

MIDDLE TENNESSE STATE UNIVERITY

Practicum Report

Transparencia Mexicana – Summer 2013

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Special thanks go to Dr. Stephen Morris, my practicum advisor. I am also grateful to Dr. Karen Petersen and Dr. Andre Korobkov for serving on the practicum committee, and to Dr. Moses Tesi, Graduate Director. I am so thankful for the role each of you have played in my academic and personal development. The words of encouragement and advice you all have given over the years are greatly appreciated.

1. Introduction

Over the summer months of 2013 I was fortunate enough to work with the Mexican National Chapter of Transparency International (TI) known as Transparencia Mexicana (TM). This opportunity served as the practicum component of a Master of Arts degree in International Affairs with a concentration in Security and Peace Studies through Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). I worked on-site in Mexico City, Mexico at the TM office.

This report covers many important aspects of my practicum and is broken down into six parts. The second section contains a brief overview of the history of the organizations (TI and TM) as well as a description of their activities and role in the international anti-corruption movement. Part three covers my practicum terms as well as the general activities and assignments I completed while with TM. I use my observations of the organization and knowledge of the non-profit sector to evaluate the NGO along with my own experience working there in the fourth section. This step allows me to further understand the political culture in Mexico, and compare and contrast it with that of the United States. Section five draws connections between the work of TM and academic research in the field. That section also explores how pairing international security and peace studies alongside corruption studies is a wise move for my future career. The report ends in section six with a conclusion and evaluation of my personal experience.

2. Organization History and Overview

TI was founded in 1993 by former World Bank expert Peter Eigen (Transparency International, 2013). Eigen and his colleagues started the NGO in response to the perceived lack of international action to address corruption which harmed developed and developing states alike (Transparency International, 2013). TI's mission was to work on a global scale to eradicate corruption and they have made remarkable strides to that end.

TI has seen great success over time in lobbying most major IGOs to adopt anti-corruption conventions. An example of this would be the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, finally adopted in 2003 (Transparency International, 2013). TI has now moved to the task of promoting the enforcement and implementation of such agreements. This has proven to be very difficult and the end is not yet in sight.

TI is also well known for their research carried out on a global scale. The organization was the first to take a systematic, quantitative approach to the study of corruption. Resources such as the Corruption Perceptions Index, Bribe-payers Index, and Corruption Barometer have allowed scholars to study corruption in ways that were previously impossible (Transparency International, 2013). This research has done much to help raise awareness about corruption, though many critique the TI methodology as ethnocentric, biased, and outdated (Galtung, 2005)

In addition to working internationally through academia and IGOs, TI has increased their global reach through their National Chapter system. After a rigorous clearance process TI allows an existing organization to become a semi-autonomous branch of TI that serves as the TI representative in a given state. This model allows the National Chapter to focus on local priorities and problems while remaining connected to the larger TI body and goal. TI has done thrive with this system, and there are well over 100 National Chapters around the world today (Transparency International, 2013).

TM comes into the story now as the National Chapter of TI in Mexico. Though TM shares many similarities with its umbrella organization, it is worth looking at TM's background because it has set itself apart in several ways. TM was started in 1999 by Eduardo Bohorquez, who is still in place as the director of TM today (Transparencia Mexicana, 2013). Unlike TI, which has seen great change to the executive leadership over the years, TM has had consistent leadership at the highest levels.

Over the past 14 years TM has contributed to many TI projects and as well as worked on their own original projects and research agendas. TM developed the National Index of Corruption and Good

Governance (INCBG) that is able to better focus on the Mexican situation than some of the surveys and projects done solely by TI (Transparencia Mexicana, 2013). IPRO is another program run by TM. IPRO collects data on government services and offices and makes this all available to the public (Transparencia Mexicana, 2013).

TM currently has about a dozen staff members as well as many other consultants, contractors, and part-time staff members who work in conjunction with related Mexican NGOs. Additionally, TM occasionally hosts interns. Most Mexican university students are required to complete a service internship prior to graduation, and an internship with TM is one available option. I had the opportunity to work alongside five interns at TM for eight of the weeks I was in Mexico City. The majority of the staff, as well as all the interns, were from Mexico. Everyone at TM spoke proficient English, which was highly beneficial to me as I had very limited Spanish skills. It is worth mentioning that TM does have two staff members from Spain, as well as one from Brazil.

3. Practicum Terms and Activities Overview

I was in Mexico City between the dates of May 11th August 15th, 2013. I worked with TM Monday through Friday during that time. On a typical work day I would arrive at the TM office around 9:30 a.m. and leave around 7 p.m., though my schedule did vary when the needs of the organization changed. As part of MTSU's Master of Arts in International Affairs (MAIA) program I am required to spend at least 240 hours working with my practicum agency. Thanks to the amount of time I was able to spend in Mexico City I was able to complete nearly double the required number of work hours. This section covers only the basics of my practicum terms, or rules, and daily activities. For a more exhaustive review of my time with TM please see my daily log in which I kept detailed records of my time, activities, and perceptions each day at work.

Going back to the beginning of the practicum process, Dr. Stephen Morris introduced me to TM and TI. I am very grateful to him for helping arrange the practicum. Dr. Morris also agreed to serve as

my practicum advisor and provided advice and feedback throughout the process. Dr. Moses Tesi, the Graduate Director for the MAIA program, kept the paperwork for the practicum on track to ensure that I would be eligible to receive the six credit hours needed for the practicum. Dr. Karen Petersen and Dr. Andre Korobkov filled out the remainder of my practicum committee. My trip was also backed by MTSU's Office of International Affairs, which provided funding for roundtrip airfare to Mexico City. All the support from my home institution helped to make my practicum a success.

I arrived for my practicum shortly before a conference hosted by TM on corruption in climate finance. My first couple of weeks with TM were spent working on that conference and my tasks included helping set up conference rooms and receptions, stuffing folders for attendees, registering guests, etc. During the conference I was able to listen to many of the speakers and participants who had come from about a dozen different countries. I also spent time shadowing some of TM's staff to become more familiar with the daily rhythm of the organization.

After the climate finance conference had ended I began researching the best and most up-to-date survey methods from around the world to see what could be applied in Mexico. This was done in preparation for TM's survey known as the National Index of Corruption and Good Governance (INCBG). TM has conducted this survey several times in years past, but wanted to ensure that the 2013 version would avoid any mistakes made in previous versions. I spent several weeks compiling research and drafted a series of recommendations for the new survey. I also reached out to more than a dozen corruption experts for their input. Part of that process included translating old versions of the survey, which was useful as I attempted to learn Spanish as quickly as possible.

Another major assignment during my practicum was the Open Parliaments Project. This project started as an agreement between Mexico City's state-level legislature and TM that held the legislature to a minimum standard of openness for the public. TM and their affiliates are still working on a database that would measure how well other state and national legislatures stack up in terms of

openness and accessibility. I helped with the Open Parliaments Project in several ways. First, I co-authored and published an online article that compared and contrasted the Tennessee, United States, and two Spanish legislatures with their Mexican counterparts. I was able to interview Senator Ketron, who represents Murfreesboro in the Tennessee state legislature, for the piece. I also helped refine the variable operationalizations for the dataset as well as edit and proof their translation into English. TM also created a codebook for the project in the hope that other states would adopt the project and I was tasked with editing and proofing the codebook.

While working with TM I frequently edited grant proposals or articles that had been translated into English. At times I helped with basic office tasks like organizing supplies. I had great opportunities to attend some important political events around the city and sit in on staff meetings. Throughout my practicum I tried to spend time every day working on improving my Spanish skills. My various assignments with TM developed some practical career skills and allowed me to observe Mexican political culture firsthand.

4. Organization and Practicum Evaluation

My work and observations form the basis of my evaluation of my practicum with TM as well as my evaluation of the organization generally. This evaluation led to some lessons learned about Mexican political culture as well as office management in general that I can take to other positions in the future. Before beginning the evaluation I would like to make it clear that, though I will be critiquing the practicum and TM extensively, I do not have a negative view of the experience in the slightest. Rather, it is important to point out the areas that challenged me in the practicum because those areas are the ones in which I was able to learn and grow the most.

The first part of my evaluation deals with my personal practicum experience. One significant part of my practicum experience was the lack of direction and feedback from my practicum supervisor. This was a sentiment often echoed by the other interns. I reported directly to Eduardo Bohorquez,

TM's director, but he was often too busy to address my work. This was very stressful at times because I was unsure if I was doing well or proving useful to TM, but I slowly came to realize that working independently without instruction is simply a part of many adult jobs. Thus, what was initially a source of stress and discouragement turned out to be an important learning opportunity. I maintain that TM would see better results from interns if more time and instruction was invested in them on the front end, but the experience can teach an intern a lot about the workplace either way.

Another challenge during my practicum was the issue of time management. I often felt frustrated when meetings were cancelled or delayed. I was asked to arrive at 9:30 a.m. in the morning (which I nearly always did) but no one was there to open the office until after well 10 a.m. many mornings. Things rarely happened when originally planned in the TM office, and, coming from a culture where punctuality is prized, it was difficult for me to adapt. Over time I came to appreciate more the Mexican culture's perception of time. It taught me that sometimes taking longer than expected on a project or meeting is worthwhile if it improves the quality of your output.

Throughout my time in Mexico City I was impressed by the attention given to personal relationships. Time spent developing a friendship or professional connection is not considered a waste. Additionally, charisma seemed to be valued over many other character traits, particularly in a leader. This was something I did not quite understand coming from the United States, where other qualities often trump a good personality or charisma. I have since learned that this is an aspect of Mexican culture known as *personalismo*. Understanding this model of relationship building and leadership helps me to now better interpret my experience with TM.

I was rather surprised by the prominence that gender stereotypes have in Mexican culture, extending even to the TM office. I did not expect to see this facet in a progressive environment like TM. The legacy of *machismo* is still alive and well in Mexico and much of Latin America today. *Machismo* refers to a code of conduct and belief that men are superior to women. *Machismo*

encourages men to embody “male” traits such as courage, dominance, and leadership, while women are considered weaker and in need of protection. I saw this play out in everyday encounters. For example, the interns, all young women, were asked to join a meeting taking place with Eduardo Bohorquez, the director, and another male staff member. When the interns walked into the meeting room they were asked by Eduardo to pull up chairs for themselves. All the interns were deeply offended for weeks on end because, as women, they thought the men in the room should pull up the chairs for them. Small moments such as this stuck out in my mind because it showed me that, though times are changing, the legacy of *machismo* still influences how people act and think in Mexico. In the United States we are no stranger to sexism and gender inequality, but I think it has been easier for me to insulate myself against it in the United States than in Mexico.

My personal experiences in my practicum often correlate with larger patterns of behavior and cultural traits I observed at TM in general. The office dynamics at TM were very interesting at times. Eduardo, the director, had complete control of the organization. Nearly every decision had to be approved by him. This could cause problems in the office because it often meant waiting longer than necessary to move forward with a project. One example brought to mind would be a publication authored by one of the staff members that had been awaiting approval for over six months. Eduardo travels extensively for TM and so the meetings continued to be pushed back. This made the staff member involved rather disgruntled. Since my time in Mexico I have learned that executive dominance is a common feature found in Latin American politics. This political model carries over to other parts of society and I witnessed it firsthand at TM.

This model of executive dominance sometimes caused problems within the office. People often talked negatively about the director behind his back, though all agreed to his strong leadership skills and charming but intimidating personality. People in the office often acted in ways that they described as strategic when talking about themselves but manipulative when talking about others. Eduardo

often caused frustration in the office because he would move forward with a plan without informing anyone of his end goal or even his strategy. I realized this personally when I learned near the end of my practicum that Eduardo thought that my work would be useful to promote his vision for the INCBG to the board. He planned to use my work in that manner before I had even reached any conclusions or drafted any recommendations. It turns out that my ideas for the survey methodology matched his vision, but I can understand why staff members often felt misused when dealing with Eduardo. This part of the office environment matches up with a Latin American idea prior to the independence movement expressed as "*Obedezco pero no cumpro.*" In English this translates to "I obey but I do not comply," meaning you may go along with a policy or order but internally resist and disagree.

The TM office was often inefficient. Meetings usually started and ran late due to people chatting before and after the actual work at hand. Staff members often took long lunches or dinners, particularly if they were dining with a colleague. I would argue that the source of this is that Mexicans often value political efficiency rather than economic efficiency. Time invested in relationships can pay off in political gains, and so in this way the lax adherence to the scheduling is politically efficient. Again, this highlights the importance of personal relationships to Mexican political culture.

The final, and perhaps most striking feature of TM that I noticed is how the NGO is largely isolated from Mexican society. While many of TM's programs are geared to help the lower classes, in reality staff members rarely interact with anyone outside the elite through work. TM's location and phone number are not available on their website, and they have no indication of their office's presence on the street outside the complex. This seems to cut off some interaction with the outside world. I expected to see people or school groups drop by the office to learn about TM and the anti-corruption movement but that did not occur even once while I was there. Events held outside the office only included political elites. The climate finance event in particular bothered me in this aspect. The event claimed to look at how recent work in the area has helped those in poverty, but not a single person

at the conference had actually benefitted from the programs or even worked directly in the implementation of programs on the ground. I wonder how well these programs actually speak for the poor when they are not even invited to an event discussing the program. I was also bothered by TM's use of funding at times. Fancy venues and expensive meals reduce the amount of funding that can go to programming. One dinner I recall from the climate finance conference cost TM about sixty dollars per head! When you walk the streets of Mexico City and see the needs of the city it becomes hard to justify such an expense. Overall it seemed that the actions and attitude of TM was failing in its goal of reducing the inequality that contributes to corruption. In my mind, using funding to serve yourself a sixty dollar dinner is a form of corruption in itself.

5. Academic and Career Connections

My experience with TM illustrated and deepened my understanding of the existing corruption literature. Even outside the office I was able to see firsthand the effects and causes of corruption that I have read about in the classroom. My time in Mexico City brought my academic interest to life and fueled my desire to continue working in the area.

Inequality becomes far more serious and personal when you get to know the people most affected by it. Growing up in the United States, I was aware of inequality in an abstract way. Throughout graduate school I had been taught about the impact that inequality can have on a state but I really only thought about it on the macro-level. Mexico changed that for me. Sometimes you need to move outside of your home region to see issues more clearly. Now when I think of inequality, my mind goes to the people I met who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Mexico suffers from deep income, racial, and gender inequality that I was able to see on the individual level. Inequality seemed unfair and unfortunate before, but now it angers me because I better understand the ways it shapes a person's life and narrows their opportunities.

Inequality is linked to corruption as it both fuels and is caused by corruption in what Uslaner refers to as the inequality trap. (Uslaner, 2011). Corruption most harms those who can least afford it due to inequality in the economic and political system (You & Khagram, 2005; Uslaner, 2011). Thus, we cannot solve corruption without tackling inequality. The rhetoric of TI and TM takes a strong stance for ending inequality, but you do not always see that carried out in practice. Living in Mexico City you see how blatant and severe the inequality is and I realize now that what TI and TM are doing is not nearly enough if they are serious about putting a dent in inequality.

Another area in which I could see firsthand the practical implications of academic research was in methodology. Research shows that it is important to not conflate the perception and participation in corruption because the two are very different and do not consistently correlate (Morris, 2008). In order to curtail corruption, organizations like TM need a clear understanding of how people think about corruption as well as their actual experience. When drafting recommendations for the upcoming round of the INCBG survey it was made clear to me that the TM board and members of the TI Secretariat preferred to focus on perceptions of corruption. Eduardo held that the survey should emphasize participation in corruption, and I agreed. My academic experience with the corruption literature played a crucial role in my ability to draft the most useful recommendations.

Beyond the academic connections I made during my practicum I also gained important skills I can carry with me after graduate school to any career. Most importantly, I gathered more evidence as to why the study of corruption fits within the fields of IR and security studies. Mexico is an excellent example of how the three come together. Mexico is known to have serious security issues, particularly on its borders with the United States and Central American states. Many of the groups that cause insecurity work transnationally transporting drugs, arms, and humans. Effective plans of actions need to involve coordinated efforts from multiple states. Thus, security and IR are inextricably linked. Corruption comes into the equation because oftentimes the response to security problems comes

through corrupt agencies such as the military or police. The Mexican court system is weak and corrupt, leaving it incapable of fully dealing with issues like drug trafficking or gang violence. The difficulties that Mexico is facing are massive, and many other states are suffering from similar problems. Fortunately for me, that means I can expect to find work that relates to all three of my areas of interest for many years to come.

One of the best aspects of my practicum was that it allowed me to practice working with the front-end of data rather than only the output. This experience made me realize how difficult it can be to operationalize a variable in such a way that coding is going to be consistent and actually reflect the characteristic you want to measure. My work with the Open Parliaments Project was particularly useful in this way. Dealing with these common issues in research methods is a skill that I can apply to later academic or professional work.

My time with TM also highlighted the importance of learning a foreign language. I am continuing my Spanish education in the United States now as I work toward proficiency. Had I spoken Spanish fluently coming into the practicum I probably would have been more useful to TM and gained even more from the experience. The practicum also taught me a lesson in cultural adaptation. I learned to work in an environment and culture that was, pun intended, foreign to me. I would recommend that all future students in the MAIA program be required to work or study abroad. Experience in a country outside your home instills confidence that I expect to be useful when approaching future employers.

6. Personal Evaluation and Conclusion

The practicum allowed me to undergo tremendous personal growth and energized and focused my academic interests as well as my career goals. Going forward, I have a much clearer idea of the type of work I would like to do and how I would like to use my degree. The experience of moving to a foreign country completely alone with extremely limited language skills boosted my confidence and my awareness for my surroundings. Before going to Mexico I heard horror stories about the security

situation there, which is quite horrible if you listen to media. In spite of some dire predictions about my safety, I knew that working with TM in Mexico City would be the perfect opportunity to test out the life I have dreamed of. For the first time, I felt as though I were doing something brave.

Living in Mexico was undeniably challenging at times. I was often sick, and that is difficult when you are alone. I felt frustrated when I had a hard time describing what I needed in a pharmacy or store. I missed my family, especially my little sister, and hated missing special events like weddings and family reunions. Living in a new culture can be perplexing and you often feel as though you are trying to catch up with everyone else.

Despite the slight obstacles, I thrived in Mexico City. I met a wonderful group of friends who helped me to not feel alone, and people were exceedingly kind in public. People would often go out of their way to make sure that I was not lost and would wait patiently as I searched for words in my broken Spanish. I felt more welcome in Mexico City than any other place I have been, and that kindness contributed greatly to my overall perception that it would be a wonderful place to call home. The knowledge that I can handle moving by myself to a country whose language I do not speak, and flourish, learn, and be happy in the process, is incredibly empowering. I am now ready to take on another challenge. The mature confidence I gained through my practicum would not have come through an internship here in the United States and I hope to see MTSU's MAIA program encourage other students to seek out similar opportunities. I also have a greater appreciation now for people who chose to come to the United States to pursue a better life. I now tutor an adult group of ESL learners from Latin America. My students are inspiring to me because I now understand how difficult it is to tackle a new language and adapt to a new culture at the same time. I am also trying to take the time to make greater investments in people's lives because I better understand the power of relationships.

One word to sum up my feelings toward the experience both personally and professionally would be gratitude. Though I found the day-to-day management of TM to be disappointing at times, I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to observe TM up-close. My opinions and preconceptions about Mexican political culture as well as the anti-corruption field were challenged and changed. It was only after returning to the United States that I truly came to appreciate all the ways in which I grew and matured. I can hardly believe that I was given the honor of participating in and contributing to several important projects that will hopefully change people's lives. Overall, my practicum experience allowed me to take TM, and TI, off of the pedestal I had placed it on in my mind. I saw for myself that the organization is imperfect, but made-up of many people who are doing their best to eliminate corruption. I have a greater appreciation for the amount of work and dedication it takes to establish meaningful political connections and make inroads in changing policy when dealing with an elite who have little incentive to curtail corruption. I will be graduating soon, and thanks in large part to my practicum I can now say that I will be ready to pursue a career in the field of anti-corruption.

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