

## **The Diffusion of Government Responsibilities: Movement Towards Regional and Neighborhood-Centered Policy-Making in Brazil**

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Changing economic, social, and political conditions worldwide are rapidly affecting the way governments are organized. Emphasis on efficient government is growing as democracy and market-based economics spread throughout the globe. In the past 20 years, many nations have pushed for decentralization. Central governments accumulated excessive debts, requiring that state and municipal authorities take on greater roles, while at the same time attention was focused on the effectiveness of democratic participation and localized planning at providing services. This marks the first recent shift in the distribution of responsibility within government.

Today, a second shift is occurring. Municipal governments are finding ways to shift responsibility for service provision and planning away from their offices in two directions "up" to regional agencies (see Kirlin 1993) and "down" to neighborhood associations. Regional planning agencies are gaining significance as certain problems require regional cooperation (see Turok 1995, Prud'homme 1995, Popper 1992, 1993, Doherty 1992, Gilbert 1992, Gore 1984). At the same time, many municipal governments are moving certain municipal functions down to the community level, in an effort to improve efficiency (see Bens 1994) by including the community in the decision-making (see Ortiz), and even the implementation, process (for associated problems, see Fulton 1996, Beatley 1994).

### ***Main Theme***

Although this marks the beginning of a long process in which I will narrow down a topic appropriate for dissertation research, the the general topic will be the analysis of movements away from historical provision of services by the federal, state, or municipal governments in Brazil.

Various Brazilian cities would likely be compared (Porto Alegre, Curitiba, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Sao Paulo, and Salvador are candidates).

***Research Questions***

The following questions would be asked:

- (1) How were urban services traditionally provided by the municipal, state, and federal agencies? What role did neighborhood associations play? Which agencies were responsible for various types of service provision? What were the problems associated with these functions? What laws existed to regulate the manner in which municipalities organized service provision?
- (2) What shifts have there been in Brazilian legislation regarding planning institutions in recent years? What roles are newly developing regional agencies taking within the policy-setting framework? Why are these roles being bestowed on these agencies?
- (3) What shifts have there been in Brazilian legislation regarding service provision in recent years? What roles are newly developing neighborhood associations taking within the policy-setting framework? Why are these tasks being carried out by these groups?
- (4) Can one identify general characteristics of those topics that are assigned to regional agencies? Neighborhood associations? Do these topics imply a natural segregation of services/planning needs by layer of governance? What does this imply about the effectiveness and efficiency of different levels of governance?
- (5) What are the costs and benefits of devolution to neighborhood associations, on the one hand, and the shifting of responsibility up to regional institutions, on the other? For instance, the scale of a particular problem, like high school education, may indicate that it is best addressed at a metropolitan level, or that parts of it may be while others may not.
- (6) What lessons can be learned regarding appropriate delegation of responsibility? What sorts of services can best be provided at a decidedly local level versus municipal or regional?

***Hypotheses to Test***

The efficiency gains to be realized by assigning topics to an appropriate level of government are significant. More specifically, neighborhood associations play an important role in improving effectiveness of outcomes from projects in which they play an advisory or implementation role.

Projects which must be carried out by municipal authorities due to economies of scale (e.g. infrastructure improvement) will benefit from an advisory role by neighborhood associations. On the other hand, community-level concerns unique to that community such as safety and education may be better met by neighborhood associations, which will play a role in implementing these types of projects (rather than simply advising higher authorities).

Regional agencies would be used for planning functions. This may be true particularly in those cases when a region's central city is deemed "at capacity" in some form. In cities where it is found that density, crime, limited economic growth, or other indicators have reached a limit, regional planning may be a means through which to spread development over the region. Regional planning may also result in cases of economic or environmental necessity, as when cities are dependent on the surrounding agricultural economy or where areas have been set aside for ecological preservation.

***Methods***

The research would involve book/file research (particularly within local government, legal, and research libraries), and extensive interviewing (of neighborhood association leaders and participants, municipal authorities, regional planners, state and central government officials). Indicators would be developed to compare the effectiveness of new non-municipal level policy-making efforts (as well as a control group of municipal efforts which might benefit from localization or regionalization) with their municipal predecessors. Some polling might be done in coordination with a national or regional news provider or research institution. (Note: the author speaks fluent Portuguese, and has family and professional connections in Brazil.)

### ***Stage of Research***

At this point only the above sketch featuring areas for further inquiry has been elaborated. Field research would only commence upon completion of coursework and exams, most likely in January, 2001. There are, therefore, no preliminary results to share at this time.

### ***Major Obstacles in Developing Research***

The primary obstacle at this point is that of defining a specific area of inquiry. As outlined above, there are clearly many questions to tackle, several of which could yield separate research opportunities. Thus, the next step is to refine the above list of questions to focus on areas where the product of the research could be most useful to improving the effectiveness of governance in Brazil.

### ***Relevance for Planning Knowledge***

Rapid changes taking place globally require new views on how best to govern, including appropriate, most effective distribution of responsibility. Decentralization has been taking place worldwide over the past decades, but only recently has a similar worldwide regionalization of planning begun to develop. This regionalization is in sharp contrast to the increased use of neighborhood associations to provide localized services. However, the two phenomena may be the result of a similar international movement towards efficiency and participation. Understanding why these changes are taking place is essential, and analyzing the outcomes of these changes will help to provide the necessary direction for future changes. The proposed research would aim at providing this knowledge within the Brazilian context, with the ultimate objective of helping communities and policymakers form decisions to enhance successful outputs.

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