Reflection

Transparency for What: An Analysis of Mexico and Brazil's Strategy During the Pandemic

Gabriel S. Rojas Salazar[2]

Abstract: Transparency is often used in public management but not constantly defined, and it appears as a normative element that improves democracies. However, in a context with high ambiguity and uncertainty, what is the importance of transparency? This text argues that organizational transparency related to the development of trust offers a useful framework to analyze the importance of transparency as openness, competence, and reliability. In a context such as the pandemic, a transparent government strengthens trust among citizens, while an opaque one can reduce it. It is briefly analyzed how in the case of Mexico, the strategy based on hermeticism, mixed messages, and incompetence had affected the results of the health policies during the pandemic.

Introduction

Governments have to decide and act in contexts of great uncertainty and ambiguity. However, when they face an unknown virus pandemic, this vagueness increases. As we have seen, dealing with COVID-19 has implied a muddled learning process in which there is no definitive evidence, information change constantly, and aspects of the virus change in the space of weeks. Furthermore, the appearance of new strains alerts us about the evolutionary dynamics of the virus. Governments have to adapt fast and design policies that contain and treat the infection, albeit with scarce information. Moreover, governments are also compelled to communicate and inform about the virus, explain and detail the health measures implemented, and clarify information that could mislead people to follow the sanitary recommendations (Romero, 2021; Moon, 2021; Ding, 2020). These tasks are necessary to secure the effectiveness of health policies during the pandemic. However, suppose public servants do not communicate clearly. In that case, their information is fuzzy, or their decisions are opaque; citizens could lose their trust in authorities, thus questioning the policies and increasing the number of people infected (Lee & Li, 2021).

Therefore, it could be argued that transparent communication promotes generalized trust, which generates that citizens act according to the sanitary measures, reducing the contagions and deaths during the pandemic. Nevertheless, what happens when governments are opaque and do not inform or communicate transparently? One answer is that citizens lose trust in their authorities and thus do not follow sanitary recommendations or challenge them. Hence, this article suggests that in countries where governments are opaque; in other words: where communication is hermetic and unclear, where decisions are biased against social groups for political reasons, and there is no transparency or any explanation of the rationale of decisions made, untrust among the

[2] Associate Professor, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE) Mexico, gabriel.rojas@cide.edu

population increases, facilitating the failure of health measures during the pandemic.

In that line, Mexico and Brazil are fascinating cases to analyze. In both countries, the governments —and mostly the presidents— have questioned the seriousness of COVID-19 (Cavalcanti, 2021); diminished critics of scientists about their management (Renteria & Arellano-Gault, 2021) even promoted actions against transparency. For example, gaming reported data about deaths (Ahmed, 2020). Further, Mexico and Brazil had one of the highest tolls of infected population and deaths caused by COVID-19 worldwide.

This brief analysis reflects over the importance of transparency and communicative transparency in promoting generalized trust of the population that facilitates governments' health strategies success during the pandemic. Thus, this text is divided into three sections. The first one discusses the different meanings of transparency and presents a helpful framework for organizational transparency and trust (Auger; 2014; Menon & Goh, 2005). The second section is dedicated to describing and explaining the case of Mexico and Brazil. The Mexican case is explored by analyzing the *semáforo epidemiológico*, a communication strategy system implemented by the Health Minister to inform about the contagion rates, consisting of four colors. Hugo López-Gatell, sub secretary of the Public Health Minister, was in charge of this strategy, who, until the date of writing this text (April 2022), is in charge of the pandemics control and health policies. He has been heavily criticized for his declarations and decisions, mainly because of his incoherence, mistakes, and lies. In the case of Brazil, it is examined the strategy of underreported deceases and the declarations of Jair Bolsonaro comparing COVID-19 with the flu. The last section concludes with some relevant reflections on the importance of

transparency in constructing and strengthening generalized trust in citizens. In the discussion about the importance of communicating transparently, the pandemic has offered us a great example in which communication between government-society and how it is done is vital.

What is Transparency?

Transparency is a common concept in public management. Nonetheless, as Hood (2007) argues is a normative concept but not precisely well defined. Therefore, this concept's definitions and theoretical perspectives vary consistently throughout the literature. Transparency is often seen as essential to all processes in public management and as a critical condition for democracy. Likewise, transparency is discussed as an enabler for public value (Douglas & Miejer, 2016; Hood & Heald, 2006); thus, it is analyzed more as a tool than a condition or a value. In that line, Douglas and Meijer (2016) consider that public organizations can also use transparency to interact and collaborate with different stakeholders.

Nevertheless, transparency is frequently confused with other concepts such as accountability (Fox, 2007) or establishing a causal relationship between both terms, as transparency generates accountability. For example, Fox (2007) states that some phrases have been associated with this relation, like "information is power" or "speaking truth to power". Consequently, transparency seems to be associated with the information governments —public servants and politicians—offer and facilitate about their actions, decisions, and policies. But what kind of information? In what manner and with which mechanisms? Is there any quality standard and temporality, or should it be directed to specific audiences?

The debate around these questions is fundamental and requires a close examination of the different elements that distinguish transparency. Heald (2003) proposes a categorization of transparency in which he differentiates the following types of transparency:

- Event versus the process transparency.
- Real-time versus retrospective transparency.
- Direct versus indirect transparency.

Unfortunately, these categories are not enough to accomplish such an exercise. Transparency is associated more with the publication of information, government openness in their procedures, and the participation of different actors and groups in the design policy process (Fox, 2007). Although, transparency is also related to abilities to communicate and inform clearly and openly.

Transparency and Trust

Another form to define transparency is proposed by Auger (2014); she states that organizational transparency is built upon authenticity, legitimacy, and credibility since these elements develop trust among their stakeholders. Thus, transparency is closely connected with trust (Auger, 2014; Rawlins, 2008), so organizations must behave transparently. In other terms, organizations generate trust and commitment if they inspire confidence, which is attainable by being transparent, competent, and reliable (Hon & Gruning, 1999), which requires a specific type of communication: communicative transparency. Thus, Rawlins (2009) claims that organizational transparency requires integrity, openness, competence, and reliability. Hence, transparency is not only a value, a tool, or the exercise of publishing information, nor is it making an organization a box of glass; instead, it is about generating trust. Trust develops when an organization communicates clearly, informs what it will do, and fulfills expectations (Hon & Gruning, 1999). Auger (2014) mentions that "[w]hen organizations have demonstrated their competence to provide a service or product, stakeholders will expect the organization to continue providing such services or products competently, reliably, and safely" (p.327). In that way, transparency is related to the actual functions of organizations and their success, eliminating some of the critics about goal displacement in bureaucracies because of the obligations of transparency (Hood, 2006).

Additionally, Auger (2014) hypothesizes the interaction between reputation for organizational transparency and communicative transparency on trust and behavioral intentions. Organizations that communicate transparently have greater stakeholder trust and positive behavioral intentions in crises than non-transparent organizations that are opaquer. However, the author does not explain communicative transparency, resulting in an ambiguous concept about communication. Thus, transparency is essential to generate trust, positively impacting critical situations. Therefore, transparent governments are more trustworthy, thus making them more reliable and allowing them to implement health measures more effectively since their population supports them. This perspective could be related to the idea of Roberts (2005) about transparency related to perceptions, attitudes, and communicative skills of public managers. So it could be outlined that transparency is related to open communication, competence, and reliability in this framework, and those elements develop trust.

Then again, trust becomes a central concept for governments, as Peeters and Dussauge expose (2021). Li and Betts (2004) defined that trust contributes to reducing uncertainty. Trust is based on expectations related to organizational ability to conduct business or provide a service as expected by stakeholders (Auger, 2014). However, trust is constantly fluctuating; it requires a permanent reaffirmation, even if the relationship between the organization and stakeholders is stable and sustained. Paradoxically, trust originated all through perceptions that must be materialized at some point, but sometimes, governments only offer discourses and promises of change (Brunsson, 2007).

The Mexican Strategy: López-Gatell, *Semáforo Epidemiológico* and Mixed Messages

Mexico is a compelling case to analyze. The current president is considered a populist. During the pandemic, López Obrador has criticized and minimized the seriousness of the virus. Additionally, have questioned the expertise of scientists and doctors, arguing that their critics are based on political judgments. Despite their high popularity rates, López Obrador's government did not develop trust since their policies and decisions were neither transparent nor competent. Numbers speak for themselves: almost 4 million contagions in Mexico with approximately 300 thousand deaths; (updated on 14 December of 2021). Furthermore, these numbers are high and underestimated (Ahmed, 2020; López-Calva, 2020).

It can be argued that the management of this country is the farthest away from transparency in its three elements: open communication, competence, and reliability. To demonstrate how this country's governments have been opaque and close in their communication, incompetent in their decision-making, and

unreliable, it will describe and analyze the *semáforo epidemiológico* strategy.

In May 2020, after two months of lockdown, health authorities in Mexico decided to implement actions for the "new normality", which included an epidemiological risk traffic light to control the use of public spaces, despite the high number of contagions.
The "epidemiological risk traffic light" started as a way to communicate the advance in the return of activities within the states in Mexico. Hence, this system consists of four colors: red, orange, yellow, and green, each with a meaning and specific recommendations (Gobierno de México, n.d).

- Red: Stay home, economic and social activities controlled by the local or federal authority, and the mandatory use of facemasks in all public spaces.
- Orange: reduced community mobility; economic and social activities were regulated to 50% of their capacity, and the mandatory use of facemasks in all public spaces.
- Yellow: slight decrease in activities in public spaces, the operation of economic and social activities was deployed to 75% of capacity, the mandatory use of a facemask in all closed public spaces, and recommended in open spaces.
- Green: No mobility restrictions, economic and social activities will be carried out as usual, and facemasks are recommended in closed public spaces and mandatory in public transport.

The advance in the system was determined by four indicators: Hospital occupation, hospital trend, the reproduction rate of the coronavirus, and percent positivity. After two months, in July 2020, state governors asked that the

epidemiological traffic light be revised and modified every 15 days (Ordaz, 2020). However, the choice to change the colors was influenced by political aspects and discretionary factors, as later, the methodology was changed to promote more states with a green grade (Roldán, 2020). Also, it did not apply to president López Obrador or other politicians. For example, when the entire country was on the red level, López Obrador declared he would restart his political tours (Ferrer, 2020).

Moreover, AMLO offers a conference every morning, justified as an exercise of transparency and accountability (Natal, 2021). When the pandemic arrived, AMLO designated López-Gatell as the man in charge of crisis management. In the beginning, this charismatic public servant was well regarded for his explanations' clarity and openness to deal with the media. López-Gatell's answer to the pandemic was using the watchman model (Najar, 2020), a model developed in 2006 to control the cases of AH1N1 influenza. According to López-Gatell, this model could be used to monitor the cases of COVID-19 with better precision than massive testing, and also, it was cheaper. However, as months went by, it was clear that the model was inconsistent, and infection tracing was chaotic. Moreover, mixed messages between the sub secretary and AMLO were alarming. AMLO refused to use facemasks and lessened the seriousness of COVID-19 continuing his visits to different localities within the country. López-Gatell promoted the use of facemasks in public areas but rapidly changed his discourse to support the president, proclaiming "[t]he president's strength is moral, it is not a contagious force" (González, 2020).

In December 2020, Mexican authorities lifted mobility restrictions and the change to green in almost all the countries. Several specialists argued that Mexico was in its second wave during this period, with cases increasing in shocking numbers (Expansion Política, 2020). Nonetheless, newspapers took photos of López-Gatell on the beach with no facemask and surrounded by people without following any of the recommendations established by the Minister he managed (Ferri, 2021). These photos generated hassle and distrust among the population, who questioned that even the authority did not follow its own rules.

Scientists, public health specialists, and the population, in general, started to question the mechanism's reliability. Furthermore, it was seen as a simulation, and it was based on the interest in reactivating the economy and on the political concerns of López Obrador (Cahmaji, 2021). Even it was reported that data was manipulated to justify the changes in the traffic light system (Kitroeff, 2020; Ahmed, 2020). Until today (April 2022), this traffic light system is still used.

Brazil Strategy: Bolsonaro's Misinformation and Negligence

The case in Brazil shares some factors with Mexico; the presidents share a populist view. Both have disdained expert opinion and downplayed the severity of the pandemic. However, the case of Brazil reflects the negligence of a government when it comes to being transparent and communicating information.
President Jair Bolsonaro questioned that COVID-19 was a serious disease, pointing out it is like "the flu" (Chaib, 2020). Later, he declared to be against the vaccines. However, the problem is that this process has systematically denied reality, with doctors facing adverse conditions and the saturation of hospitals during the first months of 2020

(Paton Walsh, Shelley, Duwe, and Bonnett, CNN, 2020).

In this sense, the narratives in Brazil were central in the formulation of health policies, so their failure is associated with biases and political discourses, as pointed out by Peci, González, and Dussauge (2022). Bolsonaro's management has been disastrous. Based on a report made by the Senate, the actions carried out by the administration were analyzed. The document is the product of six months of work by a special commission of the Senate and constitutes a welcome effort to ensure accountability in Brazil (Barbara, 2021). According to the report, Bolsonaro spread false information. For example, the Department of Social Communication admitted that it paid influencers to offer positive comments about ineffective medicines provided by the government. In addition, the Department celebrated the fact that Brazil was one of the countries with the largest number of people "recovered" from COVID-19, which implies a high rate of infection, reflecting an ineffective strategy (Senado Federal, 2021). Bolsonaro's actions reflect a lack of transparency, but there are negligent and harmful. The necropolitical approach used by the Bolsonaro government involved letting people fend for themselves, causing one of the worst responses to the pandemic (Filho & Feil, 2021).

How is it possible for the population to trust a government that acted negligently and intentionally? The case of Brazil reflects the importance of transparency and openness and considers the importance of verifying that a government is competent in acting in critical situations. The case of Brazil is an example of what happens when some essential elements of transparency and citizen trust are ignored.

Final Reflections

Overall, it is evident that transparency can be defined as how governments communicate and inform. Hence, transparency is related to trust; thus, the definition proposed by Auger (2014) is valuable. Organizational transparency implies competence, openness, communicative transparency, and reliability. Governments tend to promote discourses full of promises and expectations, but almost none of them fulfilled these expectations. In the pandemic, transparency is essential to communicate and perform according to the population's necessities in moments of unmatched stress and uncertainty.

This article is just a mere introduction to discuss this form of transparency and analyze the limits and scopes. Moreover, it suggests a causal relation worthy of study: in countries where their governments are opaque, the trust decreases, impacting public policy results. Here, it is just analyzed two examples, but these can be open to more policy areas in other countries, which could enrich this proposition. Nevertheless, the pandemic poses a situation of high ambiguity and uncertainty in which transparency is even more necessary than in other situations. Communicating information quickly with responsibility and reliability generates trust. This thought could save millions of lives in a pandemic or other natural disaster. The Mexican and Brazilian cases confirm this affirmation.

The management of the crisis in both countries has been closed, no one outside the party in power can be part of decisions, and members of the opposition are not considered. The governments' hermeticism has not allowed any feedback, critique, or improvement, dealing with the pandemic with biased information and prejudices that reduce the efficiency and

effectiveness of sanitary policies (Cavalcanti, 2021; Renteria & Arellano-Gault, 2021; Bauer & Becker, 2020). The impact on trust is undeniable since the expectations have not been matched with the strategies implemented by the government, which generates a vicious circle (Peeters & Dussauge, 2021; Rothstein, 2013).

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