
Rural Progress, Rural Decay is a much welcomed book on many fronts. While a number of social scientists have addressed the challenges of neoliberalism for Latin American economic, political, and social lives, few have done so in such a methodical or systematic manner as the authors of this volume. Drawing from a political economy perspective, neoliberal policies (and particularly structural adjustment programs) are analyzed with an eye toward understanding how power structures impede or facilitate the success of these policies. Of particular concern is an assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national, provincial, and municipal governments, and global development bodies such as the World Bank and IMF. Although it is unclear from the title, the impressive movement across scales of power addressed in this volume is neatly contained by a number of case studies all focusing around Ecuador, a small Andean nation whose experience with neoliberal restructuring has been tumultuous and painful, as evidenced by a protracted economic crisis (that ultimately lead to dollarization), massive out-migration, and a remarkably unstable presidency (three presidents ousted in seven years). A subtext to many of the articles is a nuanced discussion of “development,” a notorious black box that often is reduced to economic indicators. Here, refreshingly, development is approached as “progress toward equity and respect for the full range of internationally recognized human rights” and the articles reflect this more global definition.

Part one of the book provides a wide-ranging theoretical background for the specific Ecuadorian case studies that follow. Louis Lefeber and Ricardo Grinspun’s opening pieces, the first based on a lecture given in Ecuador and the second a thought piece on the connection between rural development policies and international trade agreements, paints with broad strokes, yet the ideas still provoke: how can we think of development in non-economic terms? In what ways is development dependent on civil society and the middle class? How are trade rules and institutions shaping (or not shaping) local development? Their different interests – one local (or national) and the other global (or international) set the tone for the case studies that follow.

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Part two offers a number of case studies that tackle one of the central questions of the volume: do suitable economic and political conditions exist in rural Latin America to facilitate the kinds of development encouraged by neoliberal policies? Two unique explorations address this question using comparative analyses of Ecuadorian provinces. North, Kit, and Koep look to human rights violations as they relate to rural land conflicts as an indicator of civic conditions. Utilizing little-used data from the Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights (CEDHU), North and her colleagues plot incidences of violence up against changes in rural policies, the impact of immigration remittances, and rural judicial systems. Their central findings – that land scarcity pressures fuel conflict – dovetail with Valle’s paper’s central claim that SAP policies toward large-scale agriculture have resulted in a concentration rather than a redistribution of land as proponents often argue. Both call for a stronger role by the state to mediate the effects of land scarcity.

In the final and most substantial section of the work, the papers bring clarity and nuanced criticism to what are often taken to be the bright spots of rural development: agrarian reform, the work of NGOs, micro-finance and small industry, and strength of local municipal. The results of these rural experiments are decidedly mixed and both progress and decay abound. While Tanya Korovkin addresses the historical emergence of “communal institutional spaces” in Ecuador’s Chimborazo province resulting from failed agrarian reform, she demonstrates that neither indigenous groups nor NGOs have been able to successfully harness this community organizing potential. Bretón Solo de Zaldívar follows up Korovkin by taking up the question of NGO activity in Chimborazo, demonstrating ways that NGOs often end up mirroring the neoliberal policies they in part seek to challenge. Contradictory policies often lead to failed planning. John Cameron deepens this picture through a comparative analysis of three rural municipalities. His findings seem, at first to echo the standard line, namely that NGOs promote civil society. However, in the final analysis, he explains how unequal land distribution, a paucity of women leaders, and an absence of state support (necessary in addition to NGO activity) stymie many well-intentioned rural programs. Finally, Liisa North’s case studies of the now-famous cooperative town of Salinas and the textile industry in Pelileo expose the fragility of small-industry as development in rural areas. Her findings stand as a powerful indictment.