

TRANSFORMING RURAL WATER GOVERNANCE

The road from resource management to political activism in Nicaragua

Romano, S.T. 2019. Transforming rural water governance - The road from resource management to political activism in Nicaragua. The University of Arizona Press. ISBN 9780816538072 (Hardcover), ISBN 9780816540600 (Ebook), 232 p.

Book Review by Sandra Gutiérrez Poizat

"A well documented and clearly written book on the importance of grassroots organizations for water management and protection in Nicaragua that can inspire water social movements in countries around the world."

As water turns scarce and pressure for transforming it into a market commodity increases, Sarah T. Romano shows that there are other options based on communal property, local knowledge and legitimate grassroots empowerment. By delineating the path followed by the CAPS (Comités de Agua Potable y Saneamiento / Potable Water and Sanitation Committee/s), community-based water management regimes in Nicaragua, this book presents us with powerful lessons from rural water governance that could be a model for social and environmental justice in the water sector.

As the author indicates, the main contributions of the book are threefold: a/ the importance of common property regimes in a multiscale perspective; b/ a reconceptualization of decentralized natural resources management; and c/ the transformation of social capital constructions by building up bridges while making positive use of solid bonds.

In relation to the first contribution abovementioned, Romano describes how common property regimes often have to fulfill simultaneous roles as resource managers and water and sanitation service providers, roles legally and in the popular imaginary, assigned to the state. By introducing the concept of organic empowerment, a "bottom-up process that evolves over time in the wake of a de facto conferring of roles and responsibilities to grassroots actors", the author portrays how, "in the absence of formal state decentralization", rural residents have become empowered to manage their own natural resources and, at the same time, have acquired skills and knowledge to become effective service providers, cultivating legitimacy and authority through practice.

But the importance of common properties regimes also has, according to Romano's perspective, a multiscale dimension. Within the book she reveals under what circumstances local resources managers as well as users act collectively across and beyond their communities. In particular she focuses on how NGOs and multilateral organizations facilitated the use of new networks and platforms and helped develop CAPS's legal recognition. The author describes three contributions these allies have made to achieve the multiscale dimension of community-based water management regimes: first, they facilitated physical mobility of water committees across geographic regions, thus having presence at municipal but also national levels; second, they helped acquire legal and political capacities in network spaces; and third, by creating state-society interfaces

they supported access of water managers to state actors. In Romano's words "through facilitating water committees' physical mobility and political visibility, building up political and legal capacities, and obtaining access to state channels of representation, allies have been integral... in the formation and operation of new multiscale CAPS networks".

A second contribution of the book requests for an academic reconceptualization of decentralized natural resources management. Here Romano draws our attention to the need "to integrate a focus within the scholarship on societal actors participating in water governance and service provision who operate "below the radar" of state policies and legal frameworks". She calls for shifting the emphasis from civil society empowerment and participation to improve management effectiveness of official projects to recognizing that government is not always performing a function or providing a service prior to local actors taking on it. She also stresses that local actors who already have gained decision-making authority and responsibility are not always governmental actors.

Finally, a third contribution of the book focuses on the transformation of social capital constructions within CAPS by explaining their transition from resource managers and services providers to political activists. Building upon theories of social capital but also contributing to these theories, Romano studies the particular way in which Nicaraguan community-based water management regimes take advantage of two forms of social capital: bonding and bridging. The book presents us with evidence that "bonding social capital does not impede action and solidarity across different actors" and at the same time bridging social capital facilitates the spread of a bonding social capital that "can be highly beneficial towards achieving collective goals".

Transforming Rural Water Governance is a book about daily life, about rural communities resilience, about protecting basic natural resources from bottom up. It is also a book about the importance of the rural world in the provision of basic services to urban territories. And about how, even with limited resources but with the conviction of protecting their lives and territories, Nicaraguan community-based water management regimes found a way to be legally recognized by the state, while at the same time keeping up their independence. Moreover it is a book about how, through grassroots activism and collaboration, it is possible to influence public policies and to "not only create more inclusive governance but also the potential for a greater social and environmental justice".