# Navigating through contradictory rationalities
## *Experiences of development in Mexico*

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the idea of policy coherence for development, and its relation to the experience of development along the Grijalva River in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Through an analysis of different understandings of the garbage in the river, and of the attempts to deal with the garbage, I highlight tensions between different generations of policies, between different levels of government, and between implementing the goals of governmental representatives and a meaningful participation by citizens. To understand these tensions, the article draws attention to the coexistence of experience-based rationalities, which are important to take into account when formulating policies, and when moving from policies to concrete projects.

**Keywords:** coherence for development, democracy, garbage, Mexico, policy rationalities, postmodernism

Since the 1990s, the issue of coherence has become increasingly important in development policies. This trend has become even more pronounced since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in which coherence has been given a more prominent position. In parallel with that trend, literature on "Policy Coherence for Development" has emerged (Siitonen, 2016),[1] revolving around avoidance of contradictions between, on the one hand, the formulation of context-specific goals, policies, and rules, and, on the other hand, taking a more global approach toward development policies (Millán Acevedo, 2014, p. 136) within a neoliberal framework (Thede, 2013). This discussion has focused upon the possibilities for making different polices converge, and has sought to single out areas where policy coherence is not possible (Barry, King, & Matthews, 2010; Carbone, 2008, 2009; Forster & Stokke, 1999; Mayer, 2006; Nyberg-Sørensen, Van Hear, & Engberg-Pedersen, 2003; Picciotto, 2004). Some authors have also shown an interest in the "murky waters of politics" (Siitonen, 2016, p. 5) behind these policies. However, the discussion makes few references to the

related issue of *coherence of development*—that is, the relationship between policies and particular projects in specific contexts.

The complexities that tend to arise in particular cases—when policies are translated into projects that are then implemented—have therefore been given little space (cf. Becker, 2013; see also the methodological discussion in this article). At the same time, the focus has been on the European Union, the main promoter of policy coherence in international institutions, not the least within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The result is that the people who are most directly affected by the policies have occupied a very marginal place in this discussion. Consequently, authors have also downplayed how to deal with contradictions in practice. The conflicts that appear in relation to different policies and ideals—when explicitly discussed—have been inserted into a model of rational choice, where different interests are thought to play out within a shared framework (see, for example, Barry, King & Matthews, 2010, pp. 11 and 29), which does not give space for the possibility of different kinds of rationality.

To help fill these gaps, this article describes and analyzes a form that development can take when experienced concretely in a particular place, outside of Europe. For example, how do (formally) coherent policies relate to concrete projects, histories, and the social relations in places where different development efforts are carried out? And how can we understand the conflicts that appear in relation to policies that turn out to be contradictory in practice?

What I will argue in this article is that the attempts to create coherent development polices in the case that I analyze have hardly solved the practical contradictions to which they refer. Following Paul Hoebink (2003, p. 220), I will argue that certain contradictions, such as the ones found in one part of the Grijalva River, cannot be dealt with by trying to improve the coherence of development policies. An effort to do so, as Natalia Millán and Guillermo Santander (2013, p. 137) have also argued, might even challenge fundamental democratic values of pluralism, openness and participation.

That having been said, development workers must, in practice, know how to navigate in contradictory contexts, such as those that have come to surround the Grijalva. Therefore, what this article proposes is a focus upon how to navigate in a contradictory context in practice—that is, how to relate a particular project to existing tensions, rather than trying to solve them. Central to this framework is the understanding of different material epistemologies, "realities", or rationalities, which co-exist in a specific place. I will stress how these rationalities condition the perception of truth claims, making truth depend upon trust in particular actors in relation to specific epistemologies. This analysis then contrasts with the

understanding of differences as relating to different interests, which can be erased through methods where the most "rational choice" gives an outcome where everybody wins—an analysis that has been present in the discussion about the challenges to policy coherence (see, above all, Barry, King & Matthews, 2010, pp. 11 and 29).

By going back to the ancient, democratic problem of distinguishing truth from falsehood,[2] I will argue that truth-claims along the river in practice are intimately related to the capacity of distinguishing between the different kinds of "reality" or "rationality" in which a particular act is carried out. Recognizing these rationalities is an important step toward being able to establish dialogues and compromises among different actors—elements that could improve both the design and the implementation of development policies and projects. It is worth stressing that the focus upon the existing social relations does not imply that development projects should never try to alter these relations. Rather, that focus highlights the need to tie policy coherence, where different values are included, to a situated analysis of the way particular policies relate to the material history of a particular place.

## Methodology

The article builds upon fieldwork carried out along the Grijalva River between June 2014 and August 2015. The fieldwork relied mainly on participant observation, which consisted of accompanying employees of a company giving tours in the river and workers on the Intermunicipal Council for the Sumidero Canyon (JICCAS) project at the federal institution called the National Council for Protected Natural Areas (CONANP). At the tour company, I participated in the daily activities such as cleaning life vests, receiving tourists, driving boats, and attending workshops given by governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to improve the quality of the tours, among other things. I also spent many evenings playing football with the boatmen and joined them when they carried out other activities, such as when one of them invited me to a cock fight. At the CONANP, I took part in meetings with municipalities to coordinate the JICCAS, and with other actors within the nature reserve or close to it. Those actors included a number of former fishermen who ran a crocodile park that the CONANP was supporting. I also observed how the daily cleaning of the river was done and joined workers as they surveyed animals in the park via cameras set up at different spots.

My research was inspired by discussions in science and technology studies, and particularly by the "flat ontology" proposed by Bruno Latour

(1988), which states that ontology aims to maintain a local focus, even if local networks can extend far beyond the kind of spatial limits that are usually associated with the term "local". A crucial feature of this ontological approach, as applied to development, is its ability to get beyond divisions between the local and the global and also beyond theories trying to relate these two extremes. At the same time, I adopted aspects of the case study method to capture moments when broader networks become particularly visible. Following a classical case analyzed by Max Gluckman (1940), I thus chose to highlight conflict situations, which gave the study a clearer focus on tensions and contradictions than is often the case in science and technology studies (cf. Candea, Cook, Trundle, & Yarrow, 2015, p. 1). As a result, I introduce a series of local oppositions that play out in practical encounters.

The conflict discussed in this article concerns the garbage in the Grijalva River (see figures 1 and 2)—a phenomenon that connects to a wide
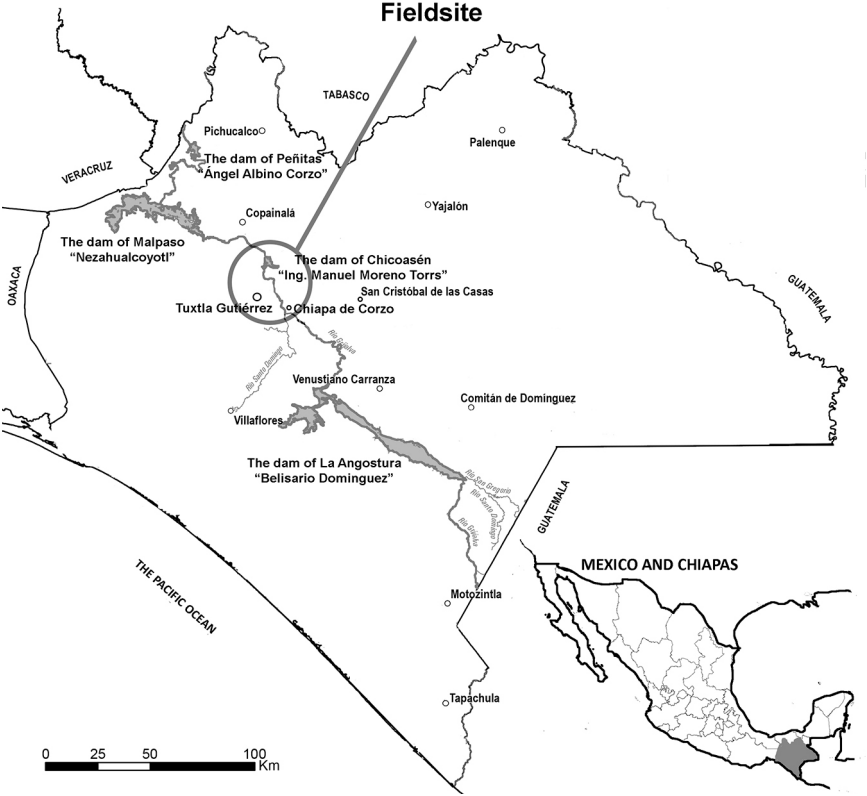


**Figure 1** • Map of Chiapas, and Chiapas's location in Mexico. The Grijalva River, the fieldsite, the dams, and the main towns and cities are located on the map.

range of human groups, things, ideas, infrastructural systems, and animals. I will begin by introducing the conflict and contextualizing it historically. Then, I will describe the governmental projects in place to solve it. From these descriptions, I will draw attention to the practical contradictions that meet the visitors of the area, and the historical policy shifts to which those contradictions relate. Finally, I will argue that the tensions I have discussed can be framed in more abstract terms, as part of a number of contradictions. I suggest that practical engagement in this kind of context would require recognition of these contradictions, not only to give space for fundamental democratic values, but also to add situated guidelines to be able to navigate practically through a contradictory context.

## Context of the case

The Grijalva is particularly attractive in the context of the discussion referred to earlier in this article. Mexico, the country where the Grijalva is located, is an OECD country that has received scant attention in discussions of Policy Coherence for Development. More specifically, the Grijalva is interesting since it has been deeply embedded in international development paradigms since shortly after World War II. Because of the Grijalva's size, and also because it flows through a stretch of impressive canyon, it became strategically interesting when large dams started being built worldwide as part of a new development model. Construction of the first major dam on the Grijalva River began relatively soon after Mexican President Miguel Alemán visited the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) on a trip to the United States in 1947 (Robinson, 2007, p. 80). The TVA, in charge of transforming a large valley, was a central part of the United States' endeavor to prove the superiority of state-led programs within a liberal, capitalist framework. As such, the TVA was a model for the liberal development that the United States aimed to extend worldwide (Ekbladh, 2010, pp. 47–48; see also Culvahouse, 2007; Katz, 2007).

The TVA was not only in charge of 16 dams that were in place when the Mexican President visited, but was also involved with a series of projects that were supposed to develop the region. It was this multipurpose development plan that inspired Alemán to establish a range of Commissions along Mexico's main rivers—like the Grijalva—with loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank group. President Alemán envisioned these Commissions not only as motors that could modernize backward rural areas, but also as elements to be inserted into a broader project aimed at centralizing the management of resources in Mexico. In so doing, Alemán sought to strengthen a federal power that

historically had been weak, especially in places far away from Mexico City, such as Chiapas (Robinson, 2007, pp. 21, 80–89). Thus, his government also echoed the centralizing efforts in the United States, where "big labor, big capital, and big government" (Harvey, 1990, p. 142) were supposed to take the country out of the Great Depression of the 1930s, and prevent similar situations in the future.

In this history, we can already identify the kind of centralization that must be present, or under consideration, before policy coherence can be thought of seriously. National plans existed in Mexico since at least 1934, but projects like the construction of new dams gave the federation the presence needed to make these plans more effective. The idea of development also gave the federation a term that could be used to formulate policies toward a common goal. The federation began to do so in 1966, when the national plan included the word "development" for the first time. Since 1980, the same model for a National Development Plan has been used as the directing document of the federal government, which specifies the government's budget and central policies (Villarreal, 2013). Development has remained the overarching goal of the Mexican State, and all three levels of government—that is, the federation, the states and the municipalities—have a legal obligation to formulate development plans, which should direct the activities of the different levels of the state in their totality (Gobierno de la República, undated). In this way, "development" is supposed to give the actions of the public institutions a coherent framework. How the national development should be carried out is further regulated through the 1983 Law of Planning (*Ley de Planeación*). Of particular interest is the Law's second article, which states in part that the Mexican State should aim to bring about an:

> equal, inclusive, integral, economic and environmentally sustainable [*sustentable y sostenible*] development, with a perspective of interculturality and gender, and aiming to reach the political, social, cultural, environmental and economic goals and objectives contained in the Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico (Ley de Planeación, 2 art. Translation by the author).

The key word here is "development", modified by a cloud of adjectives. The broad definition of "development" that this paragraph offers is complemented with a list of principles. For example, the Mexican government should "consolidate democracy as a system of life" (paragraph II), and "strengthen the federal pact and the free municipality […], promoting the decentralization of the national life" (paragraph V).

If the dams were an important part of the centralization of the Mexican State, and in the emergence of "development" as an overarching

term that has been thought to direct the State action as a whole, it is worth noticing that the policies that have given the term meaning have changed over time, and have not always followed international trends (cf. endnote 1). Regarding those changes, the Grijalva River is again a very informative place because the history of dams along the Grijalva is a quick tour through Mexican policies during the second half of the twentieth century.

When the second dam was built on the river, the multipurpose development so important to President Alemán had already been abandoned. It was replaced by a kind of development based upon the model of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI; Palerm, 1973; Robinson, 2007, p. 26), which fit within the idea of entering the next stage of the Mexican Revolution. The last dam built on the Grijalva was embedded in policies dominated by neoliberal ideas, which became dominant in the 1980s after two severe oil crises hit the Mexican economy. The ideas about the different kinds of development appear not only in the plans for the dams and related projects but also in the names chosen for the dams. While the first dam took its official name from the multitasking pre-Hispanic ruler Nezahualcoyotl, the second was named after a martyr from Chiapas who participated in the Mexican Revolution. The fourth and last dam got its name from a local politician who participated in a range of fundamental liberal reforms during the middle of the nineteenth century, including the formulation of a new Constitution.

As this article will show, these different generations of development policies, and the projects that have taken their form in relation to them, coexist in an intricate manner, among a range of political epistemologies, based on particular experiences and histories. In one way or another, these development policies all relate to the dams, although their coexistence with them is somewhat tense. The dam Chicoasén, for example, made its stretch of the Grijalva navigable, thus giving rise to the steady flow of motor boats that transport tourists between the town of Chiapa de Corzo and the dam. As a result, the area has been drawn into the worldwide production of images of a lost paradise, which is intimately connected to ideas about nature and indigeneity. Because of the new possibilities to travel on and along the river, a nature reserve was declared here at the same time as the dam was inaugurated to protect the biodiversity of a place that humans had rarely accessed before. This nature reserve, in turn, was part of a broader policy aiming to reduce the impact of the human activities upon other species. During my fieldwork, actors invested in the dam, the tours, and the nature reserve were involved in a number of development projects and policies that were not always easy to subsume into any coherent category of development.

## Garbage in paradise

I began my fieldwork as the rainy season started. The first rains washed logs, branches, plastic bottles, footballs, toys, and a range of unidentifiable objects down into the Grijalva from places throughout its watershed. The boatmen driving the tours where I worked had to relate to this garbage on a daily basis as both an environmental problem and a practical one. While learning how to drive the boat, they also had to learn how to spot the garbage at a distance that would let them avoid it without the passengers noticing (see Figure 3). If the boatmen weren't alert, plastic bottles could get stuck in the propellers, causing a sharp sound and making it very difficult to maintain control of the boat. Fortunately, the plastic bottles were relatively easy to see; the true challenge was the logs filled with water. Because these floated underneath the surface, just at the height of the propellers, they could do serious damage. If so, the company would suffer an important loss, and the driver's income would be affected.

During the rainy season, boatmen had particular difficulties navigating the point where counter currents of the Chicoasén impoundment packed the garbage into a massive blockage. Here, boatmen had to stop to find the safest way through. In addition to the possible damage to propellers, the boatmen worried about the impression the mass of fetid garbage gave to passengers. The rotting logs amid the branches, bottles, and other objects created a smell that became nauseating wherever a dead animal



**Figure 2** • Driving through the blockage of garbage.

(or even a human corpse) might be present. To avoid surprises that could make this forced stop especially repulsive, boatmen carefully avoided passing near places where vultures poked among the refuse. At the same time, the boatmen distracted passengers with an oral script that presented a more positive narrative spin to what the passengers were seeing and smelling. The garbage, they explained, came from the settlements along the river. Because residents of those settlements did not dispose of garbage in the provided bins, it would collect on the ground during the dry season. Then, it would wash down to the river at the beginning of the rainy season. However, the boatmen continued, the CONANP worked every day to clean the river. As they said this, they often pointed to CONANP boats that worked near the blockage. The boatmen finished by claiming—often in a rather dramatic tone—that more had to be done. They emphasized the visitors' opportunity to contribute to improving the environment by depositing their garbage in bins.

For the passengers, on the other hand, the stop at the blockage represented the first problem they had to face during the tour. Before arriving at the blockage, they had dealt only with aesthetic remarks about stone formations, details about the behavior of the animals living along the river, and a reference to the wars between the Spaniards and the Chiapanecas (the people who controlled this part of the river as the Spanish Conquest started). Besides, the boatmen often made an effort to create a positive atmosphere on board: some would revert to humor, others to their vast knowledge of the animals in the river. Still others chose to speak as little as possible and instead focused on taking the tourists as quickly as they could to the main points of the tour. The garbage, independent of the tactic employed by the boatmen, would then put their work to the test. The worst-case scenario was that some of the passengers would start questioning the pollution of the river caused by the motorboat in which they were traveling or would influence other passengers not to buy anything in the floating shop at the end of the tour, arguing that they would be participating in producing garbage on the river. In this scenario, the boatmen were sure, passengers would tip them less.

Considering the reasons the boatmen had for being annoyed with the garbage, it should not come as a surprise that they frequently complained about it among themselves. However, what appeared to disturb them most was not what they stressed during the tour—that people did not dispose of their garbage correctly—but instead that the workers who were supposed to clean the river were lazy. Some boatmen even had photos and videos, taken with smartphones, of the workers fishing on the job. Moreover, the boatmen had difficulty understanding how the money that the CONANP got from the tours was not enough to clean the river. Every

visitor had to pay a fee of 28 pesos (slightly more than one pound sterling during my fieldwork) to enter the reserve, which had more than half a million visitors per year. If all that money did not end up going back into the river, then somebody must be stealing it, the boatmen concluded. This supposed embezzlement, I was assured, was typical of the way politics and the governmental institutions worked locally. Only 15 years earlier, they told me, the owner of a company hired by the government to clean up the garbage took off with the money, leaving the canyon worse than ever.

## Changing policies and Mexican nationalism

The way the boatmen dealt with the garbage hinted at the complexities of development in this part of the river and at the contradictory nature of the tours. As already stressed, the main problem the garbage posed for boatmen was damage to propellers. The boatmen interpreted the presence of garbage in a way that had to do with a political failure of corrupt "politics" — an egoistic behavior that contrasted the morally correct comportment of showing solidarity with one's kin and "people" (*pueblo*). The boatmen also had to relate to a view that questioned the very presence of the boats on the river, a presence that pointed to a fundamental contradiction in the simultaneous inauguration of the dam and the nature reserve. From this perspective, the boats were out of place here, and as such, an additional form of garbage (cf. Douglas, 1984 [1966], p. 2). That perspective put the boatmen in an awkward position. From the same perspective, even the dam itself could be considered an object that should not be present on the river. Reasoning thusly, the problems that the dams faced in relation to the objects floating in the river (for example, damage to turbines) became irrelevant; the dams would be just another facet of the modernity that gave rise to the uncontrollable amounts of garbage that existed in rivers and oceans. The garbage, in other words, drew attention to the tensions between economic progress and environmental concerns that still plagued stakeholders regarding the Grijalva River. In this way, the garbage also pointed to an important shift in State policies and Mexican nationalism from a modernist form that celebrated technological progress and the control that it could give over natural resources to a postmodern version where the Mexican State had been tied to the nature, and at the same time had become its guardian.

As claimed by Patricia Torres, an anthropologist who was involved in the construction of one of the dams on the river, it was the Federal Commission of Electricity (CFE; the institution in charge of the construction of the dams) that had come up with the idea of the tours, drawing on wide-

spread ideas about the touristic potential of the canyon (cf. Lee, 1996). According to Torres, the tours would be used to create a developmental narrative by taking the visitors from the poor and backward town of Chiapa de Corzo to the symbol of the modern Mexico: the dam of Chicoasén (personal mail communication with Patricia Torres, September 2014). The idea of visiting sites of progress, like the dam of Chicoasén, readily fit within the kind of nationalist tourism projects that had dominated State policies in Mexico from the 1940s until the 1980s. In fact, tourism was just one part of the broad, nationalist project that was unfolding at this time. As Dina Berger has put it:

> [T]ourist development and promotion under Mexican control would prove to be a viable, state-directed industry: an industry made by and for Mexicans. Motorists would drive on government-financed highways where they would buy gas at government-regulated Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) stations, rent rooms in government-licensed hotels built by Mexican companies, and eat at locally owned restaurants. […] Like the celebrated murals, folk art, films, and music, its tourist industry was inspired by and built on ideas of Mexican grandeur – vast beaches, curative waters, Mesoamerican pyramids, Indian villages and markets, colonial buildings, Porfirian monuments and boulevards, and modern constructs. (Berger, 2006, p. 2)

Explicit references to Chiapas, and to the grandeur of Mexico, appeared in the discourses given during the tour during my fieldwork, as well as in advertisements for the canyon. For example, a mandatory stop during the trip on the river was at a cliff, depicted in Chiapas's heraldic coat of arms, where the Spaniards subdued the Chiapanecas. At this stop, the boatmen would show a printed and laminated image of the coat of arms (see Figure 4) and would often tell a widespread legend about the Chiapanecas preferring to commit suicide by throwing themselves into the canyon rather than be enslaved by the Spaniards.[3] In this way, the boatmen reinterpreted the coat of arms as a celebration of the indigenous resistance to the Span-



**Figure 3** • The coat of arms of Chiapas.

iards[4]—a reinterpretation that fitted well with the post–independence and post–revolutionary nationalism, as a way to distance Mexico from Spain by connecting the Mexican State with an imagined pre-colonial one (Fernández, 2004).[5]

A similar representation appeared in a promotional video made for the two hundredth anniversary of Mexican Independence by the major Mexican media corporation Televisa. However, careful examination reveals a significant difference between Televisa's representation and the development narrative to which Torres referred. Televisa's Grijalva appears in a context of waterfalls and pyramids, all of which seem to be inhabited by the indigenous population, or by some kind of ancient female beings, together with wild animals.[6] The Sumidero Canyon is presented in the image of a raft floating slowly by on which a woman is lying on a crocodile while two other women stand on the raft's corners. All three women wear dresses evoking colonial representations, produced by Enlightenment and early Romantic thinkers, of primitive reincarnations of ancient Greece or Rome (Outram, 2005, p. 67; on the link between Romanticism, nature and industrialism, see Nustad, 2015, p. 24–26). This kind of representation could, of course, be understood as part of a global industry that tries to give rise to a "parallel universe" built on recognizable myths, fantasies, and enclosed resorts, where all sorts of problems should be hidden (Pi-Sunner & Brooke, 2015, p. 93). The kind of "original paradise" (Picard, 2010, p. 140) that Televisa was evoking could also be read in the particular Mexican context. From this perspective, the Sumidero Canyon, with its legend about the Chiapanecas who supposedly threw themselves into the river to avoid subjugation, would instead become part of the "deep Mexico" (Bonfil Batalla, 1990/1987) that resisted the colonial order and is now resisting various post–independence and post–revolutionary projects.

Over time, ideas relating to the "profound Mexico" have signaled authenticity, which has been connected to different political projects—from the post–independent and post–revolutionary States' attempts to connect themselves to the pre-colonial past to the project of autonomy defended by the Zapatista Army for National Liberation, whose uprising in 1994 struck several Chiapas cities. Nature, a glorious past, and indigenous populations would, in other words, come together in the Grijalva River as an image of purity and authenticity (cf. Nustad, 2015, p. 13). However, the context in which Televisa's promotional video appeared—the anniversary of the Mexican independence—showed how the State was still present here, as part of that indigenous and natural authenticity. What did not appear in this video was the dam, which would have highlighted the new image of the Mexican State. Thus, Televisa connected the indigenous pop-

ulation to a natural site, the Sumidero Canyon, instead of to the pyramids that had been so important for modernist nationalism.

By singling out the Sumidero Canyon as a place of nationalist pride, the video also indicated that technological progress, of which the dam was an example, had lost its importance in Mexican nationalism. This shift, in fact, dated back to the early 1980s, when the model of State-planned tourist destinations was abandoned by the federal government in response to the 1982–1983 economic crisis. With the new, neoliberal agenda propelled by the World Bank—but which was also shared by Mexican economists and politicians who had seen the limits of the Import Substitution model before the crisis of 1982-83 (see, for example, Aspra, 1977)—many State-owned enterprises were privatized. At the same time, the focus of the Mexican State's strategy shifted from sun and beaches to cultural tourism. This shift was due not only to the economic crisis but also to competition from countries in the Caribbean, which had followed a similar model focusing on beaches.

The tours on the Grijalva did not have much to do with these policies; in that sense, the tours' focus on the dam appeared to be outdated from the beginning. This situation would change in the 1990s for two important reasons. First, the concept of ecotourism began to make its way into State policies, causing "nature" to become a destination. Secondly, the Zapatista uprising in 1994 reaffirmed Chiapas as a place of indigeneity, an identity that would develop into an important draw for tourism (Babb, 2011).

However, as noted earlier, the contradiction between economic progress and environmental concerns was present even at the inauguration of the Chicoasén dam; almost simultaneously, the Protected Natural Area (*Área Natural Protegida*) was declared along almost the entire stretch of the river that had seen its water levels rise because of the dam. The visit to "nature" that the tour implied had indeed not been possible before the dam, because of the complicated terrain in the area (Lee, 1996).

The tensions that appeared in discourses delivered by boatmen during the tours had a direct connection to the policies previously discussed. As part of different development projects, NGOs and governmental institutions gave the boatmen workshops aimed at influencing the boatmen's scripts. Through those workshops, the aesthetic similarities between certain stone formations and other objects or beings, which still occupied an important part of the tour, received a "scientific twist". This twist left traces in the discourses in the form of a range of details about the names of the different kinds of stones and their formation, the behaviors of animals sighted during the tour, and even certain environmental problems caused by the construction of the dam. The shift from the modernist to a post-modernist, ecological State was also visible in the script used by the boat-

men: the Grijalva and its Cañon, instead of being obstacles, and a terrain to be conquered, had turned into a site of exploration, nature study, and admiration (cf. Tsing, 2005, p. 134). The State was to be found, by turns, both embedded in this nature and acting as its guardian.

However, for our purposes, it is important to note that, in practice, the modern and the postmodern States would coexist in a complicated way, as in the discourse offered by the boatmen. The Chicoasén dam would thus be represented both as a place of which to be proud and as causing considerable difficulties for the animals living in the river. The boatmen's discourse also drew attention to the incoherences within the concept of "sustainable development" that had had been followed by the area's development projects. Rather than skirting important contradictions, the Grijalva River tour showed that the incoherences would force disparate practices and ideals into a discourse that would not always be easy, in practice, to translate into a coherent whole. In this way, the dam could coexist discursively with the nature reserve, despite the evident tensions.

## Framing the garbage: institutional responses

If the tension between environmental concerns and economic progress was clearly visible in the tours, other important tensions appeared in the program that the CONANP had initiated to deal with the garbage. The "integral" strategy that the CONANP had formulated consisted of two initiatives: cleaning the river, and long-term prevention of pollution via the JICCAS. Each initiative presented its own challenges. For example, cleaning the river was a physically demanding job. Besides having to tolerate horrible smells, workers had almost no machinery to help with the heavier tasks. Instead, they leaned over the sides of boats to remove debris by hand, including heavy, waterlogged tree trunks. Fortunately, the smaller branches could be left for a boat called a "crocodile", out of order during my fieldwork, which removed them with a plain escalator.

These physical challenges were, in a sense, nothing compared to the difficulties facing the JICCAS. While the work of cleaning the river suffered for lack of sufficient resources, the JICCAS faced the intricate problem of being based on ideals that could easily become contradictory in practice. The JICCAS's explicit objective was "avoiding the production of solid waste and mitigating the deterioration of the environment", through the coordination of 15 municipalities (JICCAS, undated, my translation). In this way, the initiative incorporated a tension that has been prominent for the management of water at large, and indeed for a variety of development projects: the tension between the ideal of achieving local participa-

tion and buy-in and implementing goals established by central authorities. This is an incoherence that is often overlooked in the above-mentioned literature on PCD.

Because the JICCAS was just starting up as I did my fieldwork, the main activities carried out in its name were an analysis of the problems facing the different municipalities in relation to the garbage, and a discussion of the kinds of action that could be taken to improve the situation. A clear difference of priorities was expressed by municipalities that were most affected by the garbage versus the communities from which most of the garbage and the pollution came. As could be expected, the former were much more interested in the JICCAS initiative than the latter. The people in charge of the JICCAS interpreted this lack of interest as an indication of how the local, municipal governments were not giving priority to the important issue of the garbage but were instead focused upon their local interests, including trivial things such as Christmas decorations. However, this "lack of interest" highlighted the fundamental role of the CONANP in the institutional setup of the JICCAS. While the JICCAS, according to its name, was supposed to be an inter-municipal entity, it was organized by representatives from the CONANP. All of the meetings in which I participated were between the CONANP and a particular municipality, never among municipalities themselves. While some municipalities were definitely interested in the state of the river, the main subject in the meetings I attended was the CONANP. Significantly, it was a representative from the CONANP who promoted the initiative to state politicians.

In this way, the JICCAS appeared to have been drawn into the very same model that has dominated water management in Mexico since the 1950s. The JICCAS's own documents said that the project was inspired by a French model that built upon the idea of letting the political organization follow the natural borders of a basin by bringing together the municipalities within that basin. This model has become very influential worldwide over the last decades (Barraqué, 1995, p. 420). However, the crucial role of a federal institution, the CONANP, in the JICCAS echoed the centralized model of the TVA that has been so important in Mexico (cf. Gallardo Zavaleta, 2014; Kauffer, 2014, p. 35; Robinson, 2007). Indeed, JICCAS's documents presented the initiative as complementing the Basin Committees headed by the National Commission on Water (CONAGUA), which again stressed the importance of the federation.

The implementation of both a short-term and a long-term strategy for coming to terms with the Grijalva's pollution and garbage did not mean that the two initiatives would come together in coherent policies managed by an integral institutional framework. Within the apparent coherence present in JICCAS's documents were two kinds of possible incoherences,

which had been glossed over in an attempt to represent the Mexican State as a coherent entity. If, on the one hand (and as happened in practice), the JICCAS was effectively part of federal policies linked to CONAGUA, then the JICCAS would leave little space for the ideal of "intermunicipality" expressed in the very name of the initiative. On the other hand, if the JICCAS would indeed give that ideal practical political importance, the JICCAS would risk undermining the ideal structure of the federal policies and the idea of a coherent State. For the term "intermunicipality" to have practical significance, the participating municipalities would need to be given the authority to reconsider and reconfigure federal policies. What emerged even in the name of the JICCAS was, in other words, vertical incoherence between municipalities and the federal government, and, more generally, the difficulties of thinking of governmental action in terms of coherence for development.

## Truth, trust, and democracy

By describing the problem of the garbage and its context, what I have highlighted thus far is the contradiction between economic development and environmental concerns, and the vertical incoherence between different levels of government. At the same time, as I will stress in this section, the discussion suggested the existence of a set of tensions more complicated than the ones already mentioned and which could be described in terms of inter-organizational incoherence for development, defined as oppositions between government and population, between expert and lay knowledge, or between education and participation. What makes these incoherences particularly complicated, and critical, is that they can invade other discussions or conflicts at any time because nothing can guarantee the truth-value of views held by either side. As Michel Foucault (1984) has noticed, this lack of guarantees is indeed one of the classical challenges for democracies (a challenge that is still very much visible, for example, in contemporary difficulties of dealing with "fake news"). Foucault argued that the most significant crisis of the ancient Greek democracy, in fact, emerged out of advice given by one of the most highly regarded public speakers in Athens; that advice led to a war with Sparta that devastated Athens. Through that example, Foucaoult shows us that even ancient "experts" could be mistaken: a fact that increased the significance of "lay knowledge".

As we have seen, suspicion of experts was very much present along the Grijalva River; for example, in the claim that the government is unable to clean the river because the government is inherently corrupt. We

have also seen that these suspicions are based upon a dense history of specific examples in Mexico at large—including the above-mentioned disappearance, 15 years ago, of the company director who absconded with all the money that had been paid for cleaning the river.[7] At the same time, the suspicion of experts that I observed could be connected to a much older conflict between the federal State and local political organizations, including the municipalities. Throughout my fieldwork, I would indeed also hear how the political representatives of the municipalities were criticized for "doing politics"—that is, for acting selfishly, against the reciprocal obligations of the local kinship and friendship ties that made up "the people".

However, the municipalities definitely had a much more deeply rooted tradition of popular representation than the higher levels of government. As Claudio Lomnitz (1995) has pointed out, powers of central governments have, historically, been designed primarily "to aid kings, presidents and regional elites to wrest resources and power from local hands" (p. 25). In Mexico, this division between federal and municipal governments is a characteristic that has persisted throughout Mexico's history of imperial, indirect rule. That division existed even before the Conquest, and grew stronger during the centuries of Spanish dominance (see, for example, Gledhill, 2008, p. 485). Not only could this history situate the critique formulated by the boatmen, but it might also explain why the local government prioritized Christmas decorations over meeting with a federal institution regarding the issue of garbage. To put it differently, and in terms of oppositions in which nothing can guarantee the truth-value of views held by either side, expert knowledge on issues such as the environmental degradation of the river found itself in conflict with the local expertise on institutional trustworthiness.

The point here is that the different claims of truth that were made in relation to the initiatives taken to deal with the Grijalva's pollution and garbage were built upon different, historically constructed, and material realities, with different moralities. Having acknowledged those realities, it is also possible to suggest that the issue of how to recognize a trustworthy statement has been resolved here by positioning the maker of the statement within one of these realities. In other words, to understand the previously mentioned truth-claims, it is important to understand local narratives and their material histories. The analysis that I am proposing points to a much more complicated democratic problem than the one discussed by Foucault through the work of Plato and others, including certain authors discussing policy coherence (e.g., Barry, King, & Matthews, 2010). Rather than moving within just one reality or rationality, where the difficulty has been knowing how to distinguish philosophy from rhetoric,

as Plato claimed, the democratic challenge here is to establish a dialogue among these realities, including non-human realities, or at least to have an idea about how to navigate through and between these rationalities. Thus, it is possible to contend that different coherences for development can coexist simultaneously based on competing ideological frameworks.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have approached the question of how policies that form part of an effort to create coherent development policies relate to the social relations in a particular place where different development efforts have been carried out. The analysis that I have presented is important because it can, potentially, make the discussion of Policy Coherence for Development more productive by linking conceptual discussions to practical problems, including those problems' relation to local political differences, from a perspective that emphasizes concrete experiences in a particular place rather than coherence between different kinds of policies. In this way, and drawing on ideas formulated by authors such as Paul Hoebink (2003, p. 220) and Natalia Millán and Guillermo Santander (2013, p. 137), practical problems are made central to formulate concrete strategies for particular projects.

As we have seen in this article, even the experience of the garbage—and indeed the very definition of it—varies among the actors that appear in the river and occupy different places in the epistemologies that are used to observe the garbage. For example, actors looking for an untouched paradise attached more importance to the plastic in the river than to the logs that were so problematic for the boatmen. For some visitors, the presence of the garbage could even collapse an imagined order, such as the idyllic one projected by Televisa. In this sense, the ideals of coherence could be understood as part of an attempt to protect certain epistemologies or moral schemes from this kind of collapse, for example, by erasing different generations of governmental policies, or by maintaining the clear opposition between traditional, indigenous peoples and modern, Western engineering.

Thus, what I argue, based upon my description of events along the Grijalva River, is that the kinds of incoherences that I have mentioned cannot disappear in a democratic context. In this sense, the desire to create a formally coherent discourse implies a risk of undermining one side or another in the contradictory relations that I noted. Moreover, this desire might even blur the internal contradictions of a particular epistemology, thus hindering stakeholders in imagining alternative ways to think and act.

Although these sorts of difficulties have been noticed to some degree in discussions of Policy Coherence for Development, little guidance has been offered on how to formulate possible strategies in concrete contexts, beyond the idea that shifting horizons might overcome short-term contradictions. In this article, I have shown the importance of ways in which ethnographic methods might be useful when drafting certain guidelines (especially those that address fundamental issues of trust) that could be used to formulate policies and projects that relate to local experiences. Guidelines of this sort would tend to be more realistic and broadly applicable than those based upon the idea of clashes between different policies and of conflicting interests within a shared framework, which can be solved through rational choices within one particular form of rationality (as proposed by Barry, King, and Matthews, 2010). By conducting fieldwork outside of the geographic regions commonly considered in discussions about policy coherence—that is, outside of Europe—I have also shown the importance of taking into account historical experiences, along with local epistemologies or rationalities. By doing so, we might become able to navigate through "the murky waters of politics", where coherence rarely appears except in governmental documents.

Independently of the coherence that is possible to achieve between different policies and political values, what this article shows is how different generations of development policies linger on in a particular place, through the materiality and the concrete experiences to which they have given rise. Therefore, the equal, inclusive, integral, economic and environmentally sustainable development for which the Mexican State should strive, is difficult to translate into concrete action. As I have shown, different values encompassed by the Law of Planning turn out to be highly contradictory when compared to the concrete difficulties facing the projects that the CONANP formulated to address the issue of the garbage in the Grijalva River. The environmental and economic goals are not easy to unite in practice—a lesson we learn when trying to unite the principle of aiming to strengthen the federal pact and the free municipality with the ideal of consolidating democracy as a system of life. Difficulties are only to be expected when attempting to establish and maintain effective dialogues between such different epistemologies. Governmental attempts to formulate coherent policies in relation to the garbage in the Grijalva River thus clashed with a landscape marked by different generations of policies concerning tourism, dam constructions, and environmental protection, all of which policies relate in turn to changes in overarching ideas about the task of the Mexican State and about the Mexican nation.

I propose that it is necessary to widen the discussion about Policy Coherence for Development to include analyses of how policies relate to par-

ticular contexts of specific communities. Furthermore, I propose that it is necessary to take into account the different rationalities and historical experiences in such analyses to move beyond the reliance on rational choice theory. This movement implies the inclusion of ethnographic fieldwork both in the analysis of development projects and when formulating a development project for a particular place. However, this focus on the practical possibilities of different policies when translated into development projects does not mean that development projects must always adapt to existing social relations. What I propose, instead, is that when formulating development projects, the preoccupation with a policy coherence and the coherence between different political values needs to be linked to an analysis that focuses on how these values relate to the rationalities, concrete tensions, and concrete contradictions (e.g., among values and rationalities) that exist in a particular setting.

At the same time, this article offers a framework that can be useful in carrying out that analysis. Formulating a practically coherent project implies choosing how to navigate through contradictions rather than follow practices that skirt current contradictions either by relying exclusively upon strategies to produce formally coherent projects or by deploying models of rational choice in which people are assumed to share the same kind of rationality.

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## NOTES

1. However, the idea can be traced much further back, including to notions about "comprehensive planning", which was prominent in the 1960s; the "integrated development" that emerged in the 1970s; the "structural adjustments" that appeared in the 1980s; and the "governance and democratization" of the 1990s (Hydén, 1999).

2. Or, as ancient philosophers such as Plato had it, between truth and rhetoric (Foucault, 1984).
3. For a historical review of this legend, see De Vos 1985.
4. Ironically enough, the coat of arms was supposed to celebrate the precise opposite of indigenous resistance. When it was designed at the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was meant to commemorate the glorious Spanish victory over the Chiapanecas (De Vos, 1985). During these tours, no mention was ever made of the hostilities among Chiapanecas, Zinacantecos and Mexicas to which Jan de Vos referred. Instead, the conflict between Spaniards and "the indigenous population" was stressed.
5. Íñigo Fernández (2004) has contrasted this State-promoted nationalism with a "hispanist" (*hispanista*) nationalism, which drew the Mexican identity on the Colonial and Catholic heritage, and which suggested that the only thing that could hold together Mexicans was religion.
6. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEmRoQPJj2g; accessed April 9, 2016.
7. It is worth mentioning that the CONANP explained the situation with the garbage in other terms: resources for cleaning the river, CONANP claimed, did not have any direct relation to the fees, as CONANP was obliged to forward the fees directly to the federal tax authority. However, even this kind of explanation could be incorporated into the previously outlined model, as it, too, stresses how the federal government was not able to organize its institutional activities effectively.

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## La navegación entre racionalidades contradictorias: experiencias de desarrollo en México

Martin J. Larsson

**Resumen:** Este artículo discute la idea de la coherencia en las políticas públicas para el desarrollo, y su relación con la experiencia de desarrollo sobre el Río Grijalva, en el estado de Chiapas, México. A través de un análisis de diversos entendimientos de la basura en el Río, subrayo las tensiones entre diferentes generaciones de políticas públicas; entre diferentes niveles de gobierno; y las tensiones entre la implementación de metas de los representantes gubernamentales y una participación significativa por parte de los ciudadanos. Para entender estas tensiones, el artículo enfatiza la co-existencia de racionalidades basadas en la experiencia práctica, que son importantes considerar al formular políticas públicas, y al moverse de las políticas públicas a proyectos concretos.

**Palabras clave:** basura, coherencia de políticas públicas, democracia, México, postmodernismo, racionalidades

## La navigation entre rationalités contradictoires: expériences de développement au Mexique

Martin J. Larsson

**Résumé :** Cet article examine l'idée de cohérence dans les stratégies politiques pour le développement et sa relation avec l'expérience du développement autour du fleuve Grijalva, dans l'état du Chiapas, au Mexique. À travers l'analyse des multiples significations des déchets dans le fleuve, je souligne les tensions entre différentes générations de politiques publiques, entre différents niveaux de gouvernement, et entre la mise en œuvre des objectifs par les représentants gouvernementaux et la participation significative des citoyens. Pour comprendre ces tensions, l'article insiste sur la coexistence de rationalités fondées sur l'expérience pratique, qu'il est important de prendre en compte dans l'élaboration des politiques publiques, et lors du passage de ces politiques publiques aux projets concrets.

**Mots-clés :** cohérence des politiques publiques pour le développement, démocratie, Mexique, postmodernisme, rationalités

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