

Book Review

Andersson, K., G. Gordillo de Anda and F. van Laerhoven. 2009. *Local Governments and Rural Development: Comparing Lessons from Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Peru*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

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This is an important book that should be of interest to commons scholars studying the important institutional design features of co-provision and co-production of public services by local governments and community-based organizations (CBOs). The book will also make waves in studies of local governance in Latin America, where there is growing and deepening interest in assessing the links between decentralization and development outcomes. As the title suggests, *Local Governments and Rural Development* directs our attention to rural areas, addressing the interrelated questions of political participation, agricultural services, and rural development. The book thus complements the excellent and abundant work on decentralization and urban politics in Latin America, especially in the areas of participatory processes and the complex and shifting relations between institutional actors. Krister Andersson, Gustavo Gordillo de Anda, and Frank van Laerhoven, along with their collaborators listed as authors on individual chapters, have done a real service in laying more groundwork for what is sure to be a major debate in the years to come.

The book compares municipalities in Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Peru on the local provision of agricultural services. The dependent variables are improvements in local governance, quality of agricultural services, and the relevance of municipal government, as measured by the perceptions of mayors and representatives of agricultural CBOs. The central argument is that co-provision and co-production drive improved local provision of agricultural services, where co-provision is measured by the presence of participatory institutions and co-production by the joint implementation of projects by the municipality and CBOs. The causal mechanisms are the resolution of institutional dilemmas well-known to commons scholars: motivational problems (or incentives problems) of local

officials; informational problems of communication between actors; and power asymmetries between actors.

To measure outcomes, the authors coordinated an impressive sample of 1210 interviews in 390 cities, generally interviewing the mayor plus two CBO representatives in each locality. This leaves certain methodological questions, since key variables are binary in form, based on the responses of “at least half” (i.e. one of two) of CBO representatives in the community. Larger numbers of respondents in each community would have added valuable information; that said, the unit of analysis in the quantitative models is the municipality, and the large number of localities sampled is a real virtue of the book. The authors are methodologically conscientious, both in their solid justification for their selection of these four countries (on criteria of decentralization) and in their circumspection about their use of perceptions as proxy variables for underlying (but unavailable) indicators of policy outcomes and municipal performance. Further, while there is a risk of tautology in analyses of this sort – where the independent variable “co-production” is perilously close to the dependent variable of CBOs finding a “relevance of municipal government”, for instance – the authors handle their argument deftly through an elaboration of its multiple steps.

Many *IJC* readers interested in commons questions will likely be left with a lingering query that arises from the inevitable challenge of balancing cross-sectional breadth with depth of individual cases. The structure of the book does allow for analytical breadth and some depth (with its comparative chapters bookending individual country chapters), but there is limited comparative specification of the idea of “agricultural services”. Each country chapter offers a two-paragraph qualitative comparison of two representative municipalities to illustrate the variation in quality and nature of services, but the comparative chapters leave the key concept “agricultural services” rather abstract. Thicker description of the nature of these agricultural services and agriculture-related initiatives would be useful for commons scholars seeking to differentiate between the forms of requests farmers might make, such as agricultural extension and technical advice, market assistance, organizational support, or municipal interventions for management of common-pool resources. A more extensive unpacking of agricultural services could also enrich the comparison between the country contexts, although a main achievement here is impressive synthesis in the midst of such detailed variation across countries and localities.

Andersson, Gordillo de Anda, and van Laerhoven have written a book that will be a point of reference for years, and it will be important in several areas. It will not stand as the final word on the subjects it broaches, but this is precisely because it does what top comparative work often sets out to achieve: it blazes new trails that others will follow. The book’s methodological ambition, combined with the importance of its questions, will push scholars of the commons and of decentralization to improve our measurements and make increasingly well-supported statements about local governance and development outcomes, especially in rural areas.