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José María Ramos & Ismael Aguilar Barajas (Coordinators), La gestión del desarrollo local en México: problemas y agenda (The management of Mexico's Local Development: Problems and Agenda). Tijuana, B.C.; El Colegio de la Frontera Norte – M.A. Porrúa, 2009. 256 pp. ISBN 978-607-479-018-4

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Regional and local Development is one of those rare issues that, like tides, goes up and down too often in the so-called Systemic Agenda. Even though it is closely related to other issue of development, which has received more attention, as is the case of the evolution of Local Governments throughout the last two decades; Local Development remains as the sole subject for specialists and practitioners, away from the focus of the media and opinion leaders.

The book coordinated by José María Ramos and Ismael Aguilar Barajas constitutes a relevant contribution, not only to compensate the underdeveloped study of Local and Regional Development in Mexico, but also because the works included in it offer an adequate state of the art. The subtitle of the book correctly expresses what it is needed to do in the upcoming years.

The book contains the papers presented during a Seminar organized by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte with the very same title. The coordinators added the Introduction and Final Remarks. The works are adequately harmonized and offer a consistent perspective.

Several lessons can be extracted from the several chapters of the book. These lessons can be divided into two types. The first one refers to those that conform a holistic approach to Regional and Local Development. The works by Ramos and Reyes (chapter 1), Aguilar Barajas (chapter 2), and Fuentes (chapter 6) refer to the subject as an integrated corpus of political definitions, social resources and management tools.

In accordance with the challenges mostly referred to, these authors acknowledge the indissolubility of the relationship between political ends and management tools, when strategies to promote local Development are implemented. As a whole, the works provide a common vision regarding the adequacy of the management tools used in Government-wide modernization strategies for regional purposes; such as strategic planning, quality management, and human security.

In the same line, the works also provide a set of instrumental definitions that goes beyond what Aguilar Barajas refers to as the traditional definition of Regional Development; in order to remark the multi-dimensional character of social processes that take place at the local and regional levels.

So, in the Development Agenda of States and Localities, sectorial as well territorial perspectives are worth applying. The same can be said regarding single-resource perspectives (e.g. water, energy or soil).

The second type of lessons comes up from the contributions of the single chapters. The first one, by José María Ramos and Marcela Reyes, provides an overview of the management background of regional policy and explains how a centralist tradition was dominant in the implementation of regional development strategies for the country and, particularly, for the Northern Border Area.

It was until 1980's when the first non-centralist and territorially based strategies were adopted by Federal and State-level institutions and programs. Even so, the old problems still remain intact:

The shifts in Party majorities at Federal level in year 2000, although produced significant changes in public administration, did not bring about better performance results. The so-called structural problems in management and civic culture have not been modified by recent administrations (p. 26).

The chapter written by Ismael Aguilar Barajas centers its attention on the analyses of the concepts historically associated to Regional Development. In contrast with the other works included in the book, Aguilar's refuses to limit its focus on the sole description of the current situation, and proposes the restoration of Mexico's Regional Policy. He remarks that "There is no need to create a huge argumentative structure to understand that this omission has affected adversely the country's development [... If we don't know how to incorporate the regional dimension in developmental

strategies, the former will be necessarily weak and hardly will be able to deliver effective results" (p. 47).

Chapters three to six are dedicate to analyze regional development in social, security, and energy sectors, as well as to the implementation of strategic planning in Ciudad Juárez and the border relations in the San Diego-Tijuana Area. These chapters offer evidence and analytical elements that overcome the sole description of the phenomena and identify the challenges that the implementation of effective policies and programs face.

The main conclusion that emerges of this book is that there is a need to recover local and regional perspectives to promote territorial development over different bases from those applied so far. It is not only a question of overcoming centralization as the dominant form of policymaking and decision-making.

It is the promising articulation of several tools and models for diagnosing, planning and implementing capacities, based upon the views of social and institutional actors. It's, essentially, the setting of an agenda for effective territorial development, as the authors of this book agree to propose.

(Transcript of the comments made during the presentation of the book at the XXXIth International Book Fair of El Palacio de Minería, Mexico City February 2010).