

Collaborative governance as a model to advance inclusive participatory processes in the Northwestern Sonora Reserve Cluster, Mexico.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy brief recommends that CONANP integrate the proposed Collaborative Governance Model into Article 20 of the General Law of Ecological Equilibrium regarding Advisory Councils of Protected Areas for social participation.

For the ongoing Northwestern Sonora Reserve Cluster strategic plan process, the model will:

- Build trust among stakeholders clearing the pathway for better informed strategic management plans
- End uneven power dynamics and access to resources
- Embed Indigenous and local communities participation in governance structures
- Dismantle unequal participation by strengthening locally-led leadership
- Generate a more transparent flow of information and accountability
- Ensure the feasibility of consensual outcomes in the short and mid-term
- Increase stakeholder participation, primarily Indigenous and local communities

The Mexican National Commission of Natural Protected Areas, CONANP, has a history of neglecting to integrate local community members in its participatory processes for establishing natural resources conservation policies, even though Mexican laws mandate their participation.

In the most recent participatory process, the Northwestern Sonora Reserve Cluster (NWSRC), CONANP failed to integrate local voices, losing an opportunity to strengthen participatory processes and enrich relationships with multiple stakeholders.

Implementing simple, cost-effective tools discussed here can reverse CONANP's systemic exclusion of community participation in decision-making processes, which is critical for the safeguarding of the environment and enhancing communities wellbeing.

Introduction

The Northwestern Sonora Reserve Cluster (NWSRC) is a multi-stakeholder decision-making process aiming to improve and strengthen the management structure and coordination between the Upper Gulf of California and Colorado River Delta, and El Pinacate y Gran Desierto de Altar protected areas in Northwestern Mexico (Figure 1). The process, led by the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas, CONANP, seeks to integrate a network of stakeholders to develop comprehensive strategies and adaptive-management practices for the conservation and sustainable use of marine and coastal biodiversity within the protected areas and their broader areas of influence.

The NWSRC workgroup, formed in late 2021, includes more than 30 representatives from the Mexican local, state, and federal governments, national and international non-profit organizations, regional and international academics, and other stakeholders interested in the sustainable use of the region's natural resources. During the last six months, the workgroup met several times and, led by CONANP, employed the [Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation](#) approach developed by Conservation Measures Partnerships to defining best conservation practices for existing economic activities in the

region, including fisheries, agriculture, and ecotourism. In addition, the exercise aims to help CONANP update the management plans of both protected areas with strategic conservation principles to address various challenges and improve its effectiveness.

The Open Standards approach focuses on synthesizing goals of human well-being and ecological integrity, linking actions to desired impacts, and incorporating adaptation and evaluation from the beginning of the planning process. One example of a successful implementation of the Open Standards approach is World Wildlife Fund, [WWF Market Transformation Initiative](#)'s work to engage the palm oil production industry in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea in sustainable conservation practices (CMP, 2020). Critical to their success was incorporating local peoples' ideas and knowledge and existing skills and experience in using and managing the resource for centuries since the beginning of the process.

Contrary to WWF, CONANP did not invite representatives of fisherfolks, farmers, and Indigenous peoples from the region that possess traditional knowledge of the

natural resources CONANP aims to protect, at least in the first phase of the NWSRC process. As a result, CONANP lost an opportunity to integrate critical information to strengthen the NWSRC process and outcomes. Moreover, by excluding the participation of these stakeholders, CONANP echoes historical processes of exclusion of local and indigenous voices in participation processes for decision-making. This is a significant setback for the General Law of Ecological Equilibrium (LGEEPA) and the Mexican Constitution, which mandate the integration of public and tribal consultations and require the participation of local peoples in the development of economic and conservation projects (Gaona Pando, 2013).

Besides, the Mexican government modified article 20 of the LGEEPA to include the creation of local Advisory Councils of Protected Areas. The councils, aiming to be agents for community integration into social participation systems, neither increased the participation nor guaranteed local and Indigenous communities the power of veto over decisions made by authorities regarding the use of natural resources, either on their lands or on lands with cultural interest for them, due to the lack of enforcement (Gaona Pando, 2013).

Figure 1. The Northwestern Sonora Reserve Cluster



CONANP has neglected the participation of local communities members from other natural resources planning processes. That includes the development of the Upper Gulf of California and Colorado River Delta management plan in 1993 and its update in 2007 and El Pinacate y Gran Desierto de Altar management plan in 1995 and its update in 2007 (Gaona Pando, 2013).

So far, CONANP has fallen short in integrating all voices in their participatory processes. To change course, CONANP needs to adopt participatory policies that lead to solid long-term relationships with stakeholders and effective conservation policies. By doing so, CONANP will play a critical role in reversing power imbalance and integrating diverse narratives into their participatory framework.

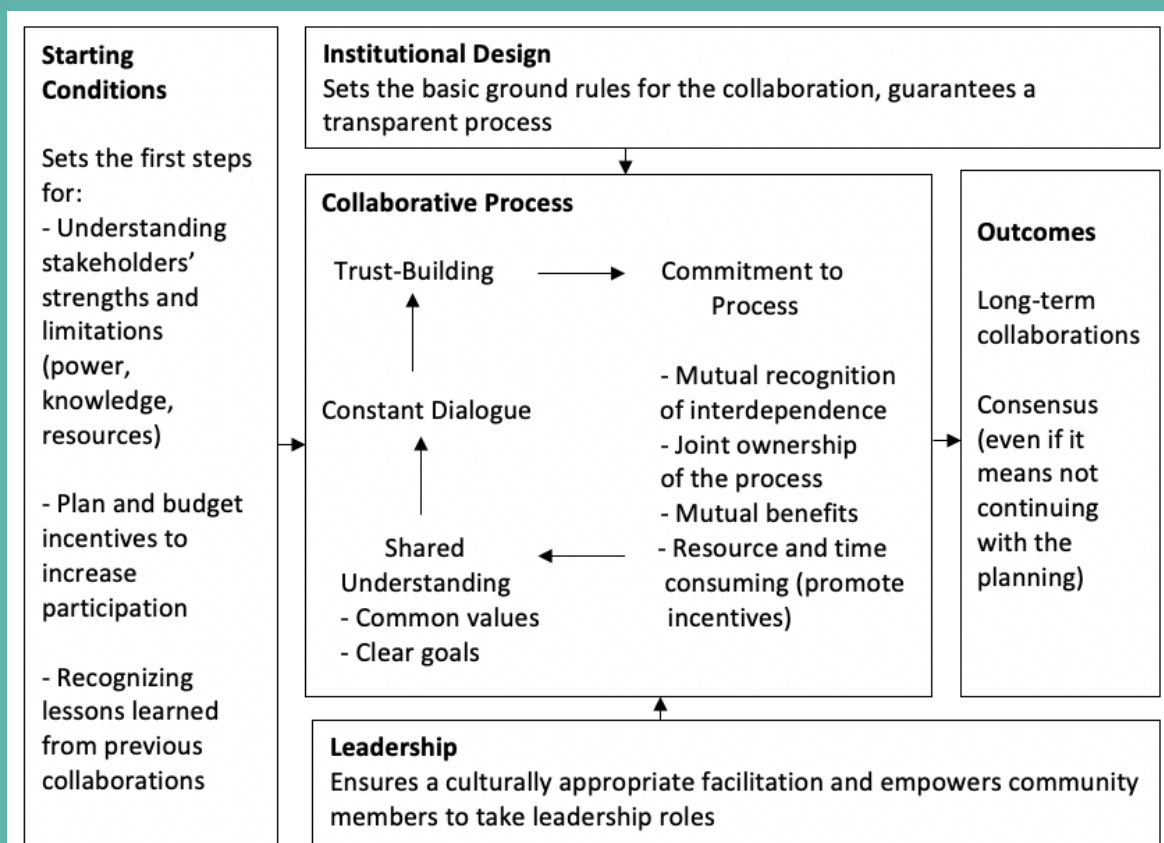
This policy brief proposes using the Collaborative Governance Model from where/by who?, an inclusive, participatory approach that could benefit both CONANP and community representatives. The policy brief also recommends making an addendum to article 20 of the LGEEPA to incorporate the model's principles into the advisory councils' framework.

The Collaborative Governance Model

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro brought a new international environmental vision in which state sovereignty and public participation started being considered critical for environmental decision-making processes (2015, ELAW). Furthermore, the Rio Conference pleaded for people's right to receive information, thus empowering concerned citizens to pursue their interests when dealing with influential stakeholders. The transparent exchange of information between stakeholders legitimizes participatory processes and generates favorable conditions for their application (2015, ELAW).

Adapted from Ansell and Gash (2007), the proposed Collaborative Governance Model to be adopted by CONANP offers a governing strategy that guarantees that the voices of everyday citizens are heard in decision-making processes. This include CONANP's NWRC process where there is an imbalance of power and influence among stakeholders. The model (Figure 2) shows a five-stage iterative cycle. The stages starting conditions, institutional design, and leadership feed the collaborative process stage that takes the central and critical spot. Finally, the Outcomes stage represents the product derived from the process.

Figure 2. Collaborative Governance Model for the Northwestern Sonora Reserve Cluster



Source: Adapted from Ansell and Gash, 2008.

The Starting Conditions stage helps understand stakeholders' strengths and limitations, including power imbalance, and access to resources. It also encourages meaningfully and trustfully understanding of their collective history, even if that means revising previous conflicts. Finally, it sets appropriate incentives to participate. For the NWSRC, that means CONANP needs to acknowledge that Indigenous and local communities are under-resourced, turning a simple task such as driving two hours to attend a meeting into an ordeal. Most local communities do not have reliable internet connections or don't know how to use the technology to participate in virtual conferences. In this case, to ensure a socially just participatory process, CONANP needs to provide these resources.

The Institutional Design stage sets the basic ground rules for the collaboration. As the collaborative effort lead, CONANP must guarantee a transparent process and ensure all stakeholders understand the goals and outcomes. The Leadership stage provides essential mediation and facilitation for the collaborative process. To elevate the voice and identity of local communities and their participation at all levels, CONANP must establish tools to empower community members to take leadership roles, including training and access to resources.

Finally, the Collaborative Process, the core stage, emphasizes the importance of continued dialogue among stakeholders. The mutual recognition of interdependence and joint ownership of the process are critical for trust-building and shared understanding, including defining clear goals among stakeholders. However, building long-term, respectful collaboration is time-consuming. This means CONANP needs to consider larger time

frames when working with Indigenous and local communities. Some actionable strategies for CONANP to implement in the short term are:

- Assure all concerned stakeholders, including Indigenous and local communities, are invited and agree on a time and date.
- Provide the necessary infrastructure, technology, and stipends for under-resourced members to attend sessions
- Invest in training for employees to understand cultural norms, which is critical to integrate people from different cultures fully
- Hire professional cultural competent facilitators to lead the sessions
- Develop a guide for inclusive participation

Ansell and Gash (2008) point out the Collaborative Governance Model has successfully reduced some common issues in participatory processes, including influential stakeholders manipulating the process, lack of commitment from public agencies, and distrust among stakeholders. The authors emphasize how bitter stakeholders have sometimes learned to engage in productive discussions, how public managers have developed more fruitful relationships with stakeholders, and how stakeholders develop sophisticated forms of collective learning and problem-solving strategies. Collaborative governance, mention the authors, "brings public and private stakeholders together in collective forums to engage in consensus-oriented decision making" (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

For CONANP, the model offers a new framework for building long-term trusted partnerships with stakeholders and reaching consensual agreements, whether the agreement could mean not continuing with the strategic planning for the NWSRC. The goal is not just to find new ways to involve community members in meaningful decision-making processes where all stakeholders benefit.

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