

Democratic Decentralization of Natural Resources: A Path to Popular Enfranchisement

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Democratic decentralizations that are sweeping the developing world, presents a promising means for institutionalizing and scaling up the popular participation that has made community-based natural resource management effective. However, most current “decentralization” reforms involve insufficient transfer of powers to local institutions and overly tight central-government oversight. Often, the local institutions do not represent and are not accountable to local communities. Nonetheless, some lessons and recommendations can be derived from the limited decentralization experiments that have taken place around the world (Ribot 2002).

Decentralizations involve two three key elements: *secure power transfers* and *accountable representation*. Local representatives remain accountable and subject to central authorities when their powers can be given and taken at the whim of central agents. For local people to become enfranchised as citizens rather than remaining dependent subjects, their local representatives require a domain of secure discretionary powers and rights. This domain of secure rights must be established in law and protected through representation and recourse. Most transfers of natural resource powers are insecure.

Choosing representative and accountable local institutions is key for equity, justice, and efficiency. Theory tells us that accountability of local decision makers to the people—that is, local democracy—is the central mechanism for achieving greater equity and efficiency. When locally accountable bodies such as elected local governments are chosen, democracy is strengthened and people are enfranchised. When self-interested, non-representative, or autocratic institutions such as interest groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or customary authorities, are chosen in the absence of overseeing representative bodies, there is a risk of strengthening their autocracy and weakening democracy. Pluralism without representation favors the most organized and powerful groups. It favors elite capture.¹

Secure powers and accountable representation must go together. Transferring power without accountable representation is dangerous. Establishing accountable representation without powers is empty. Most decentralization reforms only establish one or the other. A partial explanation is that many central government agents fear, and therefore block, decentralization. By preventing transfers of meaningful powers to local democratic bodies, or transferring them to local agents who are only accountable to central government, environmental agencies and other line ministries prevent decentralization

¹ Of course, pluralism with representation can also result in elite capture and domination by the best-organized and most-powerful groups, as in U.S. politics, where powerful interests sway environmental policy.

from moving forward. To date, the potential benefits of decentralization remain unrealized because government discourse has not resulted in the enactment of necessary laws, or where decentralization laws do exist, they have not been implemented.

Some Positive Outcomes

Nevertheless, even partial decentralizations have been observed to produce positive outcomes. In Kumaon, India, decentralized democratic authorities have sustainably managed forests for over 70 years (Agrawal 2001). In Nicaragua and Bolivia, decentralized forest management has resulted in some local councils (where local councils were more open to popular influence) protecting forests against outside commercial interests (Pacheco 2002). In Mali, the state promised that forests would come under the control of rural councils. After years of waiting for the government to transfer powers to them, elected rural councilors whose jurisdiction includes Mali's Baye Forest lost patience and began to protect the forests on their own (Kassibo 2002). Despite the Mali Forestry Department's claims that local councils lack knowledge and ability to manage local resources, their initiative demonstrated a strong local desire and capacity to protect and manage forests for future use.²

Decentralizations in Bolivia, Cameroon, Nicaragua, and Zimbabwe have led to greater inclusion of some marginal populations in forestry decisions (Pacheco 2002; Oyono 2002a; Larson 2002; Conyers 2002; Mapedza 2002). In Nicaragua, for example, indigenous groups have managed to put their natural resource concerns on municipal council agendas, where they have chosen to run their own candidates for municipal office (Larson 2002:13). The democratic processes behind establishing management committees in Cameroon's community-forestry schemes has allowed marginalized Baka villagers in Moangué-le-Bosquet to create a niche for themselves in forest management (Oyono 2002a:11).

Increased local revenues have also been generated through environmental decentralizations in Zimbabwe, India, Indonesia, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Cameroon (Mapedza 2002; Conyers 2002; Larson 2002; Resosudarmo 2002; Agrawal 2001; Bigombe Logo 2002). In Cameroon, for example, new forestry laws earmark timber

² CBNRM experiments from around the world also provide indications that local populations can successfully and equitably manage natural resources. First, they demonstrate local communities have the capacity to protect forests and foster regeneration (Dembélé and Dembélé 2001). Second, they demonstrate that local democratic processes can lead to the protection and management of resources for local community use (Conyers 2002). Lastly, they have demonstrated that local management can generate revenues for local public works (Bigombe Logo 2002; Larson 2002; Pacheco 2002). But it is important to keep in mind that these project-based approaches occur under close outside supervision and with intensive assistance, and therefore do not reflect what would occur under a more generalized decentralization scenario. It is difficult to determine from project-based experiences the degree to which success is engineered from above or is the result of local conditions and initiatives (see Baviskar 2002; Schroeder 1999).

stumpage fees for elected local councils. Promises of decentralization involving natural resources have also created empowered local authorities.

Some Negative Outcomes

Some decentralization reforms have been associated with environmental problems. In cases from Cameroon, Indonesia, and Uganda, transferring exploitation rights to local bodies has reportedly resulted in overexploitation of timber, primarily due to the need for income for local governments and local people. There is no reason to expect that local authorities will not convert natural wealth into financial wealth, especially where cash is in short supply and is viewed as more valuable than standing forests. Local youth in Cameroon, for example, have expressed their desire to profit from the forests, citing the fact that previous generations and the government have done so before them, so why shouldn't they (Oyono 2002a; 2002b). It is not clear in these cases whether local practices have been any worse for the resource base than the central government's common practice of allocation of commercial concessions. Decentralization should enable local people to exploit resources for subsistence or cash. The question is, who decides, and within what management parameters?

Decentralization changes the distribution of powers in complex ways, creating new winners and losers. Some social problems, including elite capture and violence, have also been associated with decentralization. In some districts in Brazil, Bolivia, Cameroon, India, Indonesia, Mali, Nicaragua, Mexico, Senegal, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, elite groups have captured the benefits of decentralization efforts for their own use (Brannstrom 2002; Pacheco 2002; Oyono 2002b; Baviskar 2002; Resosudarmo 2002; Kassibo 2002; Larson 2002; Melo Farrera 2002; Ribot 1999; Bazaara 2002; Muhereza 2002; Mandondo and Mapedza 2002). In Cameroon, chiefs and management committee members are colluding to establish themselves as a new "forestry elite" (Oyono 2002a). In Indonesia and Cameroon, local people are being used as proxies for outside commercial interests to gain access to timber (Resosudarmo 2002; Oyono 2002a).

Violence among resource users has been reported within decentralization efforts in Indonesia, Mali, and Cameroon (Peluso 2002; Resosudarmo 2002; Kassibo 2002; Latif 2002). In Mali, conflict among farmers and pastoralists has reportedly increased, but it is not clear that this increase is due to decentralization or to other changes in land occupation and herd management (Personal communication, Cheibane Coulibaly, Bamako, Mali 2001; Bréhima Kassibo, Bamako, Mali 2002).

Factors Influencing Outcomes

In addition to secure meaningful powers and accountability, research indicates that a complex of other measures can affect these outcomes (Ribot 2002). These include environmental standards, policies to improve equity, civic education, dispute resolution, and legal protections for activist organizations. Environmental standards are a necessary and logical complement to decentralization reforms because they define the bounds and the freedoms of local discretionary action. It may be necessary for central government to *mandate* that local government include and serve excluded populations, because

decentralization does not fully redress many social inequities, including the disenfranchisement of women, poverty, and the exclusion of marginal groups.

Decentralization can lead to conflict, particularly when it involves the transfer of natural resource management and use powers. Therefore, mediation mechanisms and access to recourse are needed. If local populations and authorities are to act on the rights and obligations that come with decentralizations, they must know the law. Civic education can inform people of these rights and obligations, raising their expectations for meaningful reform, representation, justice, and services. In addition, laws that enable people to organize and demand reforms and government responsiveness can facilitate positive change.

Central governments play key roles in effective decentralization, despite the fact that most resistance to decentralization comes from within government. Decentralization is not about the downsizing or dismantling central government; rather, it calls for mutually supportive democratic central and local governance. Strong central government is necessary for establishing national objectives, civil rights, and a legal framework to enable civil organizing, representation, and recourse. Additionally, it provides for enforcement and support services. Outside agencies (donors and NGOs) can support governments in their decentralization efforts and help set up accompanying measures.

Contrary to the positive roles they *can* play, governments, donors, and environmental organizations are already forming a backlash to decentralization on the grounds that it has not succeeded. Yet the decentralization experiment is just beginning. Discourse has rarely been translated into law or practice. Where it has, people need time to understand and invest in it. It is difficult to measure decentralization's success before the decentralization experiment has been tried. The experiment will require serious effort and time. Initial evidence indicates that it is well worth a try.

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