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Reclaiming the authority to plan: How the legacy of structural adjustment has affected recentralization in Bolivia

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Thirty years after structural adjustment policies decentralized developing country governments, signs are emerging of a slow return to centralized state authority. Nearly 140 countries and over 40 international institutions agreed through the Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action to “align” and “harmonize” aid efforts in support of country-led and country-owned development. Today, many Latin American governments are beginning to implement policy, bureaucratic, institutional and civil society strategies to “reclaim the role of protagonist that [they] lost as a result of decentralization” (Dickovick and Eaton 2013, 1454). What is not apparent in these agreements and emerging trends is exactly how, and how well, national governments can implement actions after reclaiming the authority to plan.

After Bolivia became one of the showpieces for structural adjustment and neoliberal reforms, by the late 1990s the size and power of the central government had shrunk considerably, local governments were taking more control of local decisions, and NGOs had rushed in to fill many social service gaps. When Evo Morales was elected President of Bolivia in 2006, he set out to take back his authority to govern numerous sectors. I consider the extent to which the Morales administration was able to achieve one its most ambitious attempts to re-establish state-led, equity-oriented development – the Zero Malnutrition (ZM) Program. The ZM program grew out of a frustration with what had become a fragmented, NGO-led health care system that had stalled efforts to reduce malnutrition. Fieldwork over a period of 13 months during the fourth year of the ZM program’s implementation included over one hundred semi-

structured interviews, participant observation, document review, and secondary data analysis.

Findings suggest that one of the key, lingering outcomes of structural adjustment policies – informalization and reduction of the public sector labor force – presented ZM planners with a tradeoff: build the base of permanent civil servants to carry out ZM and integrate nutrition practices into the daily routines of staff already in the health system, which could have taken years of slow, institutional reform, or hire new ZM staff as short-term consultants to launch action quickly. To seize a political window of opportunity, ZM planners chose the latter, implementing the majority of the program's interventions through consultants during the first four years of the program. These and other administrative shortcuts allowed ZM coordinators to maneuver around political and administrative landmines and to keep the program moving forward, to get some modicum of "action" on the ground while securing a certain level of political commitment from international partners, the president and other ministries.

These choices came, however, at the cost of many logistical challenges that limited the ability of ZM planners to institutionalize nutrition interventions. Their decisions led to training gaps and duplications, turf wars among new and existing staff, constant staff rotation, redundant and parallel evaluation systems, confusion about roles, loss of public credibility, and a lack of local ownership over ZM interventions. During the latter years of the ZM program, however, ZM donors, directors and local managers began to address the initial, disappointing outcomes. Rather than try and avoid the lingering effects of structural adjustment, they began to consider how they might re-skill public administrators who had lost their ability to manage programs and build upon positive legacies of decentralization, including the identification, support and development of policy champions and innovators throughout the policy system.

Ultimately, I argue that the lingering institutional constraints of structural adjustment policies may initially force national planners to make decisions based on political and administrative expediency that allows for policy resilience, but at the expense of a program's coherence, effectiveness, sustainability and adaptability at lower, operational levels of the program. Alternatively, national planners may be more effective at ensuring policy sustainability if they recognize that the process of

recentralization will not simply require political will and national-level maneuvering, but efforts to establish the conditions for local actors to adopt and adapt national policies to local contexts. This means re-building implementation capacity throughout the policy system and engagement and negotiation with local actors that solidified their positions during decentralization processes.