



Paradoxes of Decentralization: Water Reform and Social Implications in Mexico

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Summary. — Decentralized governance of water resources is a centerpiece of Mexico's neoliberal reform strategy. We analyze decentralization based on urban/rural case studies in distinct geographical regions to ascertain whether it is linked to more efficient water management or sustainable use of water resources, and to examine its development implications. We assess whether or not private sector management is related to a more efficient, sustainable, and accountable management of water variety of municipal and private management arrangement in four urban areas. We find that it has not resulted in efficiency or sustainability gains. For agricultural water management, irrigation districts in two case studies benefited from the more democratic participatory management by water users under Mexico's "transference" strategy, but did not result in greater equity, efficiency or sustainability of water use. We argue that decentralization in the Mexican water sector is context specific, and marked by limited benefits. Privatization is less an instrument aimed at improving efficiency than a channel for preferred treatment for capital accumulation by private entities as well as a legitimized way for the state to transfer the burden of water management to non-state institutions. The creation of new forms of water institutions requires not the retrenchment of the state but rather its involvement to ensure accountability, transparency, equity, and sustainability.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The political economy of Mexico has been dramatically transformed over the last dozen years by neoliberal restructuring of state responsibilities and economic processes.¹ One of the most salient features of the shift has been decentralization of critical state functions to municipalities, private corporations, and user associations. Mexico's traditional strong state control of virtually all sectors of the economy and civil society, called by Fox (1992, p. 6) "one of the most powerful and interventionist in Latin America," has been replaced by a reduced state apparatus that has ostensibly disengaged from its operational, developmental role and assumed strategic policymaking, and oversight functions. Environmental governance is

one of the areas most affected by decentralization, as evidenced by broad changes introduced in water, agricultural, and general environmental legislation since 1992. The paradoxes of decentralization² in the water sector and the impacts on urban and rural water users in Mexico's most dynamic regions are the focus of this paper.

The decentralization process implemented in recent years in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America has been presented by international

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funding organizations, national governments, and other proponents as a key component of a successful water reform strategy. It is argued that decentralization allows for a more efficient provision of service by local authorities, private companies and water users, and for a more efficient and equitable allocation and use of the resource as well (Asad, Seroa da Motta, Azevedo, Simpson, & Kemper, 1999; Garn, 1998). The World Bank and others maintain that decentralization leads to improved accountability, empowerment of local communities, and benefits for the management of natural resources (Briscoe, Anguita Salas, & Peña, 1998; Thobani, 1997). Neoliberal conceptions of water inscribed in international water agreements and national water governance strategies that focus on its economic value collide with constructions of water as a “free” good provided by nature, with traditional valuations of water as a religious/cultural symbol, and with constructions of water as a necessary part of the ecosystem whose needs also must be satisfied, equally with those of other “users” (Garn, 1998; Gleick & Wolff, 2002).

The World Bank considers Mexico one of the most successful “new globalizers” or developing countries that have promising economies based upon liberalized trade regimes and secure property rights (2002, pp. 35–36). At the same time, significant questions are being raised about the concept of water as an economic good subject to market regimes and pricing, and about equity of access to healthy water (Gleick & Wolff, 2002; World Water Assessment Programme, 2000). Some scholars criticize the notion that privatization represents any kind of “new” decentralized management scheme, but claim rather that it is really a form of re-centralizing authority and control over water subject to the demands of national markets and global economies rather than those of local households and citizens (Johnston, 2003).

In this paper, we assess the outcomes of the two principal components of decentralization within Mexican water reform, namely, the “transfer” of irrigation districts to management by water users, and the privatization and decentralized management of urban water systems. We argue that, rather than resulting in a clear success or failure, decentralization in the Mexican water sector has been a context-specific process marked by limited benefits and multiple paradoxes. In both the urban and rural cases we analyzed, decentralization and privatization appear not so much instruments aimed at improving efficiency as they do channels for

preferred treatment for capital accumulation by private entities as well as a legitimized way for the state to transfer the financial and politically charged burden of water management to non-state institutions. Privatization refers not only to the devolution of management responsibility for water systems or to the outright transfer of ownership or control of the resource, but in the Mexican case, as in other parts of Latin America that have communal resource ownership arrangements, privatization can also refer to the transfer of control of land and water assets from the ejidal (or social) sector to the private sector. Although a wide variety of decentralization and privatization strategies have been implemented over the past dozen years, we argue that decentralization has not yet uniformly yielded either efficiency gains or environmental benefits as anticipated, although in some local contexts there have been limited improvements. The very *retrenchment* of the state from its central role in managing water underscores the need for an enhanced state commitment to creating and sustaining strong water institutions while incorporating transparency and accountability in both public and private sector actions.

This paper is organized in four sections. The first section presents an introduction to the Mexican water sector and a critical discussion of the relevant literature on neoliberal assumptions and arguments underlying water reforms in the developing world; the main components of Mexico’s water reform program; and the influence of international organizations, such as the World Bank, on its design. The second section analyzes four critical urban cases to see whether private participation is linked to a more efficient, fair, and environmentally sustainable management of water, and to shed light on the governance efforts and institutions involved in the reform. The decentralized management of irrigation districts and multiple channels of privatization in the agricultural context is the focus of the third section. In the final section, we return to a discussion of the paradoxes we have found in the decentralization of the Mexican water sector, and explore the implications and conclusions of our research.

2. AMBITIOUS AGENDA: WATER REFORM PROGRAM

Mexico’s water reform program dovetailed both chronologically and ideologically with a

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