews and normative reviews for the construction of a case study database. Finally, observations were used to test the proposals and some analytical generalizations were developed (Fig. 1).

The research question

The research question started with the practical problem stated by government officials about a perceived decrease in importance, participation and commitment from government agencies and their staff for the coordination system for food and nutrition security in Bogotá in recent years. This problem prompted the question:

How do cooperation and collaboration work in interagency government arrangements when developing policy?

Choosing theoretical frameworks

Choosing the field of Collaborative Government from the Public Management literature was an obvious starting point due to the nature of the studied problem: the emergence of collaboration in interagency networks. For Collaborative Government, a profound theoretical revision was developed.

Cooperation in nature was chosen from the Sociobiology literature based on the previous work of researchers who used nature to help understand human social behaviour.

No review of food and nutrition security was developed because the principal problem investigated here was not how to assure food and nutrition security but how to develop collaboration in interagency networks, using the food and nutrition security system in Bogotá as a case study.

Developing proposals for the research question

With guidance from the literature review, the following proposals were developed:

P1: Collaboration in interagency settings emerges when some kind of sponsorship exists for the goal to be achieved.

P2: Collaboration in interagency settings emerges when the people staffing the interagency arrangement remain the same.

P3: Collaboration in interagency settings emerges when the people staffing the interagency arrangement have something to win or something to lose depending on whether or not they collaborate.

Theoretical framework

Some issues with collaborative governance

The academic field of Collaborative Governance has its roots in the work of Professor Elinor Ostrom, her notion of Collective Action² and her original doctoral thesis,³ in which she carried out a study related to the problem of water management in the Los Angeles area (California). Ostrom found a complex issue in the accountability and governance of the regional water system in this area due to the existence of several agencies with legal responsibility for said management of:

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