

BOOK REVIEW

Planning and Decentralization: Contested Spaces for Public Action in the Global South

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Beard, Victoria A., Faranak Miraftab, and Christopher Silver. 2008. *Planning and decentralization: Contested spaces for public action in the global South*. New York: Routledge. 234 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-41498-2

Planning and decentralization: Contested spaces for public action in the global South addresses a central preoccupation of planning: how to structure the state to respond to the demands of its citizens.¹ Over the past three decades, the world witnessed a near universal paring back of state control and planning functions relative to the centralized, public sector-led development policies favored in the mid 20th century.² At the same time, scholars and practitioners alike increasingly called into question these top-down, rational-technical models of organizational decision-making and action (Escobar 1995; Mitchell 2002; Scott 1998). “Big government” was assumed to be slow, corrupt, inflexible, and inefficient. Such characteristics were even more pronounced in the developing world, where a number of issues—including limited revenue capture, stunted economic growth, serious inefficiencies in public service distribution, corruption, and contentious social movements—frequently undermined centralized state authority (Cheema and Rondinelli 1983). The answer to these problems proposed in recent years—decentralization—encapsulates a number of reforms that transfer responsibility to local governments, endorsing (or at the very least recognizing) forms of “bottom-up” planning. Much of the literature posits that decentralization allows for: local governments to make use of local knowledge; constituents to elect officials who represent their interests and can be held accountable for their actions; and these officials to administer public services because they can better gauge and respond to demand (Oates 1972; Ostrom and Ostrom 1977).

Beard, Miraftab, and Silver argue that part of the problem with assessing decentralization lies in disentangling two (often theoretically conflicting) planning goals, both of which are advocated as potential benefits to the practice. Decentralization in planning traces its heritage to participatory and advocacy models of the 1960s that

sought deeper, democratic community involvement in development. A later wave of decentralization arrived with neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, under which governments encouraged cost recovery, efficiency of service delivery, and an ethos of entrepreneurship (Beard, Miraftab, and Silver 2008, 3-4). For those on the left, decentralization seems to promise empowerment through encouraging participation in local social and political institutions, while for those on the right, it supposedly discourages waste and corruption on the part of the public sector. Decentralization also signals a departure from state-centric models of guided economic growth and social reformism—opening space for alternative configurations of actors, such as civil society groups, NGOs, and the private sector. Due to the diverse circumstances in which these reforms emerged in countries across the world, there is wide variation in the institutional contexts in which decentralization operates, as well as in its ultimate proposed outcomes: efficiency and equity.

Each of the cases examined in the book involves a different configuration and provenance of these forces, highlighting specific social and political variables that can affect the outcomes of decentralization. Decentralization represents a restructuring of the basic spheres in which planning unfolds: the state, the market/private sector, and civil society. More specifically, as state involvement is “localized” or withdrawn entirely, new relationships between civil society and market actors emerge. As Cheema and Rondinelli (1983) point out, decentralization consists of reconfigurations of state activity—which they refer to as “deconcentration,” “devolution,” and “privatization”—that rely more directly on the services of local government, civil society groups, and market actors for planning. There are two main

reasons for this: (1) to promote increased local participation in decision-making and (2) to reduce inefficiency and recover the costs of service delivery.

The question of whether decentralization can deliver on these promises has a deep literature in political science and economics, but is relatively new in the planning field. The strength of *Planning and decentralization: Contested spaces for public action in the global South* is how it interrogates decentralization as an applied strategy for planning practitioners and as a research framework for planning scholars. Unlike recent volumes from other disciplines that emphasize electoral outcomes (Grindle 2007), or local governance practice (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006), the tenor of this edited volume resonates closely with that of Friedmann’s elaboration of planning theory (1987)—and specifically with planning as a form of social mobilization, underpinned by concerns of participation and empowerment. Decentralization, in this respect, produces opportunities and institutions that can either facilitate or hinder planning as social mobilization for alleviating poverty and reducing social exclusion.

Planning and decentralization’s compilation of case studies is divided into three sections: the first section sheds light on the often contentious social and political contexts within which decentralization unfolds; the second explores issues of fiscal and administrative restructuring; and the third surveys the roles of social networks, civil society organizations, and residents as planning actors. The case studies use decentralization as a backdrop for examining a number of topics relevant to international development planning, including: harnessing social capital for environmental governance (in Thailand); the role of social movements in development (in Bolivia); incorporating women into

participatory decision-making processes (in India); alternative service provision schemes; the dangers of elite capture; and the role of collaborative partnerships among community groups, local governments, and NGOs. The authors rightly argue for future work to critically examine the two proposed benefits of decentralization—efficiency and equity—as the book demonstrates they can often be mutually exclusive or antagonistic. One key contribution to the literature is the book’s argument that civil society groups and social movements can be vehicles for transformative social change under decentralization, given that they have the leadership and political opportunities to facilitate the participation and collaboration necessary for challenging poverty and social marginalization.

One common critique of decentralization is that it allows for local elites to consolidate their power (typically in some form of patron-client relationship), in what is referred to as “elite capture.” Yet, as Shatkin’s chapter on the case of Naga City, Philippines points out, this hazard may be avoided through the election of responsive leadership and the active involvement of civil society organizations. Following local reforms in the early 1990s, the Naga City government was able to launch a series of pro-poor policies—introducing microcredit, community mortgage programs, and subsidized housing—in part due to resourceful leaders who avoided the patronage trap and involved a broad coalition of interest groups and civil society organizations to counter elite dominance. While the emergence of such leaders is often serendipitous, this case highlights the need for citizens, community organizations, and NGOs to press for accountable, transparent leadership, facilitating urban political agendas for socially progressive ends.

Spencer’s chapter on an alternative scheme for water service delivery in Vietnam shows how decentralization reforms can allow for existing models of public service provision to be combined in creative, new ways. Rather than implementing a purely state-funded and managed water provision system, or a cooperatively-owned and operated system, the city of Can Tho split the difference. While outside donors and local public budgets fund wells and pumping stations, local “entrepreneurs” administer water delivery and collect payments. Problems and complaints are directed toward local managers, who can more effectively gauge local demand. Given the limited scope of privatization in Vietnam, the city has avoided a full privatization of water delivery by proving that an intermediate, public-private model is cost-effective and sustainable, leaving room for the system to eventually shift toward cooperative ownership.

The book’s chapters illustrate that alternative development schemes created through decentralization reforms can have very different consequences. In Can Tho, public-private partnerships (PPPs) consisted of local entrepreneurs mediating between the residents and the government, but as MirafTAB’s chapter cautions, such configurations can have much less desirable outcomes in different contexts. South Africa’s post-apartheid decentralization push aimed to give more autonomy to cities and regions so as to overcome the social exclusion incurred by a history of institutionalized racism. Yet the central government’s withdrawal of financial and technical assistance led municipalities like Cape Town to rely increasingly on PPPs to foster economic development, resulting in continued investment in wealthy, white districts in downtown Cape Town. Over time, problems such as poverty, unemployment, and crime were ignored or simply removed

from the city center by these PPPs. In this example, decentralization precluded an originally integrationist agenda, exacerbating inequalities within the city.

Planning and decentralization's empirical contributions resonate with theories of decentralization and urban politics stemming from a variety of historical, political, and geographic contexts. The trials and tribulations of decentralization unfolded in the United States during the rise of suburbia; the decay of the inner city; and the increasing competition among local governments for better jobs, more tax revenue, and leadership that closely matched resident needs—all presaged by Tiebout (1956), among others. The fact that decentralization can also produce metropolitan fragmentation—causing gated enclaves, slum areas, and powerful pro-growth coalitions to sprout in developing cities around the world, from Buenos Aires to Cape Town—reveals a similarity to decentralization debates about American cities from the 1950s through the 1980s that is no accident (cf. *City limits* and its critique *Beyond the city limits*). Furthermore, the cases in which decentralization invigorates the state and engages civil society—in successes resembling Fox's notion of the “sandwich strategy” (1992) or Evans' concept of “state-society synergy” (2002)—will appeal to those with an interest in development or the developing world. In sum, *Planning and decentralization: Contested spaces for public action in the global South* provides a balance of insightful critiques of conditions that either limit or contribute to the failure of decentralization, and cautious endorsements of factors that enable its success in terms of participation and empowerment.

With the great variation and depth of decentralization reforms worldwide, it is impossible to broadly

accept or dismiss decentralization's promises. Due to the diversity of cases examined, the absence of such claims may appear to be a weakness of the book. Yet this problem persists in all evaluations of decentralization, and its resolution is not the aim of *Planning and decentralization*. Rather, the book's strength is its contributors' analyses of how well particular decentralization policies have integrated the knowledge and practices of local authorities and disadvantaged groups to enable alternative channels of decision-making, administration, and basic service provision. On the one hand, decentralization's success depends on creating competitive, efficient markets and more accountable, creative institutions to better incorporate and channel demand (cf. Tandler 1997). On the other hand, decentralization works by engaging civil society, encouraging marginalized groups to participate, and integrating local knowledge to alleviate material and structural forms of poverty. In some instances, the prominence of markets or “entrepreneurial governance” leads the book's contributors (Miraftab, Libertun de Duren, and Bond, among them) to believe decentralization is simply a guise for a regressive neoliberalism, while for others (such as Kohl and Farthing, Shatkin, and Rivera-Ottenberger), decentralization's ability to engage civil society offers possibilities for radical democracy.

Given the global spread of decentralization reforms over the last few decades, and in light of the current economic downturn, it is appropriate to consider the future of planning practice and scholarship both in the US and in the global South. To some observers, recent events have signaled a crisis in the project of neoliberal restructuring. In the US, they may represent a pendulum shift back toward “bigger” government, as market intervention, Federal stimulus

packages, and a renewed interest in public service volunteerism suddenly appear less taboo. These recent shifts are occurring among (and perhaps because of) an expanded set of civil society groups, community-based organizations, cooperatives, non-profits, labor unions, and environmental groups that have grown in response to the decay of the Fordist welfare state. Ironically, decentralization can be both an instrument through which the welfare obligations of a state are undermined, impeded, or subcontracted (such as the infamous case of water privatization in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2000),³ but it is also the same mechanism through which alternative forms of collective collaboration and mobilization can achieve real gains in struggles against poverty and social exclusion (as in the case of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre).⁴ Though these examples illustrate two very different results of decentralization, they complement the contributions of *Planning and decentralization: Contested spaces for public action in the global South* in balancing the institutional, social, and political variables that can facilitate such diverse outcomes.

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Notes

¹ “State” refers to the government of a nation-state as it is involved in the provision and administration of public services. The term is not explicitly defined in the book. In

this review, I use this term as a catchall to refer to the various types of government agencies discussed in the cases the book presents, and more generally, to the concept of government planning and management.

² The notion of state-led development—based on the technical knowledge and apolitical, rational action of experts—underpins centralized planning. See Friedmann (1987) for a detailed discussion. Keynesian economic development policies of the mid 20th century are another example of state-led development, endorsed in Galbraith’s (1997) *The affluent society*. In a similar vein, the modernization theory literature of the 1950s and 1960s is based on the fundamental assumption that economic and social progress follows a linear trajectory. It emphasizes technological innovation and adoption, as well as countries reaching a “take off” stage. See Rostow (1960).

³ The city of Cochabamba, unable to finance an expansion of its municipal water service, contracted a consortium of American and European utility and engineering firms to develop and administer a water delivery service. In order to recover investment costs and to finance further expansion, the consortium’s local presence, Aguas de Tunari, raised prices to levels many of the city’s poor were unable to pay. At the beginning of 2000, protests shut down areas of the city and by April, the government declared a state of emergency, sending in the military to expel protestors and restore order. After this incident, Aguas de Tunari withdrew their interests in the project and left the country.

⁴ Porto Alegre, Brazil has drawn widespread acclaim for its system of participatory budgeting. Introduced in 1989 following the election of the leftist Workers’ Party, the city established local assemblies to encourage citizens to participate in drafting the city’s budget and selecting improvement projects. The system greatly expanded the reach of public services such as water and sanitation, in addition to improving the quality of education and healthcare in low-income neighborhoods. See Abers (2000) for a comprehensive account.

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