

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56712/latam.v4i6.1486>

Supporting municipalities in implementing participatory development initiatives: lessons learned from a decade of Poverty Stoplight implementations

Apoyo a los municipios en la implementación de iniciativas de desarrollo participativo: Lecciones aprendidas de una década de implementación del Semáforo de Eliminación de Pobreza

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Artículo recibido: 29 de noviembre de 2023. Aceptado para publicación: 15 de diciembre de 2023.
Conflictos de Interés: Algunos de los autores trabajan para el Semáforo de Eliminación de la Pobreza (Poverty Stoplight).

Abstract

Participatory initiatives in local governance, such as participatory budgeting and local assemblies, aim to involve communities at various levels of a development project. A key challenge remains in equipping government officials with tools to effectively understand and address community needs. This paper examines the efficacy of the Poverty Stoplight (Stoplight or PS), a participatory tool, in addressing this gap. This tool enables communities to self-assess their poverty status, identifying themselves as "red", "yellow", or "green" based on a range of indicators. Emphasizing self-assessment and mentoring, the Stoplight approach fosters community ownership and agency. This ensures members play a pivotal role in highlighting their needs and forming their development aspirations. This


research adopts a case study approach, detailing experiences with the Poverty Stoplight across diverse contexts, such as in Paraguay and Ecuador. Results indicate that the Stoplight not only facilitates individual poverty elimination strategies but also promotes collective participation within local governmental structures.

Keywords: participatory development, poverty stoplight, local governance, self-assessment, empowerment

Resumen

Las iniciativas participativas en la gobernanza local, como los presupuestos participativos y las asambleas locales, pretenden implicar a las comunidades en los distintos niveles de un proyecto de desarrollo. Uno de los principales retos sigue siendo dotar a los funcionarios de herramientas que les permitan comprender y abordar eficazmente las necesidades de la comunidad. Este artículo examina la eficacia del Semáforo de Eliminación de la Pobreza, una herramienta participativa, para subsanar esta carencia. Esta herramienta permite a las comunidades autoevaluar su situación de pobreza, identificándose como "roja", "amarilla" o "verde" en función de una serie de indicadores. Al hacer hincapié en la autoevaluación y la mentoría, el enfoque del Semáforo de la Pobreza fomenta la apropiación y la agencia de la comunidad. Esto garantiza que los miembros desempeñen un papel clave a la hora de poner de relieve sus necesidades y dar forma a sus aspiraciones de desarrollo. Esta investigación adopta un enfoque de estudio de casos, detallando las experiencias con el Semáforo de la Pobreza en diversos contextos, como en Paraguay y Ecuador. Los resultados indican que el Semáforo de la Pobreza no sólo facilita las estrategias individuales de eliminación de la pobreza, sino que también promueve la participación colectiva dentro de las estructuras de gobierno local.

Palabras clave: desarrollo participativo, semáforo de pobreza, gobernanza local, autoevaluación, empoderamiento

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Como citar: Burt, M. C., Parwani, K., Ramos, N., Peroni, V., Pane, J. C., & Burt, M. (2023). Supporting municipalities in implementing participatory development initiatives: lessons learned from a decade of Poverty Stoplight implementations. *LATAM Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades* 4(6), 755– 770. <https://doi.org/10.56712/latam.v4i6.1486>

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of economic and social well-being in communities requires a strategic and multi-layered approach. One central element in this complex landscape is the enhancement of local social dialogue and managerial skills among both governmental and civil society stakeholders. Fostering such capacities is vital for the effective design and implementation of community development initiatives (ILO, 2013). While progress has been made in understanding the importance of participatory governance (Chambers, 1994; Jennings, 2000; Camfield and McGregor, 2005; Camfield, 2006; Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Roelen et al., 2020), a nuanced understanding of the dynamics between citizen participation and administrative decision-making remains limited.

The concept of participatory development has gained considerable traction over the years, offering transformative possibilities across various sectors. Scholars and practitioners have explored numerous aspects of this paradigm, from participatory budgeting to local assemblies (Pomeranz, 2014; Shannon and O'Leary, 2020). However, there remains an explicit gap in understanding the depth and nature of citizen participation within the structure of local governance. Existing models, such as Arnstein's (1996) "ladder of participation," Pretty et al., (1995) "the typology of participation" and Cornwall's (2008) "model of inclusive participation", provide limited insight into the fluid, reciprocal interactions that characterize the relationship between communities and their government counterparts.

To address these shortcomings, this article delves into the symbiosis between participatory development and local governance. At the heart of this intersection lies the concept of empowerment, a multifaceted notion intrinsic to participatory development, shaped by diverse interpretations of power dynamics (Institute of Development Studies, 2011). Empowerment involves creating spaces for envisioning alternative realities and dismantling existing power structures to realize these visions (Eyben, Kabeer, and Cornwall, 2008). This dynamic interplay of power is vital in development initiatives, serving as a driving force for change and transformation. This duo - participatory development and local governance - offers a lens to better comprehend community-led advancement, emphasizing the significance of individuals' freedoms and capabilities in shaping meaningful development trajectories. Such a perspective not only aligns with participatory development's ethos, which advocates for community and individual empowerment, but also complements local governance's objectives to engage communities in their own future-building endeavors. The potential of participatory development initiatives to stimulate positive transformations within marginalized communities (Duvendak and Mader, 2020; Duflo, 2012; Pomeranz, 2014) and the underlying belief in the power of participatory approaches to empower individuals and alleviate poverty (Pomeranz, 2014; World Bank, 2014) are testament to this synergy.

This paper seeks to explore the Poverty Stoplight, a participatory tool and methodology designed for individuals to assess and address their own poverty-related challenges (Ramos and Hammler, 2021). Central to this approach is the "Life Map," a comprehensive self-assessment similar to a survey, which utilizes a stoplight color system—red, yellow, and green—to illustrate various indicators of poverty. This visual representation not only highlights the areas of need (reds and yellows) but also identifies the priority areas that families choose to focus on for improvement. Developed with the immediate aim of fostering personal agency and dignity, the Poverty Stoplight also aspires to achieve broader objectives. These include community transformation and the cultivation of strong civil societies capable of holding governments accountable. An individual whose basic needs have not been met cannot properly participate in civil society, and a community, lacking cohesion or information about its own needs on the ground, cannot adequately lobby for change or enforce accountability. The Poverty Stoplight helps individuals rise above poverty, fostering empowerment that extends from individuals to communities. This collective empowerment enables communities to drive policy and societal changes. The Poverty

Stoplight thus creates a feedback loop that informs and empowers both individuals and communities and equips them with the necessary tools to demand change from those in office.

In addition, the Poverty Stoplight provides local governments with a more nuanced understanding of the community's challenges, allowing them to optimize their efforts to protect individual rights and promote equal opportunity for all to prosper. In this way, local governments can better allocate their resources and enhance transparency and accountability for their actions.

Our research employs a case study approach, examining its implementation across three different contexts: a community development project in Paraguay, agricultural programs in Ecuador, and capacity-building initiatives for civil servants in Paraguay. The case study methodology was chosen for its capability to capture the multidimensionality and contextual factors affecting participatory development, thereby contributing a nuanced understanding to the field.

Despite the theoretical convergence of participatory development and local governance, the existing literature on empirical evaluations of their joint efficacy is scarce. The Poverty Stoplight's application in our selected case studies offers a practical perspective on this intersection, allowing for the assessment of how it can influence and shape participatory initiatives and governance processes. Acknowledging the noted challenges and limitations in citizen engagement and empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000), this paper seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical constructs and tangible application, exploring how such approaches can manifest in transformative development practices.

Through our findings, we emphasize the necessity of creating a synergistic relationship between diverse societal actors, which serves as a catalyst for impactful and enduring community development.

Conceptual Framework

Bhaskar (2008) articulates empowerment as a process that enhances the capacity of disadvantaged individuals to challenge and alter existing subordinate power relationships. This process is inherently political, social, and economic in nature (Batliwala, 2007). In the realm of development initiatives, empowerment serves as a catalyst for change and transformation. However, while many definitions of empowerment emphasize its processual aspect, development interventions often treat it as an outcome (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 2018; Priya et al., 2021). This research examines how participatory development initiatives can stimulate this empowerment process, especially within marginalized communities (Duvendak and Mader, 2020; Duflo, 2012; Pomeranz, 2014), and how these initiatives align with the broader participatory ethos of enabling individuals to make meaningful choices (Sen, 2001; Batliwala, 2019). The belief in the transformative power of these approaches continues to drive substantial interest and engagement in the development sector (Pomeranz, 2014; World Bank, 2014; Gessese, 2020).

In participatory development discourse, power is a multidimensional concept that shapes agency, engagement, and the potential for transformation. "Power to," as highlighted by scholars including Sen (2001), Clark et al., (2019), Rowlands (1997), and Ibrahim and Alkire (2007), is an individual's capacity to effect change and pursue valued goals, positioning individuals as architects of their own and their environment's transformation. This aligns with agency as defined by Sen (2001) —the freedom to set one's own goals and act upon them. "Power with" (Rowlands, 1997; Luttrell et al., 2007) complements the previous term by focusing on collective empowerment and the synergies of collaboration. It goes beyond individual actions to embrace the strength of group cooperation, recognizing that unified efforts often yield greater outcomes than solitary ones. This dimension of power is critical in participatory development, as it fosters cooperation, mutual understanding, and shared objectives, allowing for a collaborative power dynamic that enhances the collective capacity to overcome common challenges.

Similarly, "power from within" can be understood as an intrinsic form of empowerment that springs from self-confidence, dignity, and autonomy. This concept, explored by Rowlands (1997), Mayoux (1998), and others, suggests that empowerment begins with an internal transformation through self-reflection, enabling individuals—particularly women—to aspire, challenge norms, and make autonomous decisions. It is power characterized by the courage to face fears and the realization of one's innate strength to push against external pressures. On the other hand, "power over," as discussed by Gaventa (1982), Lukes (2005), and Alsop (2005), represents a more conflictual form of power, where authority is used to control or coerce, often leading to actions that serve the powerful at the expense of others. This coercive power can manipulate actions, shape agendas, and even distort truths to uphold certain interests, creating a zero-sum dynamic in power relations (Pane, 2021). Such dynamics are antithetical to the goals of modern development programs, which seek to reduce inequalities and promote social justice by empowering individuals and communities. Recognizing the adverse implications of "power over," which can undermine sustainable development, ethical standards, and community resilience, development programs are increasingly focused on nurturing "power from within" and other forms of collaborative and enabling power.

In light of these circumstances, this discourse embarks on an exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of power in the context of participatory development. By delving into the intricate connections between "power to," "power with," "power from within," and "power over," this research aims to shed light on their profound implications for individuals' agency and transformative potential (Batiwala, 2007; Bhaskar, 2008; Pane, 2021).

Crucially, these dimensions of power are interconnected and synergistic. "Power to" gains momentum through collective collaboration, reinforcing its link to "power with" (Rowlands, 1997). Similarly, an amplified sense of "power within" often facilitates action by bolstering one's belief in their capability (Rowlands, 1997; Mercado, 1997; Batiwala, 2019). Scholars argue that understanding the improvement of various power dynamics in particular social structures requires adopting a wider viewpoint that extends beyond focusing solely on individual agents. (Chopra, 2019; McGee and Pettit, 2019). In essence, these dimensions collectively delineate the multifaceted nature of power within participatory development, highlighting its nuanced and interdependent manifestations.

The different types of power are not isolated entities, but rather synergistic forces that weave to shape the dynamics of participatory initiatives. As the pursuit of development gains momentum, it becomes evident that the potency of these types of power transcends mere resource provision, associating with collective efforts, self-belief, participatory decision-making, equality, and sustainable development. This interconnected understanding accentuates the need for local governments engaged in participatory development to consider the intricate interplay of types of power, recognizing their potential to foster holistic empowerment and sustainable transformation within their communities.

METHODOLOGY

In our examination of the three case studies, we employ a mixed-methods approach to rigorously investigate the effectiveness of the Poverty Stoplight (PS) methodology in local government-led participatory development initiatives. This approach combines quantitative measures, utilizing program data and statistical analysis to assess outcomes and impacts, with qualitative insights drawn from interviews with project staff deeply involved in PS implementation. Through this comprehensive approach, we aim to explore how the PS tool empowers families to own their development journey, breaking down the complexities of poverty into actionable indicators and engaging them in a collaborative, problem-solving process to prioritize and address their poverty-related challenges.

The first case study examines the Cerrito Initiative in Paraguay, which demonstrated a significant reduction in poverty levels among participating families. The second focuses on the integration of the PS by Ecuador's Ministry of Agriculture to refine resource allocation and foster cross-agency collaboration, offering insights into the tool's reception and practical challenges. The third case involves a partnership between Fundación Paraguaya (FP) and local municipalities in Paraguay to institutionalize PS as a development instrument, highlighting its role in promoting economic inclusivity and capacity building among local entrepreneurs.

Our research adopts a comprehensive data collection strategy, leveraging primary data from surveys, interviews, and reflections from stakeholders involved in each case study. This methodical approach allows for an in-depth evaluation of the Poverty Stoplight (PS) methodology's implementation specifics—such as the extent of its adoption across cities, participant demographics, responsible government agencies, and direct beneficiaries. Furthermore, by examining the dynamic interplay between local communities and governments, our study elucidates the collaborative processes and leadership mechanisms that underpin these participatory development efforts.

Lastly, our research aims to distil essential insights into the functioning of participatory development as a whole. We seek to identify and highlight the most successful participatory elements that have contributed to the overall effectiveness of these initiatives. By examining these key dimensions in each case study, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the potential and challenges of participatory development in the context of local governance.

RESULTS

In this section, we present the main results from the three case studies exploring how the Poverty Stoplight provides local governments with bottom-up data and a methodology to foster participation between communities and governments to improve the quality of life of citizens.

Case Study 1: Poverty Stoplight Implementation in the Cerrito community

The Stoplight-Cerrito initiative study exemplifies a partnership between local government and community, unified by the Poverty Stoplight initiative. In 2017, Fundación Paraguaya started working closely with 900 families in Cerrito to implement the Poverty Stoplight with the goal of empowering the community to eliminate their poverty-related challenges. Over the course of 4 years, this collaboration has matured into a robust working group that harmonizes the community's grassroots efforts with governmental support, highlighting the government's role as an essential enabler of development and recognizing the community's potential to lead transformative change.

In the Cerrito case study, families collaboratively work on both their individual poverty situations and communal challenges. This collective effort involves creating strategies and making decisions that affect everyone in the community. The process starts with a self-assessment to identify personal challenges, aspirations, and priorities, fostering a bottom-up approach that empowers the community and ensures contextually relevant and sustainable solutions. Such community-driven goal-setting and development planning enhance a sense of ownership and agency among members.

The government, on the other hand, assumes the role of enabler and facilitator. It provides essential resources, support, and a conducive environment for the initiative to thrive. Local government authorities collaborate with community members to identify needs, allocate resources, and align policies with community-driven priorities. This model of collaborative governance creates a space for dialogue, allowing the government to effectively respond to the changing needs of the community. Regular interactions, workshops, and consultations foster a sense of camaraderie and trust. The

initiative's framework, encompassing indicators of multidimensional poverty, resonates with the broader government development agenda, facilitating alignment and synergy between the two entities.

In the Stoplight-Cerrito initiative, noteworthy achievements include infrastructure developments and strategic partnerships that have significantly benefited the community. Key accomplishments include the construction of a community-managed well providing clean water access, the revitalization of artisan markets linking to larger sales channels, and the creation of a market for local entrepreneurs, bolstering both economic activity and social cohesion. These efforts have been amplified by the collaborative engagements with national and international universities, NGOs, private entities, and public institutions, enriching the community with diverse resources and expertise. Additionally, civil society have been instrumental in fortifying the initiative through their provision of technical support, expansive networks, and evaluative capabilities, thereby maximizing the project's scope and impact.

While there have been significant results, the Stoplight-Cerrito initiative has faced a number of challenges that have shaped its execution and impact. These challenges, some of them anticipated and others unforeseen, have highlighted the inherent complexities in addressing multidimensional poverty and fostering community-driven change. One of the main challenges has been navigating cultural diversity and social dynamics within the community. Cerrito is a tapestry of diverse identities, including indigenous families of the Toba Qom ethnicity and non-indigenous families with ancestral ties to Swiss and Italian immigrants. Bridging cultural gaps, addressing historical disparities, and ensuring equitable participation among these groups has posed intricate challenges. Adapting the Stoplight methodology to resonate with each cultural context while fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose required a delicate balancing act.

The Stoplight-Cerrito initiative initially grappled with complex social hierarchies and existing power dynamics, which posed challenges to both community cohesion and individual agency. According to Tellez et al. (2020), there was a notable tension between collective agency and delegated agency within the community, with a tendency to rely on established leaders sometimes limiting equitable participation. In response, the initiative focused on redistributing leadership to foster both communal and individual empowerment more effectively. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges, exacerbating these issues. The shift towards digital engagement, necessitated by lockdowns and social distancing measures, brought the digital divide into sharp relief, making it harder for some community members to stay connected and engaged. This situation demanded innovative solutions to maintain support for all, particularly the most vulnerable families. The pandemic, therefore, served as a catalyst for the initiative to develop more inclusive and adaptable strategies. These strategies aimed to bridge the digital gap and ensure that the principles of distributed leadership and empowerment could withstand and adapt to the extraordinary circumstances posed by the pandemic, ultimately strengthening the community's resilience and collective efficacy.

Resource allocation and sustainability presented another set of challenges. While the initiative's multidimensional approach resonated with the government's development agenda, ensuring consistent and adequate funding remained a challenge. Balancing short-term resource allocation with long-term sustainability required careful planning, advocacy, and innovative fundraising strategies. The initiative had to continually demonstrate its impact to maintain stakeholder support and secure the necessary resources for expansion.

The Stoplight-Cerrito initiative faced the intricate task of transforming cultural norms and conventional mindsets about poverty and individual agency. It necessitated redefining community perceptions of poverty from a stance of dependency to one of empowerment and self-determination. Concurrently, the initiative operated amidst a challenging socio-economic landscape where indigenous Toba Qom

families experienced limited access to essential services. Strategic coordination with local authorities and public sector agencies was critical to navigate these systemic barriers, requiring a concerted effort characterized by negotiation and a mutual commitment to the community's prosperity.

The participatory elements of collective agency and the "Life Map" approach are central to the program's impact within the Toba Qom community. Research underscores the significance of collective agency, where community members, guided by their leaders, collaborate towards common objectives, reflecting a deep respect for the community's cultural and social fabric. This synergistic collaboration underpins a mutual support system that enhances the community's capacity for poverty alleviation. Concurrently, the "Life Map" technique, which originates from the self-assessment process, enables communities to prioritize improvement areas, address causes of poverty, and devise tangible solutions. This process not only emboldens community-driven initiatives but also cultivates problem-solving capabilities, reinforcing resilience and adaptability. Such empowerment instills confidence in the community to enact positive change and maintain persistent efforts in poverty reduction.

This study highlights the link between empowerment and poverty reduction in participatory development programs, pointing to crucial areas for further research. Comparative analysis with traditional approaches and the integration of stakeholder perspectives, including program participants, will offer a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of participatory methods. Additionally, examining the role of modern technologies in enhancing these programs can provide insights into new avenues for innovation. Addressing these areas will deepen our understanding of participatory development's role in empowering individuals and reducing poverty.

Case Study 2: Poverty Stoplight Implementation within the Ministry of Agriculture in Ecuador

In 2019, Ecuador's Ministry of Agriculture, under the leadership of Minister Xavier Lazo, integrated the Poverty Stoplight tool into their operations with the goal of addressing multidimensional poverty among farming families. The Ministry implemented the tool with hundreds of families, aiming to encourage other government sectors to adopt a similar holistic approach in supporting them out of poverty. Despite the challenges and the lukewarm response from other public entities, Minister Lazo's department managed to administer the PS survey to 993 families, totalling 3,589 individuals. Recognizing the intertwined nature of agricultural and social issues, as livelihoods were largely dependent on small-scale farming and related activities, the initiative aimed to gather data for a deeper understanding of community needs, provide targeted support, and foster empowerment among the constituents.

Minister Lazo's initiative to integrate the Poverty Stoplight within agricultural communities benefited significantly from the established trust and local knowledge of agricultural technicians. These professionals, already familiar with the territories and families involved, were pivotal in introducing the tool to associations and their members. Their credibility and established relationships facilitated the administration of the surveys and helped in managing expectations. Initially, there was skepticism among participants regarding the purpose of the tool and a general distrust towards government initiatives. Nevertheless, once the technicians provided thorough information and demonstrated the intent of the Poverty Stoplight, participants appreciated the opportunity to self-identify their needs and strengths, which in turn, allowed them to communicate effectively with authorities, thus fostering a sense of satisfaction and empowerment.

Likewise, the substantial interest and dedication shown by the head of the Ministry significantly facilitated the implementation of this tool by other department members. This was particularly true as Minister Lazo incorporated the Poverty Stoplight into the department's list of objectives, easing its adoption. This project was heavily promoted by the Ministry, as part of its strategic work with the target

population. This advantage was key to the tool's implementation because of the Ministry of Agriculture's commitment to dedicate its resources to the cause. Continuously, they applied for funding with the World Food Program, meaning that they had greater leeway to invest in the Poverty Stoplight.

The initial success of the Poverty Stoplight implementation by the Ministry of Agriculture encountered obstacles due to varying levels of commitment from other government departments. Initially, there was interest from various agencies in the project, led by Minister Lazo. Some departments participated in creating indicators and adaptation sessions, such as the Health Ministry's involvement in the "Health and Environment" dimension. However, as the project evolved to demand more time, resources, and personnel for activities like administering surveys, these agencies began to reduce their involvement. This reluctance was mainly due to the resource-intensive nature of the project's later phases, including fieldwork and financial investment, leading to a decrease in support and undermining the comprehensive approach required to address the poverty indicators effectively. Complicating matters further, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and a change in presidential administration disrupted the continuity of the program. Follow-up interventions and progress monitoring were significantly affected. Interviews with the management team highlighted that such political and structural shifts are major challenges in public sector collaborations, often resulting in the discontinuation of initiatives by new administrations that may be unprepared or unwilling to continue programs initiated by their predecessors.

Members of the Poverty Stoplight implementation team have reported that the survey uncovered previously unknown needs in different communities. To illustrate, Ecuador boasts high literacy rates, with illiteracy being a well-addressed concern among its population. For this reason, those that analyzed the aggregated data provided by the surveys were surprised when the data collected in one of the provinces (Cotopaxi) showed astoundingly high illiteracy reports. While global data showcased Ecuador as a mostly literate country, this province's Stoplights showed that 51.49% of families were in the red level (extreme poverty) in the indicator "Knows how to read, write, and comprehend"¹ and 12.7% of families were in the yellow (poverty) level. The Poverty Stoplight identified this formerly undetected deprivation.

According to interviews with staff from the Ministry of Agriculture for this paper, the Poverty Stoplight was instrumental in revealing trends in farmers' quality of life based on their association memberships. The Stoplight's diagnostic results indicated that farmers affiliated with well-organized associations, which had proper standards and offered benefits, received more substantial assistance. In contrast, farmers who were part of more "informal" and "less developed" associations did not enjoy these benefits, a factor that the Stoplight revealed to be negatively affecting their quality of life.

The Ministry of Agriculture, while not fully implementing the Stoplight program due to its complex methodology, has proactively developed strategies to improve participant outcomes. These include collaborations with government agencies and offering diverse training, like financial education. Despite challenges in fully deploying the program, particularly in coordinating among various government departments, there has been a notable interest in using the survey results for better resource allocation. The promising results and stakeholder engagement demonstrate the program's potential effectiveness. However, the program's continuity and success face risks from changes in government administrations, which can alter policy priorities and funding. To mitigate these risks and ensure long-

¹ Green: All members of my family (fifteen years and older) can read, write and do so with ease.

Yellow: All the adult members of my family (fifteen years and older) know how to read and write, but at least one has difficulty reading and/or writing their ideas.

Red: At least one adult member of my household (fifteen years and older) cannot read and/or write.

term sustainability, it is crucial to consider strategies like gaining bipartisan support, framing the program as a state policy rather than a government-specific initiative, and securing a stable funding structure.

Case Study 3: Poverty Stoplight Implementation with Municipalities in Paraguay

Fundación Paraguaya engaged in a significant partnership with 45 municipal governments in Paraguay to adopt the Poverty Stoplight as a key instrument for fostering local economic development. The initiative's core aim was to identify and mitigate the primary challenges hindering the growth of local entrepreneurs. Through the implementation of the Poverty Stoplight with local informal entrepreneurs, local policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders were equipped with actionable insights to address these challenges. The tool not only facilitated the identification of obstacles to economic participation, but also provided practical solutions to enhance sustainable growth and improve the overall economic health of the communities.

Municipal governments in Paraguay, guided by specific legislative mandates, are tasked with implementing comprehensive development programs to address barriers that hinder local progress, particularly for vulnerable groups. These programs encompass a wide array of social services, aiming to bolster areas such as nutrition, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. However, these efforts are often impeded by challenges like resource constraints, lack of standardized project management processes, and insufficient expertise in program execution. This report consolidates recommendations and alternative strategies to enhance municipal support systems, ensuring effective social and economic upliftment for community entrepreneurs and aligning local initiatives with broader development objectives.

In Paraguay, entrepreneurs—particularly the most vulnerable—face significant barriers that impede their business growth and overall well-being, impacting their socio-economic contribution and their communities' development. With entrepreneurs representing 80% of the employed demographic, the nation's economic health is intertwined with their success. Yet, according to the 2022 Permanent Household Survey (INE, 2022), around a third of Paraguayans live in poverty, many of whom are entrepreneurs in precarious conditions. The Poverty Stoplight initiative has been instrumental in identifying these barriers, which range from limited financial access, deficiencies in planning and entrepreneurial skills, and lack of enabling public policies, to gender-based discrimination and insufficient intersectoral cooperation. Moreover, municipal governments encounter parallel challenges in addressing community issues, compounded by financial and human resource limitations, bureaucratic hurdles, and resistance to adopting new technologies. The goal of uncovering these obstacles is to provide policymakers and community leaders with actionable solutions, aiming to enhance social and economic development through increased participation and the elimination of these systemic barriers.

The implementation of the Poverty Stoplight as a tool for development within municipalities in Paraguay has yielded significant achievements. A transformative shift in paradigm marked the project's approach, transitioning from conventional organizational involvement to a participatory model driven by Paraguayan families themselves. A robust network of implementers was established at both family and community levels, fostering a bottom-up trajectory for development. The project's outreach was substantial, with 4371 local government officials gaining familiarity with the Poverty Stoplight through 1457 presentations, subsequently leading to 522 signatories pledging to champion its adoption. Notably, 350 individuals underwent comprehensive training, equipping them with the necessary skills to effectively engage with the tool. The culmination of these efforts was exemplified by 678 families successfully completing the Poverty Stoplight assessment.

The project expanded its reach outside of family settings, impacting 45 municipalities and involving 420 potential candidates, which indicates the broader acknowledgment and significance of the Poverty Stoplight. Additionally, the project gained support from a variety of stakeholders, with 522 organizations, including neighborhood committees, associations, community groups, communal kitchens, NGOs, and indigenous communities, supporting the tool's implementation. This wide-ranging success demonstrates the project's ability to foster a participatory and inclusive development process, reflecting its relevance to both Paraguayan communities and municipal bodies.

DISCUSSION

In the three case studies, there are challenges and successes in the implementation of the Poverty Stoplight that can shed light on how participatory tools can provide local governments with bottom-up data and a methodology to foster participation between communities and governments to improve the quality of life of citizens.

In terms of challenges, in all cases balancing cultural diversity and social dynamics within the community proved challenging, requiring adaptation of the Stoplight methodology to resonate with different cultural contexts while fostering unity. In the case of Cerrito, pre-existing social hierarchies and power imbalances posed significant challenges to community inclusion and cohesion. The concept of "agency" within this community revealed nuanced distinctions between collective agency and delegated agency, particularly evident in research on the Poverty Stoplight's impact on family and collective agency. Here, the community's reliance on established leaders and figures of authority for initiating change had the potential to impede equitable participation and ownership. Navigating these intricate dynamics became a central task for the initiative, striving to empower both individuals and families while fostering an environment conducive to distributed leadership and thriving collective efforts. These challenges shed light on the intricate web of power dynamics in participatory development, emphasizing the critical need to address these complexities for achieving more inclusive participation and community ownership.

Regarding the second case study, overcoming challenges within the community demanded persistent efforts to challenge cultural norms and reshape mindsets regarding poverty and agency. Cultural norms and pre-existing beliefs had to be redefined to foster new community roles and responsibilities. Simultaneously, confronting entrenched social hierarchies and power dynamics presented hurdles to achieving community inclusion and cohesion, calling for a dual approach: empowering individuals and redistributing leadership. In the third case study regarding municipalities in Paraguay, the barriers hindering entrepreneurs, especially the most vulnerable, have a profound impact on their "power to", compromising their ability to engage in community development. Given the significant role entrepreneurs play in Paraguay's economy, addressing these obstacles was paramount.

The allocation of resources emerged as a persistent challenge across the three case studies, revealing intricate power dynamics at play. In Cerrito, sustaining funding for the initiative proved difficult, highlighting the need for continuous advocacy and innovative fundraising strategies to secure financial support. In Ecuador, despite the initial involvement of various government departments, resource allocation became a stumbling block when the project demanded monetary resources and time from officials, leading to stagnation in subsequent phases. Paraguayan municipalities of the third case study, while pivotal in driving these efforts, faced constraints in terms of insufficient human, financial, and temporal resources. Furthermore, a lack of standardized methodologies and knowledge hindered the execution of projects in diverse contexts, diminishing their efficiency and effectiveness.

The COVID-19 pandemic also presented unprecedented challenges across the case studies, demanding adaptability and resilience. In Cerrito, lockdowns and distancing measures disrupted conventional

engagement and mentoring methods, leading to the swift adoption of innovative digital solutions. However, this transition to virtual platforms exposed the digital divide within the community, highlighting disparities in technological access and digital literacy. In Ecuador, the pandemic and a change in leadership within the Ministry of Agriculture disrupted the project's continuity and interventions for improving indicators.

In terms of successes, in all three cases the integration of self-assessment and mentoring empowered participants, allowing them to identify needs and develop practical plans, fostering ownership and agency. This not only provided local governments with bottom-up data, but in addition, measuring multidimensional poverty with a diverse set of indicators effectively captured comprehensive community challenges and aspirations, enhancing engagement and relevance. Beyond the diagnostic aspect of the Poverty Stoplight, the "life map" approach where families make a plan to overcome their deprivations with a mentor resulted in a process that included participatory planning, promoting community-led initiatives and problem-solving skills. In the case of the third case study, the primary objective of identifying these barriers was to equip policymakers, community leaders, and entrepreneurs with concrete solutions to eliminate obstacles and foster participation, ultimately promoting social and economic development within communities.

The emergence of 'power with' is most notably demonstrated in the Cerrito case, where the indigenous Toba Qom community united to pursue common objectives. Through collaborative effort, the community pooled their resources, knowledge, and efforts, enabling them to advocate effectively for their needs and work towards overcoming systemic barriers. Their interaction with local authorities and alignment with ongoing development efforts are prime examples of leveraging collective strength for community empowerment.

In contrast, the Ecuador project showcases a blend of 'power over' and 'power with.' Minister Lazo's leadership at the Ministry of Agriculture was instrumental, as he integrated the Poverty Stoplight into the department's main objectives and ensured resource allocation. This top-down approach was complemented by collaboration with agricultural associations and technicians, who brought vital local knowledge and built trust with participants. Their role was pivotal in managing expectations and fostering collective action, illustrating how leadership and community collaboration can synergistically contribute to the success of development initiatives.

These instances set the stage for understanding the broader power dynamics at play across the case studies. The 'power to' effect change is seen in the self-assessment and mentoring processes of the Poverty Stoplight initiative, where participants actively identify and tackle their challenges. 'Power within' is highlighted by communities like the Toba Qom, who used their collective identity and cultural strength to adapt the tool to their context. This internal empowerment was key in challenging norms and adopting a proactive development stance. Furthermore, the 'power with' dynamic, essential for collaborative strength, is evident in all three case studies, especially in Cerrito's collective action with the local government. This interplay of power forms underscores the multifaceted nature of empowerment in participatory development, suggesting that recognizing and fostering these dynamics can significantly boost the impact of initiatives like the Poverty Stoplight towards more sustainable and inclusive outcomes.

Our study's insights highlight several pivotal aspects of participatory development. Effective implementation necessitates dedicated leadership and consistent support from all government departments, a standard set by Minister Lazo's efforts in Ecuador. The collaborative integration of various governmental agencies is crucial for a comprehensive approach to poverty elimination. Moreover, challenges such as limited resources and changes in leadership present common hurdles in participatory initiatives. The most effective participatory features identified include self-assessment

paired with mentoring, which enhances ownership and self-agency among participants. Additionally, using a multifaceted set of indicators to measure multidimensional poverty allows for a more accurate reflection of poverty's complexities, as demonstrated in the municipalities' case. The Cerrito case further reveals the power of collective agency and unity in enacting substantial change. Lastly, aligning development projects with community-specific priorities, like the "Agricultural Development" aspect in Ecuador, ensures that initiatives resonate with and meet the unique needs of the communities they serve.

CONCLUSION

To truly empower citizens, we need to move beyond the limited perspective of the ladder of participation. Rather than viewing citizen participation as a linear progression, it is essential to think more thoroughly about the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between citizens and civil servants/public sector employees.

A key feature that becomes evident across the case studies is the importance of forming strategic alliances or networks to carry out interventions that promote sustainable development. To achieve this, it is essential to generate synergies between sectors and actors in society to promote a virtuous circle that enables effective social interventions. Forming these alliances is not an easy task, since they must be developed on the basis of common principles, values and objectives among the various actors, each of whom can contribute their experience and knowledge. Generating this convergence requires recognition of the needs and challenges of society itself and the development of its members. It is important that state institutions contribute to prepare these leaders for these leadership situations and also establish control and accountability mechanisms. Offering spaces to provide local government public servants with the knowledge and skills to implement a dignity-based, bottom-up solution to the elimination of multidimensional poverty in their communities may be a promising pathway to increased citizen participation in development.

Further research is crucial to deepen our understanding of the relationship between empowerment and poverty reduction. Our study has shown a positive correlation, but the causality behind this link needs more detailed examination. Future studies should particularly focus on how participatory elements like mentoring and self-assessment contribute to reducing poverty. Longitudinal studies could be instrumental in establishing this direct causality. Additionally, it is vital to investigate the influence of cultural and socio-economic contexts on these empowerment programs. Developing robust methodologies for impact measurement that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative data will enhance the effectiveness of poverty alleviation initiatives.

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