



# Democracy Report

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## **TRANSCENDING TENSIONS IN DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION: INSTITUTIONAL CHOICE AND SUBSIDIARITY PRINCIPLES** *Jesse Ribot, World Resources Institute (WRI)*

### **SUMMARY:**

In its focus on decentralized natural resource management, the World Resources Institute's (WRI) "Accountability, Decentralization, and Environment Comparative Research Project in Africa" illuminates the promises and pitfalls of current democratic decentralization reforms. In decentralization reforms concerning natural resources in Africa, local institutions are receiving greater powers; however, the degree and form of power transfers do not establish conditions for more equitable or efficient use and management of natural resources. As the institutions being chosen shape the likelihood of democratic and sustainable outcomes, a combination of locally accountable representation and discretionary powers are needed. WRI has found that the wrong institutions are often being chosen. As a result, WRI has looked to empowered democratic local authorities who might also play a role in the building of civil society and citizenship, in so far as citizens organize and engage the state when the state has meaningful power and is open to influence. This Tuesday Group presentation focused on discussing these findings and suggesting some ways through appropriate institutional choice to diminish tensions among participatory approaches, customary authorities, NGOs, and democratic local authorities and through the development of subsidiarity principles to guide the choice of powers for elected local authorities.

### **ISSUES:**

What is the relationship between environment and democracy? How are natural resources an important lever for promoting democratic reforms? How can democracy contribute to more efficient, more equitable, and more sustainable forms of natural resource management and use? What are the findings of WRI's "Accountability, Decentralization, and Environment Comparative Research Project in Africa?"

### **Background**

As natural resources are the basis of livelihoods and the wealth of many African countries, they are important levers for promoting democracy; they also use policy and practice to engage everyone in political processes. Ribot argued that natural resources are much more critical to local livelihoods and local democracy than other sectors, such as health and education, because they are net producers of wealth rather than consumers of central funds. Additionally, since natural resources require a great deal of local knowledge and input into their management, they demand local collective decision making for their management and use, thereby increasing local populations engagement in democratic practices.

The "Accountability, Decentralization, and Environment Comparative Research Project in Africa" is concerned with the two-way relationship between democracy and the environment. When commercial interests exploit natural resources under the protection of national governments, the vast majority of rural populations are directly affected, as they depend on these resources for their daily sustenance. Thus, natural resource use is a crossroad where commerce and subsistence, urban and rural, and national and local come together in cooperation and conflict.

WRI's program was field-based with research taking place over a two-year period in Cameroon, Mali, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The program consisted of 17 researchers who performed one year of fieldwork, produced written analyses, and transformed research into a larger comparative program. Research focused on institutional arrangement, powers transferred, and social and ecological outcomes associated with the local configuration of actors, powers, and accountability. WRI's researchers implemented a framework for decentralization focusing on actors, powers, and accountability. This framework defined institutions - democratic, administrative, NGOs, and customary - by accountability relations.

### **Effects of Decentralization Reforms**

Decentralization reforms introduced questions of institutional choice. In some cases, outside agencies were creating their own committees composed of donor actors to implement reforms, neglecting to recognize the institutions already established within the villages. This created a conflicted situation in Uganda where decentralization reforms led by outside agencies were initiated without consulting the local government. Additionally, local populations became confused in some cases about their roles in the process of decentralization reforms. Nonetheless, WRI found transfer of powers to be a positive motion, leading local government officials to become more legitimate decision-makers. Another positive development of decentralization reforms was that they supported the building of capacity of local NGOs. Ribot noted these NGOs still need to be held accountable through the local government, otherwise a potentially divisive situation might occur amongst the public.

The transfer of powers to local institutions dealing with natural resource management may also potentially lead to the re-emergence of customary authority in reaction to central government and international NGO pressures and as a result of increased privatization. Cases include Mali with the creation of neo-traditional institutions, Mozambique with groups favoring custom to avoid local elections, and Senegal with the favoring of chiefs to reproduce administrative control.

In several cases, local democratic authorities acted on behalf of local people but the question of institutions continues to arise. Local government can be held accountable through legislation but holding NGOs and customary authorities accountable poses greater difficulties. Coalitions, farmer cooperatives, forestry unions, and international associations and memberships are, however, forming to address the question of transfer of powers to local authorities and institutions.

Ribot outlined the problems with the institutional choices being made. A lack of downward accountability exists, leading to a loss of efficient and equal benefits of decentralization. An increase of competition with democratic or downwardly accountable institutions occurs. Additionally, these difficulties spread laterally and pose difficulties in sustaining development after donors are gone from the country. Few discretionary powers are transferred to downwardly accountable bodies. Rather, the burdens of management are transferred in lieu of benefits. Management planning and capacity arguments are contingencies that disable transferring power. Overall, the power choices being made in decentralization reforms are characterized by problems of little discretion, overbearing capacity and management contingencies, and insecure means of transfer. A positive result of reforms is that local populations tend to be more conservative than outside commercial interests and, as a result, exercise this conservatism when empowered. However, current arrangements still do not inspire the crystallization of civil society around representative and empowered institutions.

### **Discussion**

Issues discussed included the quality of local government, re-emergence of customary authority, and the relationship between conflict and decentralization.

A participant from the audience asked about the self-interests of local government: if it is less accountable than national governments, at what point does local government become an obstacle? Ribot stated that WRI's research showed that the degree of local government in several developing countries is very positive compared to local government in developed countries and that some decisions about development are best handled at the local level. Another participant discussed the re-emergence of customary authority at the local level. He stated that local government reforms must have been very empowering for customary authorities to have made themselves such a threat to national authorities.

A member of the audience asked if the presence of conflicts impacted work on decentralization.

He explained that in parts of Asia conflicts have emerged among national governments, local communities, and timber companies as a result of government failures to successfully decentralize timber resources. Ribot acknowledged several country cases where decentralization reforms led to violence but noted that many of the conflicts causing the violence preceded the reforms.

Ribot concluded the discussion by stating that WRI is interested in the level of local interest in decentralization and in how overall reform trickles up to national and international policies. He stated that African governments are now better off because of decentralization processes.

This issue of ***Democracy Report*** summarizes the April 29, 2003 Tuesday Group. DR is an internal document and should not be redistributed (forwarded) outside USAID. Send comments to Shamila N. Chaudhary, [schaudhary@usaid.gov](mailto:schaudhary@usaid.gov), at the DG Office.

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