

Infranomics – What's in a name?

Traditional disciplines such as engineering, economics, finance, or law deal with infrastructure issues from somewhat narrow perspectives. I find that no single discipline, however comprehensive in its span of analysis, can be adequate to deal with infrastructure issues. Five years ago, I started a search for a concept that can go beyond a single discipline. That's when I chanced upon Nomic, a game about changing rules. Most infrastructure issues have nomic-like characteristics where rules are changed during a play to win. I particularly liked the part of the game where any loophole in the initial rule set may give the first player the chance to pull a scam and modify the rules to win the game, something we see constantly in infrastructure. Finally, I had found a perfect title for this blog – Infranomics.

Why am I explaining this now? I saw an interesting technical note on Infranomics. The authors, Adrian V. Gheorghe and Marcelo Masera introduce "Infranomics" as a crucial discipline for this century and defined it "to include a body of disciplines supporting the analysis and decision making regarding the metasystems (e.g., the totality of the technical components, stakeholders, mind frame, legal constraints, etc composing the set of infrastructures)." For these authors, "Infranomics is the set of theories, assumptions, models, methods, and associated scientific and technical tools required for studying the conception, design, development, implementation, operation, administration, maintenance, service supply, and resilience of the metasystem. Because none of the currently existing disciplines provides a complete solution, infranomics will be the discipline-of-disciplines grouping all needed knowledge."

My view of Infranomics is quite different. It is not a composite library of knowledge drawn from all disciplines. It is even less about integrating different meta systems, tools, or models because that may not add value for policy makers. Infranomics is about processes and interactions. It is about infrastructure institutions and their real life limitations. It is about inability of societies to create perfect contracts and about voice and participation of stakeholders. It is about empowerment of common citizen to understand possible impacts when ordinary decisions are taken to create infrastructure assets or policies. I cannot predict whether it is possible to develop a comprehensive discipline as suggested by writers of the technical note. I have a modest goal, to translate complex issues relating to infrastructure into simple understandable messages. At the end of the day, one needs to improve the accountability for infrastructure decisions that affects ordinary people and I hope Infranomics can begin doing this, even in a small measure.