

How Decentralization and Governance shape Local Planning Practice: Rhetoric, Reality and the Lessons from the Philippines

Decentralization became a prominent topic on the reform agenda of nation states and international cooperation during the 1990s. Today it often forms part of initiatives that cut across sectors to improve sub-national governance, by encouraging and facilitating stakeholder participation in the delivery of services, evaluation of government performance and in decision-making.

Together, decentralization and governance reforms provide a host of incentives and opportunities for sub-national planning practice. They enable planning to become a social process, through which a range of people in diverse institutional relations come together to make plans and develop strategies for managing local territories. They potentially create new venues and arenas for debate, new styles of interaction and learning.

This research is about the relationship between decentralization, governance and local planning practice. It raises several questions. Firstly, what exactly are those new opportunities for planning and how can we conceptualize the link between the terms decentralization and governance. Secondly, to what extent do reforms actually induce the intended changes in local planning practice. How do reform processes affect spatial planning practice. Finally, what can theory learn from the practical experiences.

The work places its research assumptions, empirical inquiry, interpretation and concluding recommendations into the theoretical context of the communicative planning paradigm. Communicative planning considers planning as a collaborative practice, in which those with a stake engage in deliberation and debate and learn to '*make sense together*'. The result of this learning process is a solution - a plan or a program of action - that reflects the achievable levels of mutual understanding and that builds new resources or capital: social, political and intellectual. Communicative planning theory offers an understanding of such processes as public and democratic deliberation and as a planning-driven style of decentralized governance.

The research focuses on the Philippines, a country described as one of the richest experiments in new methods of decentralized governance and planning practice. It presents a review of the nationwide trends in local governance and in-depth empirical case study research on the application of sector and spatial planning instruments and processes in one local government unit over a period of almost a decade (1992 – 2000).

Measured against the potentials of decentralization and governance, the analysis of planning practice uncovers intended and expected trends, but likewise some surprising shifts. Departing from there, the work develops a set of recommendations derived from the communicative paradigm. They focus essentially on information and available political opportunities to organize debates and deliberations along issues or themes that are of common concern to all participants. It furthermore develops a planning model to transform local planning work into spatial practice.

The study concludes with a critical discussion of the practical value of communicative planning theory in deepening the agenda of decentralization in local planning practice. It argues that its application offers fresh inspiration for those dealing with planning and governance. At the same time, it reveals that communicative planning theory may not be a sufficient guide to overcome the existing structural and culturally bound asymmetries in relations, roles and power.