CHAPTER III

STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN MEXICO

Decentralization, as defined in the last chapter, is a key step in making sure that local governments become strong units of government within a federal system such as that of Mexico. Decentralization is helpful as it spreads power, autonomy and discretionary abilities throughout the different levels of government away from central authority. However, this doesn’t ensure that these will be used appropriately by intermediate and local governments in a way that would benefit the country and its population. Neither does it mean that this will transform local governments into full fledged political, legal and administrative governing bodies. María Emilia Janetti and Arturo Pontifes clearly explain the problems of viewing decentralization as the only step needed in order to strengthen local governments and of viewing local government only as an element in a decentralizing formula (56). Assigning local governments attributions through political decentralization will only offer a partial solution problem of division of power within the State. This will limit local government to playing the role of political and administrative divisions of the national and regional authorities instead of transforming local government into a genuine body of local political representation of the community (24). In order for this to happen, a further step needs to be taken to materialize decentralized authority and power into local government structures while ensuring that it is done properly. As shall be seen in the following sections, this challenge may prove to be much more difficult than that of decentralizing the government system as a whole. One of the greatest risks is the fact that decentralizing power and authority doesn’t ensure that these will not automatically re-concentrate in the hands of local and regional authorities, creating fragmentation and endangering national cohesion.
Effective decentralization has to be carried out in order to turn local governments into real political, legal and administrative government actors. As said by the former mayor of Quito, Perú, Jamil Mahuad Witt, “there can be no talk of local or regional governance without decentralization” (Gobernabilidad y desarrollo democrático en América Latina y el Caribe, 151). If power, authority and financial resources remain concentrated as they are currently in the hands of central government, local government will also remain an insignificant and powerless government unit on the lowest tier of a bureaucratic and administrative hierarchy. At the same time, the argument being made in this thesis in favor of strengthening local government doesn’t limit itself to the possibility of decentralizing the Mexican state. Instead it is crucial to contemplate the ways in which local government can be strengthened under current conditions and within the existing legal framework. This is due to the fact that an integral and complete overhaul of the existing government system and state reform are tasks that take place during extended periods of time and are rarely carried out properly because of domestic political confrontation. Therefore the suggestions towards strengthening local governments in Mexico and the way we should go about doing this that will be made in this chapter will be divided into short, medium and long term strategies that imply deeper and more structural changes in the government as they go along.

The following section concentrates on explaining the benefits of strengthening local government in the effort to solve some of the country’s most serious problems. Its goal is to enlist the reasons for which local government is best suited for confronting these issues and the logic behind making local government a more significant player in the Mexican political arena. In addition, it will also enlist the so called “dangers of localism” that must be considered when carrying out an effort to enhance local government structures. As in any
other public policy proposal contemplating the way in which things might go wrong always offers a good way of avoiding this from happening.

**The advantages of ‘the local’**

Recent currents of thought in both the academic and the political spheres have tended to emphasize the importance of local politics in national governments. “One of the most recent political phenomena within the dynamics of modern day democratic political regimes has been the rebirth of local regimes as elements promoting and valuing the idea of participation, and therefore, the legitimacy of the State” (Parejo, 147). On all points of the political spectrum there is a renewed importance given to localities demonstrated by the shared belief of neo-liberalism and post-Marxism “that states or markets cannot and should not be solely responsible for ensuring social equality and welfare growth. Local actors, knowledge and interventions are key features in both ‘new’ Right and ‘new’ Left conceptualizations of development” (Mayo and Craig quoted in Mohan and Stokke, 249).

This trend has taken root in Mexico over the last twenty years and as a result, an increasing number of politicians and academics now think that within local government lies the key to overcoming some of the country’s most challenging issues, such as poverty, unemployment and public security; and to reinvigorating some of the practices that have been lacking or missing in Mexican politics, such as enhanced representative democracy, civil participation in politics and the existence of strengthened citizenship at a local level. Several authors are now pointing to the need for considering local government as a crucial factor in the economic and social development of the country, that is to say, as a full-capacity governing body. Yet, despite this current surge of localist line of thought, the study of local government remains extremely limited in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. Jordi
Borja points out that “many intellectuals have analyzed the process of concentration of population, urban issues and social mobility in the city. But rarely have they analyzed the issue of local power” (28). Consequently, the importance of local government and its advantages in carrying out effective governance are yet to be established as common wisdom in political thought.

But why is local government being reassigned this key role within national governments and politics? One of the fundamental arguments behind this is the fact that local governments are the level of government that is closest to society, and they are therefore better able perceive the problems existing within it and more capable of solving them. Because of this the local sphere of government is best suited to carry out effective public policy creation and implementation. Local government officials are the first line of fire when it comes to facing society and its problems, and whenever a problem does come up they are the first ones to hear about it. As a result, local governments are much more aware of the specific problems existing within their jurisdictions and are therefore better able to offer the appropriate solutions.

In contrast to this, the national level of government only offers solutions and programs that are applicable to the entire country or regions and may therefore be inappropriate, ineffective and inefficient for the more particular and specific needs of the municipios. In addition to this, the national government may create public policy in order to overcome problems that might be urgent in some communities, while others have more immediate needs and priorities. The latter usually end up applying programs and allocating resources for solving issues that are not considered to be urgent by the local government or the local population. The advantages of creating and implementing public policy on a local level will be discussed later on in this chapter.
The second reason for this generalized move towards local government, which also has to do with its proximity to the population, is that it allows for an increased civil participation in government activities and public decision making. The consequences of this can be identified within a wide array of different aspects of social and political life of a country. First and foremost, this has a positive impact on the conditions of democracy, as was mentioned in Chapter II. In what can be considered as a form of direct democracy (consider the Town Hall Meeting system in the United States), local governments can offer the space for citizens to participate in the decision making process of the issues concerning their communities. The proximity of local government implies accessibility as long as the local government decides to do so. Another consequence of increased participation has to do with the legitimization of state action. As described by Janetti and Pontifes,

the municipio is an expression of the social will of its communities, and as a result, a clear example showing that sovereignty resides in the people... the municipio has responsibilities that can only be defined and carried out by its own government agencies and system of political representation (26).

The fact that local government is one of the most important means through which popular sovereignty is expressed turns it into the link between the state and society and therefore the key to legitimizing state action and political accountability. Nickson describes the municipio in Latin America as “a crucial mechanism for ensuring greater political accountability... municipalities have a strategic role in bridging the gap between the state and civil society, and in transforming marginalized groups into full fledged citizens” (2).

Finally, local government is the ideal entity for the promotion of active citizenship. Active citizenship is becoming less a question of participation on the national scale and more an issue of participation the local level of government and immediate community where there
is an increased possibility of political participation. In this more Aristotelian line of thinking, active citizenship within the local community is seen as the means through which democracy can work, with citizens making laws for themselves and then abiding them. As described by early thinkers such as Marsilius of Padua, “that practical matter whose proper establishment is of greatest importance for the common sufficiency of the citizen in this life, and whose poor establishment threatens harm for the community, must be established only by the whole of the body of the citizens…” (71). Arguments that extend along the same line of thinking envision local government as the solution to striking a balance between individualist and communitarian values in modern day liberal democracies. In his essay on finding the proper balance between individualism and communitarianism, professor Reuben Clark from Brigham Young University states that if local governments are “granted the necessary flexibility, they can properly accommodate the two legitimate interests”, and he then goes on to support his argument based on the American, Polish and Japanese models of local government. In a democratic society, a citizen must not only act as a subject by obeying the law, but he is also expected to take part in the decision making process and the local community is a good place to do so since “political and governmental problems seem to be more understandable, the organs of government less distant, the chances of effective participation for the individual citizen greater on the local level than on the level of national government” (Almond and Verba, 179-180).

As a reaction to this current trend that emphasizes the importance of local government, several authors and thinkers have pointed out the dangers of granting too much value to local governments or of doing so for the wrong reasons. These arguments, which are not necessarily against strengthening local government but are instead cautious about the importance they are given within the national government context are helpful in defining
the proper scope and depth that should be assigned to local governments’ power and authority. In his analysis of centralism and localism in Europe, Edward C. Page points out that local governments cannot be taken out of the contextual government structure which they are a part of. What this means is that despite the need to give local governments renewed authority and power, they will remain subordinate institutions to a large extent in what he describes as a condition stemming from them being an “integrating component of a larger State… local governments in federal systems conform to the pattern of subordination; they are creatures of province or state and can be reorganized and subjected to mandates and limitations imposed by state government” (1,2). In order for a federal system to work properly the central government must still have the binding capacity to change or modify the activity of the levels of government that are under it. As a result, a conflict arises between the political preferences of the locality and those being imposed by higher levels of government in what L.J. Sharpe calls the ‘ineradicable ambiguity’ of local government (quoted in Page, 2). This is an issue that Mexico must properly deal with in making sure that local government is reinforced without undermining the basic underpinnings of strong federalism. It is a question of defining the extent of local power and autonomy vis à vis the central and intermediate levels of government.

In addition to this, Giles Mohan and Kristian Stokke also point out some of the most important risks in overemphasizing the importance of local government within federal systems. In their essay entitled Participatory development and empowerment: the dangers of localism the authors argue that by “focusing so heavily on ‘the local’, these manifestations tend to underplay both local inequalities, and power relations as well as national and transnational economic and political forces” (247). They go on to say, in an argument that is similar to the one made by Page, that local politics cannot be isolated from
the politics of the country and the region. It is therefore crucial to pay close attention to what they consider to be “issues of scale” by not downplaying the importance of broader political and economic structures within which local governments exist and function (249). Finally, there is one additional observation made by the authors that is of relevance to this thesis due to the historical tradition and current conditions existing in Mexico. It has to do with the risks of using localism in the promotion of a certain ideology, as was done during the colonial period in Mexico in order to strengthen the grip of the Spanish Crown over the colony and its population, or as a tool used by the State to maintain the status quo of the country as exemplified by many of the decentralizing efforts that have already been set in place in Mexico. According to Mohan and Stokke,

…another effect of ‘going local’ is that the state is downgraded in importance… such an assumption (concerning the positive effects of localism) ignores the ways in which the state has used ‘the local’ politically through material and discursive practices that disempower. For example, colonial Indirect Rule and the apartheid system were at one level about celebrating and politicizing local difference in order to govern, but their corollary was that they fragmented political opposition as well as fuelling divisions between ‘ethnic’ groups. This means that, instead of romanticizing the role of local civil society in development theory and practice, we have to examine the political use of the ‘the local’ by various actors’ (254).

Local Governments and the creation and implementation of public policy

One of the fields of study in which the value of local governments has been increasingly highlighted in recent literature is the creation and implementation of public policy. Public policy as an academic area of study is relatively recent and has therefore only started to
explore the possibilities and advantages of creating, implementing and evaluating public policies on the local rather than the national level of government. In addition to this, an increased amount of literature has been published on the dynamics of public policy creation and implementation within federal systems, which poses a specific challenge to policy makers due to the conflicting interests of government actors on different levels of government. Once again, the fundamental reason for which local government structures are seen as the ideal structures for the implementation and creation of public policy to confront the problems existing within society is due to their proximity to it.

Public policy making within federal systems presents a fundamental challenge that needs to be faced by any policy maker and analyst. This challenge arises when deciding on the importance given to national government and to the intermediate and local governments in the process of policy making and implementing. The competition existing between local and central values weighs in on this issue much in the same way as it does on the issue of decentralization. When faced with this challenge, policy makers must make a decision based upon what is expected to be accomplished by the specific policy and its objectives.

Robert P. Stoker and Richard F. Elmore have done significant work on the value of the local in the creation and implementation of public policy and have argued in favor of increasing the weight of local authority and power in this process. According to them, there are two paths that governments can follow in implementing public policy as a result of the confrontation of local and central interests within federal systems such as that of Mexico. The first is the traditional scheme of public policy implementation in which the specific policy that is implemented starts at the central government and then follows a vertex to base path through a hierarchical structure of command down to the lower and intermediate levels of government. This is usually the way implementation is carried out in highly
centralized systems. Stoker calls this system the vertical approach to public policy implementation. Due to the nature of this model, the creation phase of the public policy is crucial to its success because it is at that moment that the way in which it will be implemented through all levels of government is determined. Policy makers assume that what is determined at the federal level will be rigorously followed with a limited possibility of misinterpretation by other government actors. This model allows little or no flexibility in the implementation process because changes cannot be introduced by intermediate or local governments as it moves forward. It is precisely because of this that both authors criticize this model by saying that one of its fundamental weaknesses is the belief that top government level policy designers can control what happens when the policy is implemented and goes through lower level governments and bureaucratic structures. Stoker states that this model is extremely problem prone due to the fact that it leaves a wide margin for errors in communication between the different levels of government as well as for modifications in the original objectives intended to be reached by the policy. In addition to the complexity existing within the federal system, a veto power possessed by many of the actors in charge of implementing the policy and inherent conflict among them reduces the possibility of the policy being successful.

Instead, what these two authors propose is a model that reconciles the opposing central and local values while giving local authorities increased importance in the creation and implementation of public policy. This alternative model is based on the assumption that local government is best fit to identify and solve the problems of society because it is closer to them than either the national or intermediate levels of government. As stated by Elmore “the closer one is to the problem, the greater the possibility of exercising influence over it” (quoted in 262). The model attempts to overcome the limitations and faults of the
traditional model by emphasizing the spread of control mechanisms among levels of
government in the implementation of the policy as well as the delegation of authority and
the use of discretion by lower levels of government when doing so. In addition to this, it is
suggested to increase cooperation and mutual adaptation between levels of government
rather than subordination to them, as well as to leave a wider margin of flexibility in order
for local governments to be able to modify the policy according to their own needs and
characteristics of their jurisdictions.

In accordance with the alternative model of public policy implementation proposed by
Elmore and Stoker, the former governor of Mendoza, Argentina stated that a
decentralization process can give the implementation of public policies an increased cost-
efficiency ratio while giving more legitimacy to governmental activities (Gobernabilidad y
Desarrollo Democrático en América Latina y el Caribe, 157). In spite of this, it is a difficult
task to assess the outcome of such a model. One can only get a general idea by analyzing
the impact of a specific public policy in a government sector before and after
decentralization of that sector takes place. Decentralization of public health services that
took place in Mexico during the 1980s offers a good example of how the impact of a
specific public policy, such as the delivery of health services, may be enhanced by allowing
an increased participation of local and intermediate governments in the implementation
process. It is not my intention to carry out a specific analysis on the impacts of
decentralization of health services in Mexico, but the main health indicators in the Mexican
population did show a positive change in the years following decentralization. Mortality
rates dropped more than one percentage point from 1982 to 1988, infant mortality rates
went from 33 to 22 for every 100 000 children and life expectancy for the general
population went up four years.
Similar to the belief that public policy is better implemented with increased participation of intermediate and local governments, there is also increasing evidence of basic public services being better delivered when done so by local government agencies. The former governor of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil stated clearly that, in his opinion,

there is not one single reason for which a municipalization of basic education and health services shouldn’t take place. There is no reason not to carry out a municipalization of road and highway maintenance provision. There is no reason not to transfer to municipalities road traffic vigilance, historical site maintenance and care, provision of social services and to additionally transfer all the necessary resources to do so (Achard and Flores, 401).

Alan Tonks, a former chairman on Metro Toronto, Canada also mentions that “there is no doubt that public services are most effectively and efficiently delivered by the local level of government” (Governance for Sustainable Growth and Equity, 54).

In Mexico, despite it being specified within the Constitution that a set of basic public services must be delivered by municipalities, many state governments haven’t transferred these responsibilities to local governments that are capable of managing them. The city of Puebla for example, should be responsible for all water supply and sewage activities since the 1983 reform of Article 115 of the Constitution, but the state government still controls the delivery of this public service.

However, not all local governments in Mexico are capable of undertaking all of these responsibilities. Mexican local governments suffer from strong structural and administrative deficiencies which impede them from properly functioning and carrying out their tasks. The following section explains some of the main obstacles existing within the configuration of local governments that need to be overcome if a greater role is to be
assigned to the local in Mexico’s political and governmental system. Identifying the most important problems within local governments will help make appropriate suggestions in order to overcome them and further strengthen local government.

**Mexican local government**

To understand the problems existing within municipal government structures in Mexico, one must first understand the normative makeup of local government as established by the Mexican legal system. This section will only offer a brief overview of the makeup of municipal government in Mexico with the intention of explaining the basic premises on which it is currently built upon. If any additional and more precise information is needed the manual on municipal public administration written by Celso Fuentes and published by the Centro Estatal de Desarrollo Municipal of the state of Puebla entitled *Municipio Libre: Manual de Administración Pública Municipal* offers a detailed explanation of the legal basis and structural make-up of local government in Mexico.

Mexican local government which is called the *ayuntamiento* is made up of single person executive head or mayor known as the *presidente municipal* or *alcalde*, a legal officer know as the *síndico* and a legislature know as the *cabildo* that is made up by a number of *regidores* that is determined by the size of the municipality’s population. The number of *regidores* is never over 25 not matter how big the municipality. The mayor is elected along with the *regidores* based on a single party list, which allows for a blurry distinction between the executive and deliberative branches of government. All municipal government officials are elected for three-year nonrenewable terms (Nickson, 201).

Article 115 of the Constitution defines *municipios* within the Mexican Federation as the basis of the republican system of government that must exist within the states of the
federation and as their basic unit of territorial division and administrative and political organization. This article also defines the public services for which municipalities are responsible, which include water supply and sewerage, cleaning, roads, parks, urban transportation, slaughterhouses, markets, cemeteries, public lighting, police and traffic police. However, for the most part municipal administration is determined by state laws that define municipal statutes through a state-created municipal code. Each state is responsible for the creation of their municipal code. It is because of this over-dependence on state laws that the municipality is downgraded in Mexico. The ayuntamiento is not free to act based on its own political will if it is not supported by the state. The municipio remains an administrative unit of the state government with limited autonomy and discretion (Nickson, 202).

Local development plans are created by a municipal planning committee based on the national development plan. Therefore, each three year local administration is in charge of the creation of a new development plan which rarely takes into account what was done by the previous administration and what will be done by the following. Municipal development plans are created and carried out under close supervision of federal government agencies, something which limits the ability of local governments to include strategies and elements of their own that are not compatible with the national plan.

In Mexico, municipios obtain their income from three different sources: federal government transfers, grants on behalf of federal and state governments, and local tax revenue. In general, municipalities are extremely limited in their ability to collect their own taxes and federal funds usually have to be transferred with state government approval. The criteria for the allocation of federal funds to municipalities, along with their powers of taxation, corresponds to state legislation, which leaves a wide margin for political maneuvering.
within the state government in the distribution of funds. The percentage of federal transfers to states and municipalities has significantly increased since the decentralization measures taken in the 1980s and the tax reform that was carried out with it. Still, only 1% of federal tax revenue is destined exclusively for municipalities without intermediate level intervention (Nickson 204, 205). Municipal spending and budget is determined by the cabildo and must again be approved by the corresponding state legislature.

By analyzing the basic legal framework that defines local government its responsibilities in Mexico, it should already be clear what the fundamental deficiency is: local governments or ayuntamientos in Mexico remain an administrative unit subject to the power and intervention of higher levels of government. Janetti and Pontifes describe this flaw as a result of considering the municipio as an aggregate of the state to which it belongs within the national legal framework. The modern day municipal regime is inherently weak due to the fact that constitutionally, the municipio is not defined as an autonomous government institution nor is it assigned the appropriate legal means to avoid the intervention higher government authorities (18). Instead, the municipio is constitutionally ill defined and protected, leaving its legal status and privileges as a responsibility of state governments. As a result, local governments in Mexico are structurally and legally impeded to take full advantage of their proximity to society in efficient and effective governance.

As a result of this legal deficiency, the role of local government as a real government institution with political weight has been extremely limited in Mexico and its absence can be noticed in basic indicators and activities of good governance. First and foremost, local governments have not acted as development agents. Instead, their role has been limited to that of providing a basic set of public services without participating in the creation of conditions for positive economic activity and growth. Secondly, local government as an
institution is characterized for being inefficient in the administration and provision of services destined for the well being of the population and the proper functioning of the city. Many of the local government officials occupying political and technical posts are under-qualified, there is no political culture surrounding the need for professional local functionaries, and many of the services that are provided by local governments are done so in outdated and costly manners. The previous deficiencies are further aggravated by the lack of resources that local governments dispose of in order to carry out their functions. Thirdly, local governments are unable to deal with the problems related to urban management and to offer solutions to the basic demands of an increasingly urbanized population. In Mexico, over 70% of the population is urbanized, a phenomenon that increases the pressure of many urban local governments (Borja, 30). Finally, local governments suffer from a democratic deficit resulting from their inability to promote and integrate participation of civil society within their activities and the electoral system under which they function. The political makeup of the ayuntamiento, with its limited number of regidores that do not necessarily represent all sectors of society limits the ability of citizens, civil association and non-governmental organizations to participate in local decision making process. This flaw has significant relevance in regards to local government of indigenous communities within Mexico. Local indigenous interests find it difficult to permeate into local government structures and practices in what can be seen as a process of political alienation and exclusion. As described by Jordi Borja,

…today local institutions are characterized by a lack of autonomy and political representation. They therefore enjoy limited political prestige and do not play a significant role in the incorporation of the popular and middle sectors of the population into local and national political life… they do not exercise the function
of service delivery, urban management and economic animation that would normally correspond to them (31).

In spite of these basic deficiencies of local government as an institution within Mexico, many local government administrations have been successful in carrying out good governance and promoting growth and development in their municipalities. They have done so through a series of innovative government programs and practices that have been extremely successful in some cases and offer the rest of the country valuable lessons in overcoming the legal impediments set on effective local governance.

**Innovation in Mexican local governance**

Changes in the political value given to local government in the Mexico and the increased importance of their role in national political life has come from within local governments themselves in what has been a joint effort on behalf of local administrations and society. The drive to reform the way politics are carried out and the manner in which the country is governed has come from the bottom of the traditional political hierarchy. Local governments and civil society, in the absence of efficient solutions on behalf of the central government have now started to take matters into their own hands, demanding increased participation in the decision making process of issues of relevance to society. Local governments as well as society have increased their demands in order for the municipio to be strengthened and enhanced while shedding new light on the role to be played by local governments in the solution of the country’s most important problems. In his study on local government practices entitled *La Nueva Gestión Municipal en México: Análisis de Experiencias Innovadoras en los Gobiernos Locales*, Enrique Cabrero points out that
The great dilemmas of democracy and public management that remain to be solved in Mexico don’t seem to have a chance of being solved in and from the center, it all seems to indicate that these dilemmas will find solutions in the spaces of local governments… the municipios are no longer willing to wait for solutions from the center to their every-day problems having to do with governance and municipal management (358).

As a result, Cabrero writes, a series of innovative local government practices have been created by local government administrations in order to enhance their performance and results during their limited three year periods of government. He defines innovation as a “detonating process of an institutional reconfiguration within a municipal administration, capable of generating a set of results that improve the structures of governance and the quality of the municipal administration”(31). While doing so, these local government administrations have been able to overcome the challenges and deficiencies that have been previously pointed out that have to do with the inability of local government to efficiently and professionally administer the municipio, deliver public services, overcome the lack of funds and financial resources, and eliminate the democratic deficit stemming from the lack of social participation in the local government institution. The results are very encouraging and hold valuable lessons for the plethora of municipalities existing within Mexico.

Within his study on innovative local government practices, Cabrero analyzes the case of several municipalities within Mexico that successfully put in place strategies that improved the output of local government. He divided their strategies into three broader categories according to their nature and the basic problem of local government they intended to overcome.
The first of these categories includes activities aimed at increasing the levels of civil participation and social organizations within local government. The actions taken by the local government administrations in the cities of León, Guanajuato and Xico, Veracruz are examples of the effort to promote participation of society through different innovative strategies. The 1991 to 1994 administration of the city of León in Guanajuato created the necessary administrative infrastructure in order to make participation possible through modern techniques such as Organizational Development and Strategic Planning. Both of these are used in the private sector and business and are therefore an example of the efficiency of creating a framework within local government based on private company models of administration. This model bases the relationship between the government and citizens on a customer-business perspective and has proved to be very efficient especially when applied in larger and more developed municipalities. The efforts to increase participation were based on the creation of a special government agency known as the Dirección de Integración Ciudadana y Educación which was responsible for promoting and coordinating the participation of a large number of social organizations and associations (Cabrero, 53-113). Another example of a local government mechanism to promote and increase citizen participation and communication between administration and the population was the once a week citizen-government consultation mechanism created in the City of Puebla called Miércoles Ciudadano. Every Wednesday, city hall was set up as a fairground for people to come and talk to local government officials about problems in their neighborhoods and their most important needs.

The city of Xico located in the state of Veracruz is much smaller and more rural and therefore took a different approach to increasing public participation in government. They did it through the use of popular and historical traditions of public gatherings and
community organizations such as the Faena. Innovation in this case was not caused by the creation of a mechanism of popular participation, but by the adoption of a preexisting one based on autochthonous and local traditions. The local government administration was in charge of setting up a system through which the Faena was used as a means to organize the construction of public works, administer finances, public planning and supervise a constant interaction between the local government and society. The transformation of local traditions such as the faena, the guelaguetza or fajina into governance tools can prove to be very valuable especially in small, rural and indigenous municipalities in Mexico (Cabrero, 121-156).

The second set of innovative practices has less to do with the promotion of public participation in local government and more to do with the creation of strategies of governance based on strong leadership. Due to the legal limitations on local government and the current conditions of local governments as a political periphery, the leadership role played by high local government officials is extremely important in finding the way around the legal obstacles. As pointed out by Ann Schulz, “local politicians have to rely upon influence and bargaining- not authority and doctrine. The local politician’s role is the most political of all” (191). Therefore the political ability and leadership of the head of the ayuntamiento is crucial to the success of his or her administration and to the creation of innovative governing strategies. He or she must be able to take advantage of the political weight possessed by local government resulting from it being the area of interaction between the state and society and the political entity most strongly related to the every day life of local society, rather than the legal weight which is rather weak in Mexico. As opposed to legal localism, political localism is associated with pragmatic decision making and the ability of local leaders to “influence local policy through bringing benefits to the
locality through bargaining and negotiating with other state politicians and officials” (Page, 70). The current conditions of local government in Mexico demand effective leadership and the use of strong political localism in order to strengthen the municipio.

The two examples cited by Cabrero in his study focus on the leadership role played by two alcaldesas, or female mayors in the cities of Charcas, San Luis Potosí and Atoyac de Álvarez, Guerrero. According to the study, while they were heads of government in their municipalities these women were distinctly able to “generate an innovative dynamic based on their charismatic personalities and personal ability to promote participation” (16). Another important distinguishing quality they possessed as mayors was their ability to focus on their responsibilities as government officials rather than on their political and party interests. The case of Atoyac de Alvarez in the state of Guerrero is of special interest due to the historical and social conditions of the region and its population that are typical of the southeastern states of Mexico such as Chiapas. This particular municipio has been the scenario of multiple social manifestations due to the conditions of inequality and exploitation felt by the population, which compared to national standards is one of the poorest and most underdeveloped. Recently a peasant guerrilla movement sprung in this municipality in what represents a very particular and serious challenge for any municipal administration. The presidenta municipal of Atoyac was able to create an open dialogue between the local government administration and the population which included the guerilla, which in turn created an increased capacity to reduce the possibility of open conflict, created political and social consensus around the projects that would be undertaken by the administration, and also involved the population in local government affairs. Despite the fact that the administration’s success was based on a number of additional factors, the alcadesa’s ability to promote open dialogue and make it part of the
local government’s agencies and bureaucracy was of special significance (Cabrero, 159-160).

Finally, a set of innovative practices based on the renewal of intergovernmental relations also proved to be very positive as regards the performance of local government. In Mexico, the legal framework and political differences between mayors and state governors are common factors that lead to the establishment of less than cordial relations between these two levels of government. As is taking place in Mexico at increasing rates, mayors and governors have to face conditions of cohabitation while in power, which implies that political consensus is more difficult to achieve and the levels of communication between the two remain low. The same happens in the ties between the all three levels of government. Therefore efforts to improve intergovernmental relations have proven to be effective in promoting good governance, especially under the Mexican federal system. The first example of positive intergovernmental cooperation took place between the government of the city of Santiago Maravatío and the government of the state of Guanajuato. The efforts carried out between the two led to the establishment of a complementary relationship of mutual respect through the creation of a governmental mechanism of cooperation which allowed for an increased ability to share and administer resources and projects. This happened despite the fact that the two were being governed by different parties. The main lesson learned from this example lies in the value there is in increased cooperation between state and local levels of government. In this specific case, this led to more efficient and effective governance without the political conflicts that usually exist in local-state relations. In addition, it highlights the importance of the role to be played by the intermediate level of government in promoting and strengthening local government and governance.
The second example of increased intergovernmental cooperation took place within several communities on the purépecha plateau in the state of Michoacán. Due to the growth of the population and its needs, neighboring communities had begun spreading and the definition of their territorial boundaries became an issue of dispute. The problem became even more complex because of the importance of land to fundamentally agricultural communities. Although conflict had long existed among the neighboring communities, in the early 1990s it became more intense and began showing signs of violence. In response to this situation, the federal and state governments created a program called Brigada de Conciliación, which required participation of all three levels of government in order to be successfully applied. The Brigade successfully settled territorial disputes and established a new dynamic in local government administration based on continuous contact and communication with the communities and the population. As mentioned by Cabrero “This experience, besides having shown that it is possible to establish functional ties based on respect between all three levels of government – disregarding the political party they came from – also shows the possibility of reestablishing institutionalism, peace and cooperation on behalf of local government” (17). In my view, this example also shows that local governments have a lot to gain by successfully applying state and federal programs that are at their disposal but not always taken advantage of.

In Mexico, as in a number of countries around the world, localism has become a strong tendency. Political, social as well as economic problems seem to have a greater chance of being solved through the effective participation of local governments and communities rather than through the implementation of programs and policies coming from central governments. The fundamental reason for which local governments are now seen as more
fit for facing these problems is because of their proximity to society. The fact that local governments are more exposed to what goes on in society makes them more aware of their problems and therefore more able to offer adequate solutions.

In spite of this, local government in Mexico suffers from structural flaws that are a result of the Mexican legal framework. Legally speaking, the *municipio* is usually limited to playing the role of an administrative unit under the control and intervention of both state and federal government. It enjoys little autonomy and discretion, and is extremely limited in its ability to govern because of a strong lack of financial resources. In addition to this, local governments suffer from a democratic deficit stemming from their electoral system and the make up of the *cabildo*, which is not representative of society and allows little space for public participation.

However, there are still many things that can be done in order to enhance the role of local governments in Mexico. As analyzed in Enrique Cabrero’s study on innovative local government practices, many municipal administrations have found the way to improve local governance and open the doors of their administrations to society. They have done this by increasing mechanisms of public participation in local government, recurring to strong leadership and promoting cooperation within intergovernmental relations. The outcome has been very positive and is a strong sign that points to a real possibility of solving important national problems through enhanced local government institutions.

In the concluding chapter, having analyzed the historical and contemporary realities of Mexican local government, I will propose a strategy intended to strengthen local governments and increase their participation in national political life. The strategy is divided into three phases based on short, medium and long term objectives according to the degree of difficulty in achieving them and setting them in place. The first phase is based on
local governments’ ability to innovate and work around the existing legal framework in order to increase the depth and scope of local government actions. The second is focused on restructuring municipal government or the *ayuntamiento* based on the legal authority of states and state legislatures in order to make it more efficient, professional, and open to public participation. Finally, the third phase involves a constitutional amendment in order to strengthen local governments and give them a constitutional definition as real political government authorities with increased responsibilities and resources. This would be part of a more generalized reform of the state.