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Albert Hirschman and the “intermediary”: connecting top-down and bottom-up in mid-century Latin American reform projects

In 1954 the IRBD appointed Albert Hirschman as an economic advisor to Colombia’s National Planning Council. A newbie in real-world development, it didn't take long before he became exasperated with grand development planning and its obsession with balanced growth, which he saw as reductionist, decontextualized and hyper-linear. So he quit his bank job and spent the next years traveling across Colombia as a private consultant, determined to understand how development there actually worked, how problems were solved in context by real people. By the light of what he would later call “an empirical lantern”, he found himself drawn to the scrappy, incremental, bottom-up reform projects, animated by the sweat, ingenuity and creative collective adaptability of people navigating conditions of scarcity. In my own work I have argued that this tradition resonated for Hirschman with Adam Smith’s emphasis on the local, the small scale, the unintended, the spontaneous and the unplanned.

Years later Hirschman would publish *Getting Ahead Collectively*, an exploration of the Latin American grass-roots collective action projects that had so inspired him. There he emphasized the role that “intermediate institutions” play in facilitating interaction between top-down institutions and the resilient bottom-up energies found in communities in poverty, helping them to make better decisions, and improve their condition. In Berlin I will reflect on “intermediary” spaces in incremental reform, and the importance of connecting top-down and bottom-up capacities / knowledges / resources.

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