

Decentralization in Guatemala: Searching for Democratic Local Government

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Guatemala 2006-2008

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Decentralization reforms have reshaped the state in countries across the globe over the past decades. Although decentralization reforms vary and can encompass political, fiscal and/or administrative responsibilities and resources, all such reforms are commonly justified as enhancing efficiency and democracy in local governance.

This research examines the decentralization process in Guatemala and seeks to understand what new possibilities for democratic governance at the local level have been opened up by twenty years of decentralization reforms. The findings indicate that although meaningful decentralization of responsibilities and resources to the local level have indeed occurred, the implications for democratic governance are ambiguous. Specific mechanisms to democratize local government decision-making have been put in place, yet weaknesses in the legislation, the lack of oversight and support, and a prevailing political culture that retains many undemocratic features all undermine the real prospects for achieving genuine democratic local governance.

The case study of the municipality of Uspantán showcases the progress and limitations of the decentralization process in Guatemala, as communities and civil society have been increasingly included in some spheres of decision making while other important decisions affecting communities are made without such inclusion.