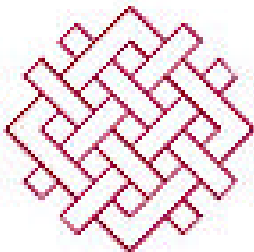


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**Services and Infrastructure versus Natural Resource
Management: Building a Base for Democratic Decentralization**

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SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE VERSUS NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: BUILDING A BASE FOR DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION

In this article, we argue that environmental sector has some unique characteristics that provide greater opportunities to support democratic local governance than do other sectoral decentralization reforms.

Services and infrastructure provision dominate the discourse on decentralization, and are particularly high profile in multilateral banks and the major bilateral donor agencies (World Bank 2000; UNDP 1999; USAID 2000). Road, market and water infrastructure, health and education, play a major role in decentralizations (Schroeder and Andrews 2001:21; Therkildsen 2001; Crook and Sverrisson 2001; Smoke 2000). The supposed advantages of decentralization largely relate to the greater efficiency of local governments in carrying out these and other management and development functions and their ability to better reflect local priorities (Rondinelli et al. 1989; World Bank 2000:108; Huther and Shah 1998; Sewell 1996; Romeo 1996; Tiebout 1972; Selznick 1984[1949]). While equity is also frequently evoked as an objective, Therkildsen (2001:2) points out that “efficiency” is considered “the holy grail” of decentralization reforms.¹ By and large, this emphasis on efficiency of service and infrastructure delivery pushes decentralization reforms to be more instrumental rather than democratic in nature.

Natural resource management reforms and interventions have often emphasized the need for local participation as a means of increasing their effectiveness. Arguments for greater local inclusion in decision making and management have emphasized that greater local knowledge is needed in natural resource management to understand both the complex physical characteristics of resources and the culturally specific patterns of resource management and use. Because natural resources are the basis of local livelihoods as well as national wealth, they are the locus of potential conflict and tension that requires extra sensitivity to local livelihood strategies and political dynamics in the making and implementation of any environmental interventions. Further, given the need for local labor and knowledge participation in implementation many authors have argued that local people must be included at every stage in order to build their sense of “ownership” of reforms to garner local support and to prevent sabotage and disaffection. Also, because natural resources are a source of wealth, many authors have argued for participation as a way of increasing local incomes. (Ostrom 1990; Agrawal and Gibson 2001; Baland and Platteau 1996; Western and Wright 1994; Poffenberger 1994.)

This article compares service and infrastructure with natural resource management in order to bring attention to aspects of natural resource management that make it well suited to support more democratic approaches to decentralization, particularly those that develop the domain of autonomous discretionary local decision making, legislative functions and judiciary. The objective of this article is to bring natural resources into the service of prying open this local democratic space: a space that we argue will improve the effectiveness of decentralizations in all sectors. The management of local natural resources has various characteristics that make it difficult to approach as a centrally mandated and funded sector and that make it difficult to ignore legislative and judiciary functions. The differences are all matters of degree and not kind. Our

¹ For a discussion of a range of objectives that justify decentralizations, including central control, central burden shedding, fiscal crisis, national unification, development, democratization, efficiency and equity, see Ribot 2001.

point is to use natural resource management's particular mix of characteristics to throw aspects of all decentralization reforms into relief. Those are the aspects that need attention in order to balance the immediate technical objective of meeting national social and economic ends with the longer-term participatory, inclusive and empowering objectives of local democracy.

Contrasting Services and Infrastructure with Natural Resource Management

Uniformity/Variability

Service and infrastructure reforms have characteristics that make them amenable to top-down, delivery-oriented approaches. Since most service and infrastructure interventions are regular, recurring activities, and the investment needs are largely foreseeable, national governments and internationally funded projects can establish regular planning—usually annual—planning and programming cycles with a pre-defined calendar for decision-making. While these characteristics make central planning more feasible, there is still a need for decentralized implementation in order to optimize the match between the prescribed services and differentiated local needs. Because of the greater regularity of service and infrastructure sectors, programs transferred to the local arena can be largely prescribed in a central planning process.

Greater spatial and temporal variability of natural resources requires greater local knowledge for their management, making them less amenable to central standardization. The fine adaptation of service provision to local conditions and in response to local needs and priorities is one of the reasons behind decentralization. Nevertheless, to a certain extent a school, a clinic, or a bridge in one location is not that different from a similar item in another location. Thus, the social service ministries and social investment funds achieve substantial economies of scale by designing national curriculum, health programs, and construction prototypes for the entire country. In contrast, natural resources are inherently much more location specific. Fruiting cycles, masting, timing for the harvest of various natural products require local knowledge to discern. A pine forest has different uses and poses fundamentally different problems from a broad leaf forests. Deserts are fundamentally distinct from the humid tropics. Fishing regulations must reflect the population dynamics in each ecosystem, and so on. In many instances the only cost effective way to understand how the ecosystems function and manage them effectively is long-term observation of how they respond to different types of intervention. Despite recent improvements in soil mapping, remote sensing, and geographical information systems, no central government can aspire to that level of detailed local knowledge.

Further, many key natural resource management decisions do not follow a predetermined annual calendar. Decisions must be made in response to conflicts or crises, variations in rainfall, to fluctuations in production cycles, semi-random discoveries of illegal activity, new initiatives at other levels of government, and similar situations. Many local government natural resource management activities cannot be pre-programmed in the same sense as one can program social service and infrastructure planning. There needs to be flexibility and responsiveness to cope with the contingencies of nature. This, of course is also the case of health services, which must respond to disease outbreaks and war, and is seen in infrastructure investment where investments may come unexpectedly due to road washouts, dam failure or malicious attacks. Nevertheless, the variability of natural resource management an everyday part of its character.

Knowledge

These spatial and temporal variations in natural resources lead to a need for a greater degree of local knowledge in their management, planning and implementation. In health and infrastructure, as well as education, the knowledge needed is much more predictable, and often much more

dependent on standardized expert knowledge. But the constant need for local knowledge in natural resource use and management increases the need for local participation in planning processes. There is a great diversity of ecological niches and of uses within a single local jurisdiction or community, hence local knowledge itself is also highly variable and is a reflection of different needs and priorities. These variations are overlaid by social differences in class, caste, clan, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, origin, and profession that characterizes most local “communities,” which diversify the patterns of uses, needs and aspirations in all sectors, making local knowledge always of great importance.

Service and infrastructure planning need to take these kinds of variations into account as much as does natural resource management. But, the greater the spatial, temporal and social variability, and the less predictability in a system, the more acute the need for mediating mechanisms of representation and accountability so that the broadest range of needs and aspirations are integrated into decision-making processes. It is through these mechanisms of representation and accountability that social and ecological concerns are internalized in decisions and that services and management are matched to local needs. So, while representation and accountability are essential parts of any decentralization process, the greater diversity and contingency in natural resource use and management requires greater vigilance around representation and accountability if outcomes are to reflect the efficiency and equity goals of decentralization—both of which operate through increased participation.

In cases of social services, infrastructure and natural resource management, central governments often use local governments weak technical capacity as an excuse not to decentralize. In all of these domains, local knowledge and capacities are systematically ignored (Zartman 2000; Goldman 2001; Agrawal 1995; Fortmann and Bruce 1988). At least in the case of natural resource management one can question how much such “technical capacity” has or can contribute to more-sustainable or more-equitable natural resource management, and to what extent it has simply been used as an excuse to usurp control over existing natural capital (Ribot 1995).² In many instances, technical arguments have simply served as ideological discourses justifying the monopolization of natural and other resources by elite groups (Ribot 2001; 1999; 1995; Fairhead and Leach 1996; Fiszbein 1997; Conyers 2001). As noted above, it may well be that local groups, with greater local knowledge of their resources, have a better understanding of how to manage those resources sustainably than trained professionals do, although that is not necessarily the case (Scott 1998; Agrawal 1995).

Discretion within Standards

Centrally determined standards and guidelines, while assuring a minimum service quality, put bounds on the degrees of local freedoms. The setting of standards and regulations by central government determines the degrees of freedom of local government. If the standards are highly specified, then the degrees of freedom are limited. If the standards are broad the degrees of local freedom are broad. The setting of standards is the locus of tension between national mandate and local discretion. Standards circumscribe the domain of local autonomy. Standards are set using “expert” knowledge based on notions of technical complexity, equity, efficiency, public good and economies of scale. The great variability of natural resources which privileges certain kinds of

² There is little evidence that centrally imposed natural resource regulations have led local people to manage their resources better or even that they have a compelling underlying technical logic behind them. Often the literature refers to people who operate within the law as sustainably managing their resources and those that do not operate within the law as not sustainably managing them without providing any evidence that meeting legal standards—as opposed to following local practices—leads to more optimal impacts on the ecosystems involved.

local knowledge over expert knowledge dictates a greater range of local freedoms, within a set of minimum environmental standards. The word minimum here is very important. Standards in many sectors are set too high (Tendler 1980; Ribot 1995). This may be a means for a technical ministry to impose its control over resources, an artifact of un-adapted standards handed down by colonial governments, or it may result from the perceived nature of the resource itself. In natural resources the potential domain of local discretion, in which national good is not threatened and where local knowledge is sufficient for management, is very large. It is much larger than environmental ministries are typically willing to admit (Fairhead and Leach 1996; Leach and Mearns 1996; Ribot 1999a).

The rules, standards and guidelines that separate those decisions that can be made locally from those that require central intervention are not always based on principles of better management or national good. In practice, control over natural resources without great commercial value has largely remained in the local arena around the world (Ribot 1999b; 2000; Xu 2002). Local governments may get involved in their use and management or may leave matters purely to individual communities and households. Central governments generally become involved in natural resource management when they are commercially valuable. Hence, they are very involved in providing mining and timber concessions, hunting licenses, or in managing tourist parks, but have little interest in regulating non-timber forest products for household consumption, firewood, and local fishing resources. Ironically, since timber extraction and mining are typically the causes of degradation, one can hardly consider central management of valuable resources to be more sound than local use, such as when forests are allocated to timber corporations or minerals to international mining operations.

One can also see a trend for central governments to “devolve” to local governments and communities control over resources that they previously “managed” but that have become so degraded that they no longer are of interest (Xu 2002; Ribot 1999b). In short, rules and standards determining which resources will be under central control are often justified as a scientific necessity for management when they are actually about establishing central control over lucrative opportunities. Many of these opportunities could be transferred to local government—some with positive environmental results. The question of concern is: Which powers can be transferred to local government so that management remains sound and so that the inter-jurisdictional management and distribution functions of higher-level government are still maintained?³

Among the natural resources sector’s domain of discretionary powers is the allocation of profit-generating opportunities. In the service and infrastructure sector, the state has contracts and jobs to allocate. Many of these service-sector allocative opportunities are circumscribed by standards for allocation to certified experts and to established contractors. In the natural resources sector the field is more opened since exploitation opportunities does not require the same level of oversight and specification. The wealth-generating opportunities could be devolved to local authorities to increase the domain of local discretion, but are not.

³ Both the decentralization of natural resources and that of social services and infrastructure pose issues of inter-regional equity. In the case of social services and infrastructure a strong argument can be made that financing these activities from local revenues leads to a highly unequal—and hence unjust—distribution of benefits. This implies that rich areas should be made to transfer some of their resources to the poorer areas. This argument also arises in the context of natural resources with high commercial value such as petroleum, minerals, and timber; although ironically, in many instances the regions where these resources come from are quite poor precisely because central governments and large companies have traditionally appropriated the great majority of benefits.

Wealth

Natural resources are a *source of income and wealth* for local livelihoods, government urban elite and for whole nations. In this sense they are very different from social services and infrastructure sectors which are net sinks for financial resources. One important implication of these differences is that natural resource management can often be self financing. The ability of natural resource management to be self financing comes from two different characteristics of the resources. First, natural resources are less costly to “transfer into the local arena since they are already located there. Intervening in the management of pre-existing natural resources does not necessarily require large sums of money, as does the provision of social services and infrastructure. What needs to be transferred are the rights, not the resources—a much less costly, but no-less political, prospect. Indeed, most natural resources are already being managed in some form or another by local people.

Second, natural resources generate wealth that can be taxed and can therefore contribute to their own management. Rather than being an expense for local and central governments, control over access to natural resources through regulation, taxation, or the determination of other property rights can be a major revenues source—legal or illegal. Hence, local governments do not necessarily have to wait for central government financing to take action—again legal or otherwise—to “manage” their natural resources. In other words, local authorities do not always have to wait for those above to “decentralize.” They can—and often do—take initiatives on their own. In addition, income from natural resources can also be invested in the development of other sectors, as a cross-sectoral subsidy (Ribot 2001). Because services and infrastructure cost more than many local jurisdictions can afford, and they do not generate income, they typically require central government grants and local taxes backed by central government mandates complemented by user fees (Smoke 2000; UNCDF 2000).

Another important implication of wealth generation is that natural resource management provides a broader set of patronage and economic opportunities than do other sectors. All sectoral decentralizations create jobs—for construction and maintenance as well as service delivery itself. This creates one kind of patronage resource for the authorities who allocate labor opportunities. In addition they also create concessions and contracts for construction, service provision or extraction. These too are lucrative allocative opportunities. For natural resources, there is also the allocation of productive resources to commercial actors, from individual licenses and permits to large-scale commercial concessions. These constitute a set of highly lucrative extractive opportunities. Allocation of natural resource access constitutes an important economic and political power.

“Decentralizing” control over natural resources, whether de jure or de facto, is also likely to increase the portion of the benefits that goes to local groups (although this is not necessarily so, particularly in contexts with powerful local elite, corruption, limited accountability or weak democracy). Whether that result promotes equity or not depends on who the local groups that benefit are and who the national groups that lose are. If the local groups that benefit form part of the elite and the national groups that lose are taxpayers the outcome may be regressive; although it is also possible that even the local elite are poor and marginalized groups by national standards and that if the money had gone to the national coffers it would have been used to benefit the rich. To the extent that resource-rich regions tend to have low economic incomes and receive little government support, geographical redistribution of benefits may at the least bring new resources into depressed areas; but again, there is no guarantee that will happen.

Politics and Conflict

Since natural resources with commercial value constitute a potential source of rent, local governments frequently become interested in appropriating those rents for their own use, in the form of taxes, fees, transformation of the resource into municipal property, or bribes. In many poor rural areas these natural resources are in fact one of the few available sources of wealth, and hence attract great interest from local governments. This frequently leads to conflict between local and central governments over who will capture the rents; as well as conflicts between local governments and other stakeholders (Namara 2001; Etoungou 2001; Mandondo and Mapedza 2001; Conyers 2001; Ribot 1998). In addition, variations in planning needs occur because the resources and the groups most interested in them often do not fit neatly into political-administrative jurisdictions. This jurisdictional mismatch can be the cause for considerable tension.

The ability to determine how productive resources, concessions, contracts and jobs are allocated and used is a “political” matter. This ability appears greater given the productive nature of natural resources, than with the implementation of a largely pre-determined set of services and infrastructure investments. This is even true in the allocation of labor opportunities, since those in the service sectors require more centrally defined qualifications (educational degrees, teaching or nursing certificates, licenses, etc.) than with natural resource management jobs. The greater the allocative opportunities, the more the municipality's political nature stands out. This is because the political part of local authority is located in its ability to make discretionary decisions, of which allocation is an important part. This ability makes local government politically, economically and socially important to the local population.

The ability to execute central mandates and to spend a budget that has been earmarked for specific uses is a more administrative function—an extension of central administration—than a political function. There is clearly a relation between political power, mandate, and budget. This relation comes back to the discretion that local governments have in allocating and spending funds. This is a multi-layered matter. Administrative and political power cannot be cleanly separated. Municipal governments may gain the political power to exercise influence over land, forests, fauna, or water as a result of the size and discretionality of the budget they manage for other activities or because of the importance and desirability of the services they deliver to the population. These administrative powers may also help build national political alliances.

Control of natural resources is also more political than services and infrastructure since, even without a budget, *it overlaps with numerous pre-existing claims*, many of which belong to local elite, notables, religious leaders, or customary authorities (van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1987; Peluso 1992).

Adaptability of Sectoral Authorities

In at least one manner, natural resources have a disadvantage with respect to other sectors in moving toward democratic decentralization. Manor (2002:2-3) notes that the transition to democratic decentralization in the environmental sector poses unusual difficulties. He argues that in the forest sector, because of the history of forest services' policing role in most developing countries, asking foresters to turn around 180 degrees from being police to being enablers in joint forms of forest management arrangements is exceptionally difficult. “This is far more difficult for them than for bureaucrats in, for example, the education or health sectors who have traditionally focused mainly on service delivery rather than any sort of policing.”

It is doubly difficult to imagine a transition from central management to democratic decentralization in the sector, because not only does it mean becoming enablers, it also means letting go of real powers that environmental services have held onto and depended on for their *raison d'être* over the past century. Further, given the lucrative nature of the resources, many private interests with great leverage at the center will also create obstacles to decentralizing what has served as an important source of profit.

Return to Discretionality

Service and infrastructure approaches tend to focus on improving local government executive powers—that is, targeting and implementing capacity. This focus complements reforms oriented toward supporting local democratization. Democratic local government, however, has more than targeting and implementing in their executive functions. A democratic executive also has discretionary decision making powers, in addition to having legislative and judiciary functions. Under administratively driven decentralizations, the focus is implementation and enforcement (see Mamdani 1996). The discretionary decision-making aspect of the executive is diminished. Local legislative powers also get limited attention because the central government continues to provide guidelines and set standards for the type of investments and services municipal government will provide.

The domain of local discretion is the basis for local democratic decision making. It is the realm in which elected local authorities have powers to meet the needs of local citizens. It gives local citizens a reason to even want to influence and be involved in local government. This realm of local autonomy is the realm of freedom with respect to which local authorities represent and are held accountable to their constituents. Without discretionary powers, local government is an administrative extension of central government. Having discretion is what defines meaningful authority in local democracy.

Discretionality is the essence of a political entity. In natural resource management, there is a great need for local political authorities, that is elected local representatives, to have a domain of discretion. First, it is necessary in order to attend to the great spatial, temporal and social exigencies of use and management. Second, it arises in the allocative nature of natural resource use and management decision making due to the lucrative nature of the many opportunities that natural resources present. Third, it arises in the need for flexible and locally informed negotiation among the multiple claims by pre-existing authorities, citizens and local government.

This domain of discretion is important since it is the domain of local freedom around which democratic local government can form and develop. This point cannot be taken lightly. Local government without discretionary powers is merely an extension of central administration. It neither creates nor encourages local democracy. Even if the authorities are elected, without discretionary powers, they have no meaningful domain of action within which the local population can judge and interact with their performance. It is the ability of local people to select their leaders based on performance that makes elections meaningful. It is also the exercise of powers by local leaders that allows them to develop local legitimacy and to cultivate a relation with society. Further, it is with respect to the powers of local authorities that civil society is motivated to organize and apply influence.

Conclusion

Both the legislative and the judicial functions become more important for natural resources because: 1) natural resources are locale specific, diverse, serve multiple uses, and therefore require local knowledge in designing their management, and 2), access to natural resources and restrictions on that access involve existing, new and often multiple overlapping claims that can

generate conflict. This need for local governments to have flexibility in natural resource management and use in the local context, along with the need to mediate among multiple interests, speaks to the need for local authorities to have the discretionary powers needed to adapt, act and react effectively. Local democratic authorities created under democratic decentralizations need discretionary powers in order to have a role and in order to make decisions on behalf of their constituencies. They need discretionary powers to be able to make meaningful decisions that could legitimate them in the eyes of local peoples. Such discretionary powers are a core element of local democracy and appear to be a necessity for adaptive natural resource management.

Uniformity of services and technical needs and the required scale of funding make central planning and funding more important in the service and infrastructure sectors. Such characteristics predispose these sectors to more administratively managed approaches. Natural resources, however, are an important source of wealth—the kind of wealth needed by local authorities to be able to execute programs and to implement decisions they make. Further, because natural resource exploitation can be lucrative, the allocation of access to natural resources by local governments can be a further source of legitimacy, giving local authorities discretion over yet another important power in the local domain.

Clearly, as most government environmental agencies point out when approached on the topic of decentralizing natural resource management, one cannot devolve everything to local people. In Uganda, Mali and Ghana, re-centralization has been called for based on the argument that when forest management was decentralized, local governments and people just cut them down without restraint. But, this situation is specious. No serious decentralization devolves all powers to the local arena. Some powers are devolved, some retained at the center. Known sustainable and non-damaging activities can be devolved. Known unsustainable activities must be prohibited. Rights to harvest sustainably, for example, can be devolved. Commercial logging rights can be devolved while maintaining the same management requirements that were required under central control. A domain of local autonomy in management and use can be created in which there is discretion that does not threaten long-term and larger-scale wellbeing. This is sustainable subsidiarity. It is not the abandon of all control on the naïve notion that “the people” know best. Minimum restrictions and standards must be thought out at a higher level, but their establishment requires dialogue and input from all scales of experience.

Natural resource powers place local government at the center of more political issues than do service and infrastructure provision, due to greater discretionary opportunities concerning allocative decision making, usage and management rule making, and greater need to facilitate cooperation, mediate conflict, or engage in dispute resolution. These greater degrees of freedom for local authorities that natural resource management necessitates also implies that the level of democracy, accountability, and participation of dominated groups in decision making, rule making, and adjudication, becomes more central to the outcomes of natural resource decentralization. The higher-level tensions between central and local government and those between local government and the local population also implies a need for a classic balance and separation of powers. Accountability is about the existence of counter powers to check the arbitrary use of power. The executive and judiciary must be separated so that society can use the courts against government. Local political authorities must have legal leverage to bring central government to account. Local authorities must represent and be accountable to local people so that they exercise their powers based on local knowledge, aspirations and needs. In decentralized natural resource management cases around the world, these kinds of issues are evident.

What are the implications of these differences among sectors? In sequencing decentralizations, should natural resource powers be transferred first to help establish and legitimize local

democratic authorities? Should natural resources be given special attention by advocates of local democratization? We need to explore more deeply the characteristics of natural resources to understand their potential role in supporting decentralization reforms.

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