Please Sign Here

Documents, Signatures, and Anxieties in a Chilean State Programme

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Abstract

Drawing on one year of ethnographic fieldwork with state officials implementing a development programme for Indigenous farmers in southern Chile, I show how anxieties are generated in a context of increased accountability and labour precarity and how the materiality of bureaucracy plays a role in this process. By showing how state officials hired under flexible fixed-term contracts deal with documents and signatures, I challenge the notion of the indifferent bureaucrat. Rather than portraying state officials as disinterested or indifferent, I illustrate how those in unstable job positions depend on generating an official paper trail to secure ongoing employment. Ethnographically, the article highlights the affective dimensions of bureaucratic practices, emphasising how the pressure to meet deadlines and ensure the timely validation of documents produces anxiety, and shapes the everyday experiences and futures of these officials.

Keywords: anxieties, documents, materiality of bureaucracy, precarity, signatures, state officials

The Chilean state frequently addresses Indigenous demands from a perspective of poverty and social vulnerability (de la Maza 2014). In rural areas, this approach is translated into social or development programmes that aim to boost productivity through connecting Indigenous people to existing markets while preserving, and often enhancing, their traditional practices. Such a programme is the Programa de Desarrollo Territorial Indígena (Indigenous Territorial Development Programme – PDTI), a state-led development programme rolled out across rural territories with large Indigenous populations in 2011. Following the model of other state-led social and development programmes, the PDTI is mostly implemented by local municipal governments. As executing entities, municipal governments hire teams of professionals and technicians with forestry, farming, and livestock expertise to provide

assistance and advice to the PDTI 'users', a term officially used to characterise a person participating in governmental programmes or accessing the public system (de la Maza and Alchao 2012) – in this case, the Indigenous farmers. During one of our recurring visits to farmers in the rural areas close to the city of Castro, the capital of the Archipelago of Chiloé (see Fig. 1), César,[1] a PDTI user, welcomed me and Renato, one of the state officials in charge of the programme's implementation, into his home. Sitting at a table next to the wood stove, Renato asked questions that would allow him to keep a record of the user's agricultural activities, based on which the officials could then offer technical advice and/or think about a future project that could improve the user's agricultural production. César answered the questions without much thought, and when asked about the identification number of one of his properties and its surface area, he got up from the table, left the room, and after a couple of minutes returned with a worn-out blue folder. Among the documents contained in the folder were the purchase agreement, a photocopy of his identity card, his *certificado de calidad indígena*[2] (certificate of Indigenous belonging), and the plans for his property with its corresponding subdivisions. César looked for the identification number with the help of Renato, but they were not able to find the right document. After a couple of minutes discussing possible reasons for the absence of the document, Renato told César that he would take over the process. In doing so, Renato was taking on the anxiety of the missing document. Although César's documents did not meet the required standards, Renato and his colleagues were going to find a way to work around this because the PDTI team needed the missing document to apply for a project on behalf of the user and to secure their future employment.

This vignette underlines the critical role of paper-based bureaucratic practices in the everyday activities of Chilean state officials tasked with implementing development programmes like the PDTI. By highlighting the navigation of César's missing documents and the procedural workarounds employed by the official, it demonstrates the relational and affective dimensions of bureaucratic encounters. These dynamics illustrate how state officials and users alike experience the state through its bureaucratic systems, echoing this special issue's focus on the imaginative and affective engagements that emerge during moments of bureaucratic impasse. Such moments render visible the interplay between documents, affects, and governance.

In recent years, bureaucracy, described as a 'many-sided, evolving, diversified organisational device' (du Gay 2005: 3), has undergone significant reforms driven by neoliberal rationality and the pervasiveness of managerial practices and entrepreneurial governance (Bach 2012; Campbell and Price 2016; Doogan 2015; Lazar 2017). Originating in the entrepreneurial world, these transformations have introduced market-like dynamics into administrative procedures (Harvey 2007; Peck 2010; Woolford and Nelund 2013). Such changes include creating competition among service providers (Nyberg 2017), emphasising individual responsibility (Wacquant 2010), prioritising outcomes over inputs, and fostering increased public-private partnerships (du Gay 2000). In this context, labour has increasingly been characterised by flexibilisation, outsourcing, subcontracting, and calculative
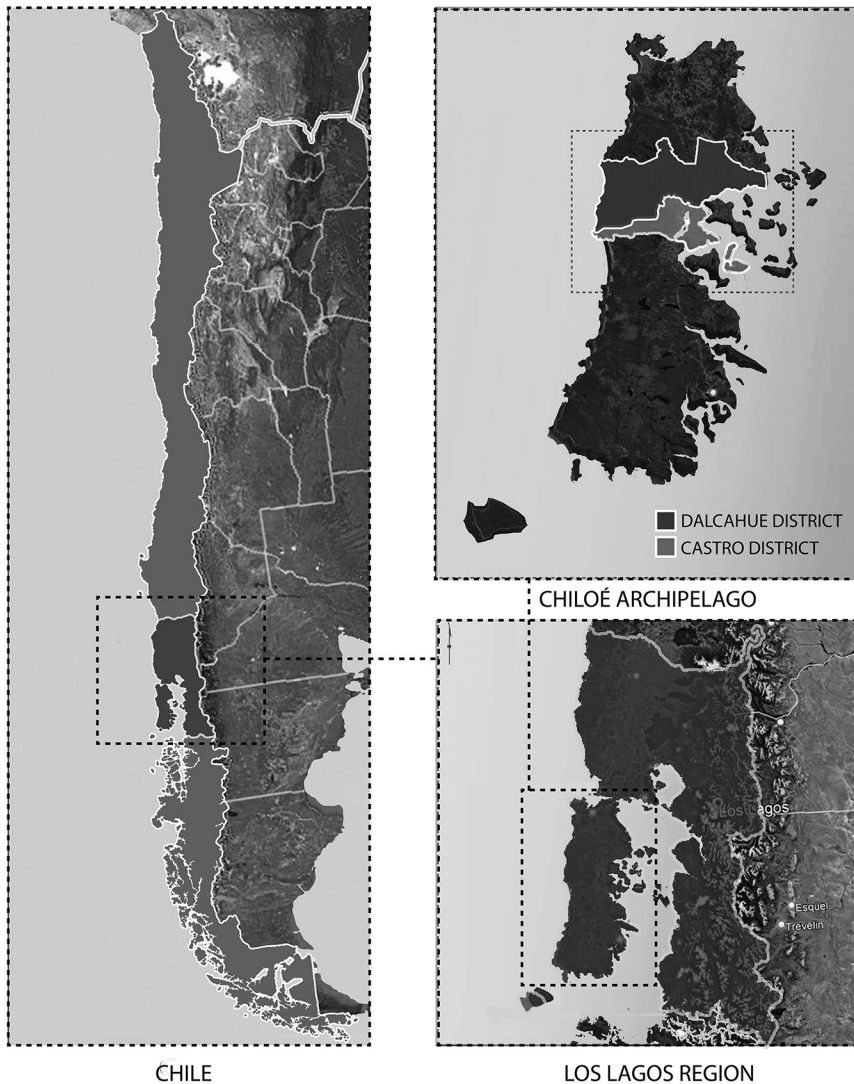
Figure 1. Chile, Los Lagos Region, and Chiloé Archipelago (used with permission of Tamara Salinas-Cohn).

audit practices that compel individuals to document (Hibou 2015). These structural shifts amplify the tensions and anxieties experienced by precariously employed state officials, whose professional survival often hinges on their ability to produce the necessary paper trails.

Piergiorgio Di Giminiani (2016) shows how Chilean state employees operate within intricate systems of auditing and work performance verification that render visible the pervasiveness of neoliberal principles, such as self-discipline and

individual accountability. This audit culture generates bureaucratic practices that depend on the production, procurement and mobilisation of documents. As shown in the opening ethnographic vignette, state officials implementing the PDTI in the archipelago of Chiloé are not exempt from this trend. On the contrary, because of the nature of their day-to-day work, officials must deal with a large number of documents that, on the one hand, allow them to mobilise and allocate resources, and on the other hand, render their own practices accountable. Collecting documents to fulfil development programmes and doing so to make themselves accountable, as I will illustrate, operate as mechanisms against the anxieties generated by their precarious working conditions.

Much has been said about the precarisation of the labour market and its consequences in capitalist societies. In particular, scholars have shown how new managerial strategies, normally recognised in the private sector, are being introduced into the operations of the state, negatively impacting the working conditions of public officials (Bach 2012). This trend, as echoed in Letizia Bonanno's article (2025), compels bureaucrats to reconcile institutional demands with the pressures of precarious employment, revealing the broader impact of neoliberal reforms. Despite criticisms of the concepts of precarity and precariousness for their Eurocentric bias and neglect of processes already present in the global South, such as informality (Millar 2017; Neilson and Rossiter 2008), it is important to recognise that precarity has now infiltrated what were once considered stable labour markets. This includes the role of state employees or public servants, positions traditionally valued for their job security in both the global North and South (O'Toole and Meir 2003).

In Chile, as in other countries across the globe, the implementation of employment casualisation and flexibility reforms within the public sector's operational level (Durán 2017; Milanesi and Ramos 2023) and the introduction of calculative practices towards efficiency (e.g. performance evaluation) has led to significant changes in public sector employment. This has contributed to greater job insecurity and has marked a shift towards more precarious employment conditions within traditionally stable public sector roles (Khatun 2020). This shift underscores how the pervasiveness of precarity has breached the state, and it highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of the role played by technologies of accountability and how these reconfigure and give new meanings to bureaucratic practices.

This article addresses rarely explored consequences around bureaucracy in a context where neoliberal rationality has shaped new 'public goods', and consequently, the institutional and organisational settings and local management techniques developed to achieve what are considered to be desirable ideals (Bear and Mathur 2015: 19). However, here I move away from a focus on documents and the practices they entail as a means of establishing the sovereignty and legitimacy of the state vis-à-vis the citizenry (Bear and Mathur 2015; Mathur 2012, 2016), and analyse them as technologies of accountability used to generate indicators (evidence) to evaluate the officials' performances. In this way, I show how instead of mobilising the 'accomplishment of development' (Mathur 2016: 169), in

the Chilean case, documents are mobilised to portray the accomplishments of the officials themselves.

Drawing on twelve months of ethnographic research with PDTI officials in the central area of Chiloé (2016–2017), this article examines the experiences and affective responses of state officials navigating precarious employment and the pressures of producing paper trails to secure their roles. Through the lens of bureaucratic practices, it explores how neoliberal rationality, manifest in the precarisation of public sector labour, reshapes not only workplace dynamics but also the affective dimensions of state governance. The article highlights how these processes generate moments of uncertainty and anxiety, and reveal the deep entanglement of documents, affect, and the uneven temporalities of bureaucratic systems.

Setting the Scene

The PDTI seeks to increase the agricultural production of rural Indigenous farmers through the provision of technical and educational guidance. The programme aims to offer technical support to primarily help strengthen farmers' agriculture and forestry activities, while being attentive to their traditional practices and seeking to improve quality of life through increasing incomes. To take part in this programme, any potential user must prove their Indigenous identity, accept the presence of state officials in their daily activities, and be able to incorporate self-regulating and accountable practices into their everyday lives. All of this involves some kind of paperwork.

Today, the programme runs in eighty-one districts across Chile, seven of which are located in the archipelago of Chiloé, where the majority of the users self-identify as Williche, the local identity of the Mapuche people. The PDTI teams that I accompanied during my fieldwork were mostly made up of non-Indigenous men in their early thirties, although officials in positions of greater responsibility, such as the technical chiefs, were older and more experienced. The way in which they operated at the territorial or institutional level was mainly informed by their upbringing in rural and peasant settings, and their formal education in the forestry and agricultural sectors. Also, most officials operating in the central area of Chiloé were Chilotes[3] or came from surrounding districts.

The officials are hired under one-year *contrato a honorarios* (service contracts). These contracts are commonly used within the state apparatus; they allow for flexibility and are renewed based on performance assessments by local government employers. This approach aligns with the evolution of accountability in public administration, which has shifted from traditional bureaucratic control to a performance-oriented model that emphasises managerial aspects, professional accountability, and results-oriented audits (Brodkin 2008; Couto and Ferreira 2020).

These teams have two central tasks. First, to apply for and secure funds for projects allocated by public institutions and to guarantee the implementation of these funded projects (such as the installation of solar panels, greenhouses, barns, electric pumps and labour training). Second, to provide agricultural technical advice in the

Figure 2. An example of a visit sheet (created by the author).

field. To carry out their first mandate, the officials must complete various forms and gather the documents needed to meet the formal requirements for funding. Then, the officials have to keep a record of their 'technical visits' to be able to identify the progress of each farmer, and to demonstrate that they are carrying out their assigned responsibilities appropriately and achieving the expected numbers of visits within the time period defined in advance. This record is kept in their 'visit logs', which are backed up by a copy left with the users – the 'visit sheet' (see Fig. 2). Most of these documents need to be signed by users and officials.

Documents such as IDs and marriage certificates are easy to gather and what they enable is virtually uncontested. However, other documents (e.g. title deeds and signed forms) may slow the process down, preventing or reducing the flow

of resources and projects. Thus, the flow of documents enables, shapes, or even impedes other steps, and documents themselves act as dynamic agents of change with direct consequences for the lives of those who require their movement.

I engage with anthropological scholarship that apprehends bureaucracy, documents, and audit practices as technologies and processes that generate anxiety (Allard 2012; Strathern 2000). Described as feelings of uneasiness and threat over real or potential future events (Udovik 2011), anxiety can be fully appreciated by shifting the ethnographic focus from programme recipients to state officials. The interaction between César and Renato that I recounted at the beginning of this article offers a glimpse into this phenomenon. Renato, as one of the officers in charge of programme implementation, requires users to provide him with documents (and, as I will unpack later, signatures) to capture resources and/or generate evidence of his value as an employee for those who evaluate his annual performance. By taking on the task of finding or producing a missing document, officials like Renato also take on the affective burden (anxiety) generated by the absence or inadequacy of the required documents. This affective dimension highlights how bureaucratic processes are far from neutral; instead, they deeply entangle officials' emotions and experiences of precarity with their professional duties. In showing how PDTI team members like Renato navigate bureaucratic processes that generate anxiety, I align with the special issue's broader examination of the role of affects in shaping encounters with bureaucratic systems and the futures they mediate. Addressing a specific type of bureaucrat, not defined by their field of intervention (e.g. migration, development, or poverty-alleviation programmes), but by the operational and managerial features of the programme they implement, I provide an alternative to anthropological work that has often portrayed bureaucrats as indolent and indifferent (Graeber 2015; Gupta 2012; Herzfeld 1993). Those descriptions, with varying degrees of nuance, continue the Weberian tradition that considers bureaucrats to be an essential cog within 'rationality machines' (Weber 1978: 973–975) and devoid of personal passions or biases (Billaud and Cowan 2020).

I illustrate how PDTI officials proactively allocate time and resources to gather, produce, officialise, and mobilise documents. Moreover, I attend ethnographically to the processes and obstacles that the officials face while generating a paper trail to legitimise their participation in the programme and secure their ongoing employment. I argue that in the case of the PDTI officials I worked with, documents not only create or disable the allocation of resources and the functioning of the programme – as technologies of accountability documents also mediate the bureaucrats' own sense of worth. While other ethnographies look at how bureaucrats enable or prevent access to resources through control of documentary channels (Allard 2012; Borrelli and Andreetta 2019; Gonçalves Martín 2016; Herzfeld 1993; Heyman 2004), the ethnographic material presented here shows that these flows depend on the previous formalisation of documents through practices that are often beyond the officials' control. Because documents and their validation/circulation become essential to render visible their hard work, indolence and indifference to the requirements and needs of users is a luxury that PDTI officials cannot afford.

Applying through/with Documents

While driving towards one of the rural areas covered by one of the extension teams working in central Chiloé, Enrique, one of the two PDTI officials covering the sector, explained the resource application process:

> E: One of the most time-consuming activities is to gather all the documents and information required in every call for an application. You have to go to [the users'] houses several times to collect them, and you have to call them constantly to remind them that they have to get or update some documents so that we can make the application.
> D: And what kind of documents do you need?
> E: In general, the documents requested in the applications are mainly the [title deeds], a photocopy of their identity card, a marriage certificate, if there is one, and their certificate of Indigenous belonging.
> D: And in general, do users have them?
> E: More or less. Some of them are used to it. Every time they want us to apply for them, there you have it, they would have the photocopies or the originals, and they would have everything ready for us. Also, we already have a folder for each user where all their history of involvement with the programme is kept. This is quite helpful when the users are not proactive and rely on us to get the necessary documents.

As Enrique's account illustrates, dealing with documents was an essential part of PDTI officials' everyday responsibilities. After identifying the goals promoted by the agencies in charge of granting the funds (e.g. water irrigation, electric generation, tractor implement acquisition), and selecting potential users, the officials must carefully read the call for application and gather all the required documentation.

To make resources flow, the officials must first make documents flow. The PDTI officials visit selected users to gather all the necessary documents. Later, they attach the documents to the applications and start the process that will allow them to access the resources needed to implement projects. Less frequently, some users visit the PDTI offices located in the cities of Castro and Dalcahue. This generally involves travelling from other small islands or from neighbouring rural areas. These visits are mainly to deliver the necessary papers or to ask questions about those required, where to get them, and if other documents could be submitted in case of difficulties in obtaining those needed. In these interactions, the officials would try to answer enquiries, emphasising that the documents were necessary for a successful application, motivating their prompt acquisition, and trying to find ways to solve, or in some cases work around, the absence of one (or more) of them.

The stereotypical bureaucrat, with a secure job and bound by standardised procedures, is often portrayed as indifferent to whether their clients have the required documents or not. In contrast, PDTI officials worked tirelessly to help users navigate these obstacles because their continued employment depended on meeting productivity goals. If the officials failed to achieve certain programme targets – such as securing funds, implementing a set number of projects, or completing the

required technical visits – they risked losing their jobs. As a result, the PDTI teams' annual activities were marked by anxiety about their performance and future job security as state employees. Thus, the state officials' vigilant and proactive approach towards documents is mainly driven by their anxieties over future job prospects.

A year after my fieldwork ended, I learned that Renato had lost his job. His poor annual performance evaluation was tied to his failure to provide sufficient evidence of his daily tasks, not to his inability to carry them out. While Renato had conducted the required number of visits, his performance was assessed through the signed visit sheets that his team submitted. Without these documents to account for his work, his efforts remained invisible within the bureaucratic system. Renato's anxiety about losing his job if he failed to secure the necessary paperwork was thus neither disproportionate nor unjustified. Rather, it underscores how central documentation is to the duties of PDTI officials. For Renato, the absence of these signed records transformed routine administrative tasks into a tangible threat to his employment, a reality that all officials in similar positions were acutely aware of.

This emphasis on documentation was a recurring theme during my fieldwork. On a cold autumn day, I accompanied Renato and Braulio as they visited farmers to collect documents for water project applications. They had previously shown me a stack of twenty folders that needed to be completed with the necessary paperwork, ranging from ID cards to certificates of Indigenous belonging. The process was familiar by my third visit: officials explained the benefits of the project, outlined the farmer's expected contributions (usually 10 per cent of expenses), and then began collecting documents. While most farmers had folders containing required papers, a missing or outdated document was a frequent obstacle. Officials often persuaded farmers to update their IDs or begin land regularisation processes, and in some cases, officials generated alternative paperwork to meet application requirements.

These procedures revealed an asymmetry in responsibilities. While officials saw documents as critical for securing resources and meeting their performance goals, farmers often lacked urgency in gathering them. When I asked the officials about this disconnect, they suggested that misaligned priorities – such as a focus on immediate needs rather than long-term investments like irrigation – were a significant contributing factor. Others cited logistical challenges, particularly for farmers on isolated islands, who faced the burden of travelling to cities to complete bureaucratic processes without assured outcomes. Farmers also sometimes resisted the involvement of officials in their agricultural practices, dismissing their advice as unnecessary interference. This asymmetry extends to the effects of missing documents: while farmers, often prioritising other needs or finding the application process too tedious, risked losing the opportunity to benefit from projects, officials faced more concrete consequences, including threats to their employment if they failed to secure resources and implement projects.

As I have shown so far, papers were indispensable for both allowing benefits to reach the users and for generating evidence of the PDTI officials' productivity. However, some of these documents also needed a 'sign of validation'. Here, signatures, understood as 'forms of stabilisation that may have a multiplicity of

instantiations (written signs, digital modes, symbols, drawings, etc.), and a plurality of sociocultural meanings (ownership, responsibilities, accountability, etc.)', allow the movement through mandatory stages, and act as a point of passage towards the achievement of the purpose for which they were generated (Gherardi and Landri 2014: 1–3). What an official can do with a document is generally shaped by the presence (or absence) of these graphic elements. Therefore, the collection of signatures and the act of signing are fundamental for the fulfilment of the PDTI officials' goals and therefore to their daily practices in the field.

Hunting for Signatures

'We are applying for fifty-something projects, so we need fifty-something signatures!' declared Jorge, the technical chief of one of the extension teams working in central Chiloé, in a tone that hinted at his stress. 'Renato and Bruno are in Puerto Montt[4] getting the latest quotes for walking tractors, mini tractors and water harvesting ponds. Tomorrow [Tuesday] we will take the motorboat to the Island[5] and each one of us will be in charge of a sector. I think that between now and Friday, or Saturday at the latest, we should be able to gather all the necessary signatures and all the missing documents.'

When Thursday arrived and I joined them on the Island, the picture did not look promising. It had been raining for much of Tuesday and Wednesday and, because of that, the officials were noticeably behind with their schedule. I called Jorge and he told me to meet him at the place he usually stayed.

Surrounded by piles of folders and papers, and sitting on his bed in front of a desk with his laptop and a printer, Jorge was organising the blue folders by area: each folder included each user's required documents and the details of the collective project he would apply for in the coming days. Among the documents gathered were quotes for tools or solutions offered; scanned copies of each user's ID; property plans and title deeds of the plots of land to be worked (or other documents that proved the legitimacy of their use); letters of commitment and consent; forms stating the goals of the project, justifications of its relevance, and the materials and the budget necessary for its implementation (including timetables and labour fees); official documents that proved users' Indigenous belonging; and letters of support provided by the PDTI.

'We are not going to make it at this rate', said Jorge with a worried look on his face when I asked him how the team were doing with their schedule. After talking about possible strategies to help reach their goal, he decided to call each user with missing documents to a meeting in the local neighbour's association building. At the meeting, Jorge called the summoned farmers one by one so they could sign the corresponding documents. He briefly reminded them what it was they were applying for, showing them the quotes and explaining which quote would be included in the application and what was expected from the users (generally a financial contribution of up to 10 per cent of the total investment, some documents and their signature). After a successful morning hunting for the missing signatures, we stood

outside and watched a motorcycle approaching. Renato dismounted, telling us with disappointment that he would have to continue working the next day and maybe over the weekend. Some of the users were not at home so he had been unable to get their signatures. On his arrival, Bruno told us a similar story: although he had done better than Renato, he would still have to spend at least a day collecting missing signatures. The team was frustrated because the hunt would have to continue: although the documents were gathered, without a signature the applications were still immobilised and unable to reach their next destination.

The act of signing the papers was necessary to ensure that the projects were eligible. Without a signature, applications are immobilised, resources are not secured, projects are not executed, and officials are unable to provide evidence to secure their ongoing employment. Failure to obtain a signature implies the failure of a piece of paper to become an official document, and therefore to be able to implement projects. A paper without the required signature acquires a different agency: rather than allowing the flow of resources, it stops it completely. As a sign of validation, closure and stabilisation, signatures enable the movement of documents and therefore give rise to subsequent actions. A signature, thus, acts as an 'obligatory point of passage within diverse stages of practice' (Gherardi and Landri 2014: 3). Only with a signature does the paper become an authorised text 'vested with testimonial and executive power' (Fraenkel 2013: 434) and therefore capable of initiating its projected journey, opening new possibilities in its path.

Among their everyday activities, the PDTI extension team takes responsibility for identifying the funds to apply for, defining projects, and, finally, collecting documents and signatures. These tasks are carried out under strict deadlines. For technical visits and the corresponding signed visit sheets, the timelines are set in their Plan de Trabajo Anual (Annual Work Plan), a schedule crafted by the team to account for the activities required and approved by the Instituto de Desarrollo Agropecuario (INDAP). For applications to secure funding and implement projects, the deadlines are dictated by the specific requirements of each call for applications or public tender. For instance, when offering water harvesting projects, the application deadline is determined by the Comisión Nacional de Riego (National Irrigation Commission, CNR), the institution responsible for allocating the funds. Due to their need to ensure that the application was both accepted and financed, and that it was submitted in the correct form and on time, most of the responsibility for bringing these procedures to a successful conclusion lied with the officials. The anxieties that emerged when a call for applications was in progress were also asymmetrically distributed (Allard 2012), as the rigid timelines and overlapping schedules left little room for delays or mistakes. Missing a deadline, whether for securing signatures or completing documentation, risked not only the failure of project implementation but also the officials' performance evaluations and job security.

Therefore, in contrast to the descriptions offered by ethnographies dealing with these issues (Allard 2012; Das 2007; Ellison 2017; Gordillo 2006; Hawkins 2002; Hetherington 2011; Hull 2012b; Reed 2006), anxiety in this context was not primarily experienced by those at whom bureaucratic practices were aimed but by those

carrying them out. The documents functioned as technologies of accountability through which the fulfilment of individual and collective annual goals was measured. Moreover, since some documents were essential for securing resources that determined the number of projects and activities implemented under their administration, they mediated not only the officials' sense of professional worth but also their job security. While the Indigenous farmers risked losing the potential benefits of promised development projects, officials faced a more immediate and tangible threat: the possibility of losing their jobs if these bureaucratic demands were unmet. This asymmetry lay not only in the outcomes but also in the allocation of responsibility; the farmers' engagement was optional and contingent on their priorities, whereas the officials were obligated to ensure the successful production, circulation, and visibility of bureaucratic devices – particularly signed documents – that justified their actions as state employees. Officials were acutely aware of the agency of these documents as evidence of their value and usefulness, which generated significant anxiety over their ability to meet these expectations in an environment where their employment depended on producing visible and measurable results.

The Differential Value of Signatures

Institutionalised practices of account-giving are common in state programmes. They entail the presence of a legitimate counterpart (accountees) requiring accounts from the officials involved in the programme (accountors) (Hupe and Hill 2007). These 'calculative practices', which can be understood as technologies of government that link responsibility and calculation (Miller 2001: 380) through monitoring techniques used to guarantee internal control, play a central role in the allocation of resources (Strathern 2000), and therefore in the execution of a programme. Accountability implies giving an explanation or justification of the accountor's behaviour or practices while carrying out their role. This commonly involves some external body with political legitimacy at the top (political or legal authority) or at the bottom (community) demanding answers, and the threat of sanctions when the actions taken have been assessed negatively against predefined criteria (Bemelmans-Videc and Lonsdale 2007; McKernan 2012).

Accountability is closely related to the concept of responsibility, and it is even sometimes approached as the same idea (Bemelmans-Videc 2007). However, according to some definitions, the latter has wider normative connotations (Hupe and Hill 2007), while the former is strongly linked to calculative and scientific methodologies such as accounting, evaluation and auditing (Bemelmans-Videc 2007; Vosselman 2016). Yet, the connection between both concepts is widely accepted and considered when reflecting on their role in the management and administration of organisations and public institutions.

Calculative practices come into play when numerical indicators are used to manage, control and produce responsibilised subjects (Shore and Wright 2015). Accountability, as a technology of government, rests extensively on the generation and circulation of records and documents through which performance can be

measured. These devices are crucial for demonstrating the fulfilment of previously defined goals (e.g. number of technical visits and projects implemented), but also for producing a paper trail to later explain or justify decisions and/or actions, or state responsibilities and be able to evaluate, in the light of previously defined criteria, if any actor involved deserves awards or sanctions.

In Matthew Hull's (2003) account of bureaucracies in Islamabad, responsibility and accountability are tempered by the production of anonymous documents. Due to the uncertain political landscape of Pakistani bureaucracy, documents are experienced by public officials as a source of great anxiety. Hence, bureaucrats adopt an impersonal tone when writing documents to avoid authorship and, thus, individual responsibility. By contrast, the PDTI officials used an 'autographic' language to make clear the individual authorship of the documents they produced. Rather than underplaying their role in the production of these bureaucratic devices and avoiding individual responsibility, they signed the documents with their names to render visible the activities they carried out and their effects.

'Through autographic writing, the actions of individuals within an organisation are made visible' (Hull 2003: 294), and signatures, names, and even stamps can be used to fix authorship in a bureaucratic procedure. Whether officials were producing and/or activating documents through the signatures of others, their authorship was always stated either by the language they used or by their signature at the bottom of the document. Here the anxiety was not produced by the political consequences that could result from being identified as an author, but from the practical consequences of not being seen as accountable for an activity that contributes to the measurement of their performance. In this scenario, officialised papers, carrying the signature of those involved in their production, not only have a representational goal but also produce effects and affects throughout their flow, transcending their textual content (Ellison 2017; Hull 2003; Hull 2012a; Hull 2012b; Riles 2006). When those producing the documents are aware of the agency of these artefacts, practices that try to contain or manage their possible consequences are brought into play, giving rise to new expectations and anxieties.

During each technical visit, when the PDTI officials provide technical advice and check the progress of the users, they first have to record some relevant information about the current state of both the users' farming (or farming-related) activities and their animals, crops and infrastructure, and then they have to record the technical advice they provided. All these materials are recorded in their logbooks during the visit. This log normally states the name and logotype of the local government and the programme in question, and includes a space for the name of the user, the sector or group to which they belong, and a section to register the information pertinent to each visit. As usual, each sheet ends with a line for the signature of the user and another for the signature of the technician responsible for the visit.

An ideal visit starts with a battery of inquiries from the officials about the user's animals and crops, the state of infrastructure such as greenhouses and sheds, and a tour to see everything first-hand. All this would then be crowned with a request

for the user's signature and the handing over of a copy of the visit sheet. However, as I witnessed, visits sometimes did not flow in the expected manner, and neither the document nor the signature materialised. Nevertheless, and due to the importance of these devices to generate accountability, the officials would find a way to generate the documents and get the signatures after their visits. For example, short visits to discuss the implementation of a project, or to gather documents required for an application, were sometimes masked as technical visits in order to reach the number of visits required by the programme.

These cases highlight not only the importance of documents and signatures in the everyday practices of the officials but also the role these technologies play as devices of accountability. As Hull (2003) argues, the production of official documents in the context of bureaucratic practices seeks to determine responsibility. By using their signature and an autographic language focused on their own agency, the actions of those producing the documents are rendered effective. The use of graphic forms like signatures not only provides legitimacy to a form or template, transforming them into official documents, but also implies the public recognition of authorship and, therefore, responsibility for their production and for the potential consequences of their flow. Every signature printed on a document allows the traceability of its manufacturer and therefore the identification of those responsible for it (Fraenkel 2013). However, because the documents produced and circulated by the PDTI would generally be signed by both the officials and the users, the identification of their authorship and the responsibilities arising from them were not straightforward but dependent on the differential effects and affects that their activation could generate.

'Signing a document' – an act that most people with experience of bureaucratic procedures would think they already understand – can entail different things, depending on the way it is plugged into a network of actors, things, and relations. One of the intriguing aspects of this differential relation lies in the uneven distribution of accountability, as the value and implications of a user's signature on a visit sheet differ significantly from those of an official's signature on the same document. This imbalance places a greater burden on officials, who are aware that missing or incorrect signatures may jeopardise their ability to meet their goals. These documents not only function as tools of accountability but also engender anxiety for officials, who must navigate the tensions between the prescribed textbook ideal of bureaucratic visits and the unpredictable realities encountered in the field. For instance, the absence of users or missing documentation often required officials to take on additional responsibilities to ensure procedures were completed. In such cases, the flow of documents – and the signatures affixed to them – shed light on the affective dimension of the process, as anxiety over the completion and validation of these bureaucratic acts weighed heavily on officials. Consequently, while the absence of a signature on documents like visit sheets or agreements essential for programme operations typically carries more adverse repercussions for officials, it also underlines the broader anxieties generated by the interplay of documents, accountability, and the contingencies of everyday bureaucratic encounters.

Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, the work of officials charged with the delivery of public services and the implementation of state programmes in Chile is only made possible by following certain bureaucratic requirements that trigger and employ bureaucratic technologies. These devices formalise, make visible, and designate accountability – leaving a trail of forms and documents that render visible the fundamental role of autographic practices such as signing a document.

As Marilyn Strathern (2000) argues, audit practices, as major instruments resulting from and essential to the optimisation of accountability, generate anxiety. The production, validation and circulation of documents are fundamental processes for the PDTI officials working in Chiloé. Accounting for their day-to-day activities is necessary to guarantee the stability and continuity of their employment by the state.

Much like in Sansone's article on eviction-threatened residents in Tunis (Sansone 2025), where documents shape affective responses, here I have illustrated that the relations mediated by documents tend to generate anxieties in the officials. This phenomenon is mainly, but not entirely, explained by the precariousness of their labour contracts which depend largely on accountability practices to determine, year after year, whether they will continue as public officials. Signed documents here are fundamental to the calculative practices of the Chilean state and are thus extremely valuable to the PDTI officials because they provide evidence of their activities – such as the number of visits made, and projects implemented – and justify their value as state employees.

Complementing the literature that sees documents as objects of desire for some marginalised groups (Ellison 2017; Gordillo 2006) or the inability to predict the outcome of the production and circulation of documents as a cause for anxiety (Allard 2012), I have shown that, in the context of PDTI officials working in Chiloé, it is the officials who are evaluated for, but also governed by, the correct activation, manipulation and stabilisation of these technologies. In the applications for resources and projects, and while carrying out technical visits, the officials must deal with these devices in order to enable processes of accountability. In this way, offering an alternative perspective on the notion that bureaucrats try to elude responsibility by avoiding the authorship of documents (Hull 2003), PDTI officials must produce a paper trail that allows them to demonstrate the work they have done and the outcomes they have achieved. Needless to say, the users of the programme also assume a certain degree of responsibility in the activation of these technologies. However, in this article I draw attention to the existence of an asymmetry of anxieties tilted towards the officials – as it is they who mostly have to deal with the production and effects of these technologies. This asymmetry brings to light the affective dimensions of bureaucratic processes, where the officials' emotional experiences, particularly their anxiety over accountability and job security, are deeply intertwined with the flow and validation of documents.

Unlike depictions of bureaucracy as a desk-centred rule based on repetitive tasks and fixed procedures (du Gay 2000; Hahonou and Martin 2019; Zacka 2017),

my ethnography renders visible a different kind of state official. I suggest that state officials who operate under flexible labour regimes extend their bureaucratic practices beyond the desk. They carry out their daily activities in the field, navigating a context defined by labour precarity, pervasive accountability, and constant competition for resources. Similar to the definitions of 'new public management' or 'entrepreneurial governance' (du Gay 2000: 11), these officials are subject to market or quasi-market mechanisms oriented towards targeted performance and output–objective dependency, reliant on the activation of bureaucratic technologies such as signed documents. By examining the relational and affective dimensions of these field-based practices, my article advances the special issue's exploration of how documents mediate affective and imaginative engagements with the state. Specifically, it highlights how the materiality and circulation of documents not only reflect but actively shape the anxieties and aspirations of precariously employed officials, and offers a nuanced perspective on the paradoxical role of bureaucracy as both a site of constraint and a tool for navigating neoliberal governance.

Literature addressing bureaucracy has generally focused on public servants who have permanent and stable jobs, and who, thus, do not have to leave a paper trail to ensure the continuity of their employment.[6] Here, I have described public servants with unstable job positions whose contracts are annually up for renewal, which puts them in a very different situation in terms of efforts, anxieties and precarity to that of the traditional bureaucrat. Instead, my ethnography brings to the fore the pervasiveness and effects of market-oriented practices within the state. These practices not only reconfigure the labour structure under which state officials carry out their daily tasks but also impose new management criteria – such as accountability and competition – generated to challenge the contemporary rhetoric of evil, repetitive, mundane, indifferent and inefficient bureaucracy (Diefenbach and By 2012; Herzfeld 1993; Mathur 2017; Zacka 2017). As I have shown, indifference is sometimes a privilege.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. In order to maintain the anonymity, I have changed the names of my informants, and in some instances, I have changed details such as physical characteristics, occupations and places.
2. Document that officially certifies that someone fulfils the requirements stated in the Indigenous Law (1993).
3. *Chilote* is the demonym used to refer to people from the archipelago of Chiloé.
4. A major city on the mainland and the administrative capital of the region.
5. Here Jorge refers to Quehui, one of more than forty small islands located in the archipelago of Chiloé. In this case 'the Island' is where the majority of the farmers participating in the PDTI live and work.
6. For examples, please see Bierschenk and de Sardan (2014); de la Maza (2014); Dubois (2020); Gupta (2012); Herzfeld (1993); Hull (2012b); Mathur (2016); and Oberfield (2014).

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