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Review of Hillel Schmid, *Neighborhood Self-Management: Experiments in Civil Society*

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Review of Hillel Schmid, *Neighborhood Self-Management: Experiments in Civil Society*

Abstract
In this volume, Professor Hillel Schmid of the Hebrew University describes and analyzes an attempt to establish neighborhood-based mechanisms that will serve as representatives and service coordinators to local residents. The experiment took place in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel. Israel is too often given negative press in the media where three monotheistic religions see home and heritage. Yet, it is important to remember that it is also a place where some 600-700,000 people work, live, and consume municipal services. Chapter 5 describes Jerusalem in such a perspective and would be of interest to many readers, even those who are not concerned with community practice and civil society issues. In the early 1990s, the city integrated two groups that served the residents interests: community centers and neighborhood self-management into a joint body called "community council."

Comments
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BOOK REVIEWS

NEIGHBORHOOD SELF-MANAGEMENT: EXPERIMENTS IN CIVIL SOCIETY. By Hillel Schmid. *New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2001, ISBN: 0-306-46511-6, 168 pp.*

In this volume, Professor Hillel Schmid of the Hebrew University describes and analyzes an attempt to establish neighborhood-based mechanisms that will serve as representatives and service coordinators to local residents. The experiment took place in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel. Israel is too often given negative press in the media where three monotheistic religions see home and heritage. Yet, it is important to remember that it is also a place where some 600-700,000 people work, live, and consume municipal services. Chapter 5 describes Jerusalem in such a perspective and would be of interest to many readers, even those who are not concerned with community practice and civil society issues. In the early 1990s, the city integrated two groups that served the residents interests: community centers and neighborhood self-management into a joint body called "community council."

The community councils were established in Jerusalem as a response to the growing needs of the city and its residents. It is a neighborhood organization which aims to enhance the community development and capacity by empowering neighborhood citizens to represent the needs of the community vis a vis the governmental and local authorities. The councils were perceived and implemented by the city in an attempt to reduce residents' alienation and to make services better suited to the specific needs of all residents. The community councils provide social, cultural, and urban services at the neighborhood level and promotes social integration between residents from different social strata.

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The community council was envisioned as a source of involvement for residents and for mediating local needs with city-wide administrations and politicians. This experiment in community practice is illuminating both in its successes and in its failures. Professor Schmid followed this experiment for almost a decade as a researcher and as a consultant. There can be no one with parallel intimate knowledge and analytical skills to sum it up and present it to the American reader. The description of the change and its consequences are eloquently presented in chapter 5 and the organizational behavior framework applied is comprehensive and easy to follow.

As expected, such an ambitious experiment ended up with mixed results. The two key drawbacks are that most neighborhood residents who were surveyed did not know about the organization and could not assess its impact. In addition, the merging of the two units was not well coordinated, which involved many tensions and ineffective headquarters. Yet, those that approach the community councils were overall pleased with their work and ten years later, they are still in operation. The reliance on public funding clearly limits the community council's independence and the heterogeneity of residents' wishes and preferences make the task of representation quite complex.

Professor Schmid analyzes the experiment using a few theoretical lenses (mostly Neoinstitutional Theory, Resource Dependence Theory, and Political-Economy Theory) and a variety of key concepts (most notably, decentralization and organizational merging). All these theories and concepts are well explained in chapter 2 and then used throughout the book. Most interesting is the four scale (types) of decentralization ranging from deconcentration (some functions are moved from headquarters closer to the community) to devolution (transfer of decision-making powers to the local level). Unfortunately, real devolution did not occur in this experiment nor does it happen in most cases of community practice.

Two chapters are most noteworthy as they can be used by any reader for numerous purposes. Chapter 4 provides an international review of attempts to form neighborhood representative bodies. The chapter provides data from the U.K., Europe, U.S.A., and Japan and New Zealand. This is a chapter that should be used in classrooms as well as by researchers interested in knowing what is happening outside their immediate ecology. Chapter 6 provides the best framework I have ever seen to analyze the functioning of a neighborhood representative bodies. Professor Schmid provides a comparative analysis of the ideological, structural, and organizational dilemmas facing these representative

bodies. Using this framework, every reader will be able to assess his or her relevant community organization and plan improvements.

One confusing aspect of the book is the terminology used by the author. The book's title focuses on "neighborhood self-management." However, the focus in the book is on an organization called "community council." This could have been a minor issue if "neighborhood self-management" was not the name of one of the two organizations that merged to become the studied, "community council." So the reader is looking for "neighborhood self-management" and finds it, but not as the focus of the book.

Community practice is engaged in bringing the needs and voice of people to higher authorities and is meant to buffer the power of these mega-size organizations when impacting local communities. As such, this book is especially relevant. Under the support of and by the authority of the city council and the mayor, new community councils are formed. They are based on two previously overlapping organizations that served to represent residents. Since the 1960s and the days of the Great Society, few cities in America took the efforts to even discuss, let alone implement, a comprehensive process of establishing mechanism for residents' representation. As such, this book is an excellent source to study the benefits embedded in such an effort and to be aware of what can go wrong. Schmid's excellent analytical framework makes the book applicable in any corner of the globe.

In sum, this is a book that contains important material to any student or scholar of community practice and civil society. Professor Schmid covers a wide range of theoretical and conceptual issues and successfully applies them to an experiment of forming new community councils. These councils were intended to bring residents and their voices to the centers of decision-making. The full spectrum of expectations were often not materialized. Yet, we can learn a lot about this process and its intentions and maybe this book can be an impetus for similar novel attempts elsewhere.

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