

Decentralization in Developing Countries: Global Perspectives on the Obstacles to Fiscal Devolution

Jorge Martinez-Vazquez and Francois Vaillancourt (Eds)

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Reviewed by Franklin Obeng-Odoom

One of the most widely used and abused concepts in public administration is decentralisation. There are often substantial differences between the normative concept and how it is practiced in 'real life'. About two years ago, I asked a senior public administrator based in Rwanda about his country's experience with decentralisation. I was told that it was 'complete'; that there was nothing in need of revision, and that Rwanda was a success case. Whether he misrepresented the facts is a moot point. What is at issue is whether we were thinking about the same issue: what really is decentralisation?

Avoiding a direct answer to this question is one of the major downsides in this book. Almost every chapter has a different interpretation, ranging from 'self-help' (e.g. pp.450-451); through federalism (e.g., pp.555-557); to public-private partnerships (e.g., p.315). It is true that, even in theory, decentralisation takes on several features, such as deconcentration (the 'offshoring' of functions to the local government level without a change in the concentration of power at the centre) and devolution (the simultaneous transfer of functions and powers from the centre to the local level). However, a book about the decentralisation experiences of different countries would be more effective if it had a working definition. Failing that, it is not clear how the editors' summary of the 'obstacles to decentralisation' (pp.2-12) should be interpreted. Are they problems of, for, or to decentralisation? In other words, are they inherent in decentralisation, external impediments to that worthy objective or concerns about the worthiness of the objective itself?

The sub-title of the book suggests a primary emphasis on the fiscal aspect of decentralisation. However, most of the chapters do not give particular attention to fiscal decentralisation. Take the case of Burkina Faso, for instance: only 3 (pp.320-322) out of 23 pages (pp.303 – 326)

consider fiscal decentralisation. Similarly, the chapter on Albania gives scant attention to fiscal decentralisation, spanning only about 8 pages out of 58 (pp.23-81). Instead the case studies typically claim to be looking at the 'political economy of decentralisation', a descriptor readers of this journal may find unsatisfactory, as it simply means a discussion of the politics in the various countries rather than a heterodox political economic analysis.

Most of the chapters show that decentralisation is not working as expected. However, they do not answer the 'so what?' or the 'does it matter?' questions that are characteristic of political economic analysis. How does failure of decentralisation affect citizens? Or is failure a success for some particular interest groups? Such questions are left 'hanging'. The Lao case tried to look at the 'consequences of deconcentration' (pp. 205-206) but went only as far as looking at fiscal inequalities between different decentralized units. The link with 'development' is never established, although decentralists often talk about the positive relationship between development and decentralisation. The Bangladeshi case study is an exception, as it looks at the distribution of local revenue and expenditure for 'development purposes' (e.g., pp.229-231).

These downsides are slight relative to the merits of the book. The editors deserve commendation for bringing together the diverse experiences of 16 countries from across the developing world in a single book. The book contains many interesting insights. In Sierra Leone, for example, we learn that chiefs, unelected and unaccountable, are those in charge of local tax collection, and it is they who decide what percentage of the total revenue is fair allocation for city planners (pp.104-105). Paradoxically, it is the council that provides local services and the formal legal structures seen to endorse the activities of the chiefs. Indeed, the chiefs (not the councils) have initiated reform of the Local Government Act, solely to entrench their positions (p.106). Also, contrary to claims by decentralists that elected mayors are freer to pursue local economic development, the case study of Madagascar shows that elected mayors face stiff opposition from structures of power, including the presidency. It seems the so called strong mayoral system is not always a panacea.

The book throws up many thought-provoking questions, such as at what stage of economic development and political maturity should

decentralisation be tried? Should post-conflict countries be built from the bottom or the centre? What is the role of tribal chiefs in decentralisation; should they be sidelined or embraced, given that they are supportive in some cases and non-cooperative in others? Should a situation where an active central state supports local governments be read as ‘successful’ decentralisation, given that decentralists consider autonomy a virtue? Is it an oxymoron to ask for strong central state support for successful decentralisation? Do rich local governments suffer the ‘resource curse’, comparable to that arising in countries where a rich endowment of mineral creates unbalanced development? It is unfortunate that the editors, who are well versed on questions of decentralisation, did not provide a concluding chapter to share their thoughts on these issues.

The appeal of the book is that its provision of many examples of how decentralisation is lived, in real life, supplies the ingredients for further exploring the slippery and contested concept of decentralisation.

Politics, Disability and Social Inclusion: People With Different Abilities in the Twenty First Century

Peter Gibilisco

VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2011

Reviewed by Frank Stilwell

This book discusses the politics of social democracy, neoliberalism and the third way from a distinctive perspective, emphasising social justice in general and the politics of disability in particular. It engages with the theory and practice of contemporary economic and social policies from the viewpoint of someone whose primary concern is with social inclusion for people whose lives are otherwise outside the mainstream.

The author’s own life story is itself engaging. Peter Gibilisco was diagnosed at the age of 14 with Friedreich’s Ataxia, a progressive disease that causes physical impairment, including markedly deteriorating eyesight, muscular growth and co-ordination. Consigned to a wheelchair by the age of 23, he could have been forgiven for giving up on the quest