CHAPTER 1

DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION THROUGH A NATURAL RESOURCE LENS: COUNTERING CENTRAL RESISTANCE, FOSTERING LOCAL DEMAND

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Introduction

Decentralizations have taken place around the world over the past century [Ribot, 1999]. Since the mid 1980s, however, decentralization has become a truly global movement, affecting most developing countries [UNCDF, 2000:5-11; World Bank, 2000; Totemeyer, 2000; Dillinger, 1994; Therkildsen, 1993; Fisher, 1991]. Governments have decentralized for multiple political-economic, social and ideological reasons, and often with the support and pressure of aid agencies [Ribot, 2002b]. At least 60 countries now claim to be decentralizing some aspect of natural resource management [Agrawal, 2001]. The language of decentralization has changed in this most recent set of reforms [Ribot, forthcoming]. Earlier reforms emphasized national cohesion, effective rule and the efficient management of rural subjects [Buell, 1928; Mair, 1936; Mamdani, 1996]. In contrast, the most recent decentralizations are introducing a new emancipatory language of democracy, pluralism and rights. Wollenberg, Edmunds and Anderson [2001], Anderson, Clement and Crowder [1998], Alden Wily [2000a,b], Meinzen-Dick and Pradhan [2000] and Utting [1999] point out that natural resource management is moving toward more-democratic and rights-based premises. Indeed, most countries are labeling their decentralizations ‘democratic’.

While a mix of factors and forces shape the specific decentralization reforms in each country [Ribot, 2002a], most decentralization theorists and policy makers evoke developmentalist arguments contending that the increased efficiency, equity and inclusion that should arise from decentralization result in better and more sustainable management [Smoke, 2000; Manor, 1999; Crook and Manor, 1998; Mawhood, 1983; Uphoff and Esman, 1974; UNDP, 1999]. Some focus on its political and economic advantages. These advocates argue that decentralization plays important roles in democratization and people’s participation [Crook and Manor, 1998; Ribot, 1996; Mbassi, 1995:23; Rothchild, 1994:1]; rural development [Uphoff and Esman, 1974:xx; UNDP, 1999; Helmsing, 2001; Roe, 1995:833; De Valk, 1990; Ribot, 2002a]; public service performance [World Bank, 2000:107]; poverty alleviation [Crook and Sverrisson, 2001:iii]; relief of fiscal crisis [Olowu, 2001; Menizen-Dick and Knox, 1999:5]; political and macro-economic stability [World Bank, 2000:107; Prud’homme, 2001:14] or national unity and state building [Conyers, 2000:7; Mamdani, 1996; Bazaara, 2002,2003; Muhereza 2003]; and can help increase the legitimacy of government [Ribot, 2002a,b].

Is this tidal wave of decentralization discourse being legislated into appropriate laws and implemented in practice? What are its effects on the ground? This special issue of the European Journal of Development Research queries the state and effect of this movement through the lens of natural resource decentralizations. The articles in this special issue use a comparative framework to characterize the degree to which natural resource decentralizations can be said to be taking place and, where possible, to measure their social and environmental consequences. The articles in this volume, except for that of Meynen and Doornbos, which came to our attention later, are a subset of those presented at the Workshop on Decentralization and the

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1 It is important to note that the language of rights and enfranchisement was also present in earlier decentralizations. So, this is not a complete change, but rather democratization and rights issues emerge more frequently in this round. See Mair 1936. It should be taken as a cautionary note that the earlier decentralizations, which went under such titles as ‘indirect rule’ were not emancipatory reforms (Ribot 1999; forthcoming).
Environment, held in Bellagio, Italy, 18 through 22 February, 2002. The purpose of this workshop was to consolidate the findings of research on decentralization and natural resources from around the world.

This issue includes case studies from Africa (Cameroon and South Africa); Asia (Indonesia, Mongolia, China and India) and Latin America (Nicaragua, Brazil and Bolivia), addressing the management of water, land, forests or pasture. In addition to the particular theoretical or practical concerns of each author, the comparative framework guiding the case studies focuses attention on 1) the extent to which central governments have decentralized authority over natural resources to local governments or other sub-national entities, 2) the relations between these local-level entities and the population, and 3) the effects of these processes on local peoples and natural resources [see Ribot, 2001]. This introductory article also draws on other cases presented at Bellagio and available in the broader literature.

**Actors, Powers and Accountability, an Analytic Starting Point**

By definition, decentralization involves the transfer of power from the central government to actors and institutions at lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy [Mawhood, 1983; Smith, 1985; Agrawal and Ribot, 1999]. The mechanism through which theorists believe that efficiency and equity should increase is by bringing public decisions closer and making them more open and accountable to local populations [Oyogi, 2002; Smoke, 2000; Manor, 1999; Mawhood, 1983]. For this to happen, several authors argue that some form of downwardly accountable local representation is necessary [Ribot, 1995; Smoke, 2000; Agrawal and Ribot, 1999]. Through broad-based local input and influence, decentralization brings local knowledge into the decision-making process, resulting in better-targeted policies and reduced information and transaction costs [World Bank, 1997]. Other authors argue that local participation in decision making makes people more likely to have a sense of ‘ownership’ of those decisions, such as rules for resource use [on ownership see Ostrom, 1990; Hirschman, 2003]. Because of this ‘ownership’ they will provide better information and be more engaged in implementing, monitoring and enforcing such rules. In addition, marginalized groups could have greater influence on local policies because of the open nature of decision making, thus increasing equity. [Smoke, 2000; Carney, 1995, Kaimowitz, et al., 1998, Margulis, 1999, Ostrom, 1990.]

The transfer of power from central to local authorities has taken administrative and political forms. Administrative decentralization or ‘deconcentration’ of public services—transfers of power to local administrative bodies—aims to help line ministries, such as health, education, public works and environment, to read the preferences of local populations and to better mobilize local resources and labor. Political or ‘democratic decentralization’ integrates local populations into decision making through better representation, by creating and empowering representative

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2 The minutes for this meeting can be found on the World Resources Institute web page at [http://www.wri.org](http://www.wri.org) [see Latif 2002].

3 According to the World Bank, decentralization should improve resource allocation, efficiency, accountability and equity ‘by linking the costs and benefits of local public services more closely’ [World Bank, 1988]. Local governments are in a better position to know the needs and desires of their constituents better than national governments, while at the same time it is easier for constituents to hold local leaders accountable [World Bank, 2000]. Decentralizations are also expected to promote democracy by ‘bringing the state closer to the people’, increasing local participation and building social capital [World Bank, 1997].
local governments. Democratic decentralization is premised on new local institutions 1) being representative of and accountable to local populations and 2) having a secure and autonomous domain of powers to make and implement meaningful decisions. [Ribot, 2001]

Deconcentration is a weaker form of decentralization than is democratic decentralization since the mechanisms by which deconcentrated decision makers are responsive and accountable to local populations are weaker [Ribot, 2002a]. If efficiency and equity benefits arise from the democratic processes that encourage local authorities to serve the needs and desires of their constituents [Smoke, 2000, Crook and Sverrisson, 2001], then democratic decentralization should be the most effective form of decentralization. With regard to natural resources, however, democratic decentralization has proven difficult to find, and the results of existing policies are highly varied.

The actors, powers and accountability framework [Agrawal and Ribot, 1999] provides an important tool for analyzing the type and extent of decentralization in a specific country. In particular, it considers (1) the powers, and accompanying resources, actually transferred to lower level actors to determine whether an autonomous domain of decision making actually exists around issues of local significance; and (2) the local-level entities receiving powers and their relation to the population, in order to understand the extent to which these are both representative of and downwardly accountable to local peoples.

This volume, however, illustrates that the type and extent of decentralization is not the only relevant factor in understanding how local actors will use their new powers or what outcomes these will have for local people and resources. The way in which decentralization is implemented as well as the economic context associated with each particular natural resource, for example, also affect the kinds of choices that are made by local decision makers. Central governments can also make an important difference through their overall commitment to implementation, local capacity building and social equity for marginal actors. Grassroots and donor pressures for change strongly influence central government commitment or resistance to decentralization. At the local level, at least four factors affect decision making: the overall capacity of the decision-making body, local power relations, the incentive structure for resource management and environmental and social ideology. [Larson, 2003a.]

**Natural Resources: A Lens into Decentralization Dynamics**

The articles in this volume interrogate decentralization through the natural resources lens, which the contributors have found to be a sharp optic for insights into decentralization writ large—not just into natural resource management and use [Kaimowitz and Ribot, 2002]. This optic is particularly powerful since natural resources differ from other sectors in ways that augment and throw into relief decentralization’s potential and risks as a lever for local democratization and development. Natural resources are at once critical for local livelihoods (subsistence and income generation), and they are the basis of significant wealth for governments and national elite. As such they have historically been a point of struggle between rural people and these elite.

With decentralization, natural resource transfer is a great opportunity for increasing the relevance of local authorities to local people, yet it is simultaneously a threat to central authorities and
elites who fear losing income or patronage resources. For example, there has been considerable political conflict and resistance associated with the redistribution of power and resources that, by definition, accompanies decentralization [see Larson, this issue; Ntsebeza, this issue; Cousins and Kepe, this issue; Peluso, 2002; Ribot and Oyono, forthcoming]. Nevertheless, given their local importance and historical local uses and claims, local knowledge and input are highly relevant to their management, making them good candidates for decentralized management and use. The evidence from these and other articles, however, shows that threats to national-level interests are producing resistance that is fettering the struggle for reform.

Some Central Problems in Decentralization—or Decentralizing Problems?

Several observations concerning decentralizations that involve natural resources emerge from articles in this volume. First, the democratic decentralization of natural resource management is barely happening. All of the case studies in this issue highlight problems with, or central government resistance to, power transfers to local entities and/or problems with the downward accountability of the local entities receiving powers [also see Bazaara, 2002; Kassibo, 2002; Peluso, 2002]. Second, democratic decentralization of natural resources appears to be more-fully developed where local people and/or local governments have had at least partial success in mobilizing to demand greater authority [see in this issue: Larson; Oyono; Pacheco; Resosudarmo; Meynen and Doornbos; Baviskar; also see Kassibo, 2002]. Third, the articles all demonstrate that the outcomes of these partial, blocked and hybrid decentralizations are highly varied, both among and within countries, and the cases begin to explain some of the reasons for those differences [see Ribot, 2001].

Greater local participation in decision making or, at the very least, a better understanding of local needs and desires and the incorporation of these into government programs, is key in decentralization theory [Ribot, 1996; Crook and Manor, 1998; Agrawal and Ribot, 1999]. Yet just as ‘decentralization’ in practice is not always what central governments and donors purport it to be, this volume also brings into question the claims of participation [see Mosse, 2001; Hirschmann, 2003]. This volume shows that ‘participation’—whether through elected authorities, co-management, committee-based management, or ‘traditional’ authorities—usually looks like a modern reproduction of indirect rule (that is, a means for managing labor and resources) [Ribot, 1995, forthcoming]. It does not reflect the enfranchisement that participation and decentralization discourses promise—through empowered downwardly accountable representation. Elsewhere, Resosudarmo [2002] has astutely labeled these new management arrangements ‘co-administration’: a form of deconcentration where elected local authorities are used by central government and donors as local administrators to implement outside agendas.

Participatory processes, however, can also be positive, particularly as an instrument for identifying and including poor and marginalized people in decision making [Mansuri and Rao, 2003; Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2003]. Participatory methods can be important tools for enhancing the inclusiveness of democratic processes. But given their limits and proneness to abuse, participatory methods should not be used in ways that compete with or substitute for nascent democratic processes.

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4 Similarly, the use of uncompensated local labor in the name of participation is another common practice—Ribot [1996] called this practice ‘participatory corvée’.
Downward accountability of leaders to citizens is the substantive essence of democracy [Moore, 1998]. It is the mechanism by which decentralizations are supposed to secure participation, even when representative, elected local governments tend to have a poor record serving women, the poor and other marginalized populations—unless required to do so by central government [Crook and Sverrison, 2001]. Nevertheless, elected local authorities appear to be the most systematic means of broad-based inclusion. The articles in this volume indicate concerted resistance even to establishing this basic level of local democracy. Central governments are choosing upwardly accountable institutions to receive decentralized powers or responsibilities as part of their strategy to maintain central control over natural resources [Ribot, 2003]. In the name of ‘pluralism’, and ‘civil society’, development institutions and NGOs appear to be choosing to transfer powers to less-than-democratic ‘traditional’ authorities, committees and local NGOs, either due to a naïve populism, an uncritical acceptance of everything ‘indigenous’, or an anti-government stance inherited from the Thatcher revolution [Ribot and Oyono, forthcoming].

The convergence of these anti-democratic tendencies is causing a potentially destructive proliferation of local institutions [see Ntsebeza, this issue; Manor, this issue; Namara and Nsabagasani, 2003]. This proliferation is creating competition with fledgling local democratic institutions, undermining their powers and legitimacy. This dynamic also appears to be fragmenting local identities—away from residency-based citizenship and identification with local government as a positive force, and toward more-divisive ethnic- and lineage-based forms of belonging [Geschiere, 2002, 2003; Ribot, forthcoming].

But downward accountability of local authority is not the only accountability relation that matters. Central government must be downwardly accountable to local elected authorities for effective decentralizations. Local governments need services from central government—such as expertise, heavy machinery, financial support [people at yesterday’s workshop here were bemoaning the effects of extensive borrowing by LGs in Guatemala and El Salvador… And some financial support ought to be in the form of direct transfers, the right to charge and collect local taxes, etc. ] , and market access. Central government also has responsibility to clarify laws, mediate major disputes and to provide guidelines and means to assure the inclusion of marginal groups. There must be mechanisms for local representatives to hold higher-level bureaucrats accountable to them [Ntsebeza, this issue; Xu and Ribot, this issue]. Xu and Ribot [this issue] imply that in China, local authorities cannot achieve downward accountability of higher-level government since the only level of democratic government is the most local. These elected authorities have little leverage over higher-level authorities. Holding the state accountable means having a real counter power in the local arena—indeed, accountability itself can be defined as counter power [see Agrawal and Ribot, 1999]. It may mean having democratic institutions at higher levels (whether it be at intermediate levels of decentralized authority or in state and national legislatures [see Veit, forthcoming])—there appears to be a need for multiple channels of influence over the state. It also means local governments must be sufficiently strong, politically organized and federated, and backed by real popular demand for their political and

Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize that there are some very real concerns about the accountability as well as capacity of more ‘democratic’ structures such as local elected governments. We believe, however, that the short-term gains that may be made by circumventing them only serve to undermine democratic processes in the long term. It is also important to recognize that traditionally marginalized populations, such as indigenous groups, peasants, and women, will probably need direct interventions in their favor in order for their livelihoods to improve, whichever type of decentralization is implemented [see Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2003].
technical functions. Local popular demand for decentralization must also be enabled and fostered [see, in this issue: Larson; Oyono; Pacheco; Resosudarmo; Meynen and Doornbos].

Further, for the state to play a supportive role, central government also needs to be strong [Cousins and Kepe, this issue; Meynen and Doornbos, this issue; Resosudarmo, this issue; also see Ribot, 2002b]. Although downsizing of government—through structural adjustment policies—has often led to decentralization policies, there is no contradiction between a strong state and decentralization. Decentralization should strengthen both central and local government. It is not about dismantling the state in order to replace it with local democratic sovereigns. It is about creating local democracy that can build legitimate states and governments—writ large—by playing the inclusive and democratic role that many of us hope governments can play and which are the foundation of democratic systems. Decentralization is about bringing the state back in, but this time as a positive, legitimate democratic institution.

Decentralizations are not working as some theories suggest. The articles in this volume illustrate that this ‘failure’ is partly because of the fact that decentralizations are not being implemented, but also due to the factors that democratic decentralization theories cannot or do not account for. Most decentralization theory stems from a mix of new institutionalist ‘if-then’ propositions: if the institutions (i.e. actors, powers and accountability) are right, then the outcomes will be positive. We cannot yet say whether these ‘if-then’ propositions are right, because for many reasons, decentralizations are not getting to ‘if’ [see Ribot, forthcoming]. The failure to establish decentralizations—the failure to get to ‘if’—is partly due to the practical complexities of implementation, to factors external to the models, to the multiple and alternative motives behind power transfers to the periphery when they do happen,6 and to the larger political economy in which the attempts at these institutional changes are embedded [see Larson, 2003b]. When the factors outside of the models dominate outcomes, it is time to re-think those models or to systematically locate them in a broader political economy [see Cousins in Latif, 2002].

The degree of decentralization and its outcomes are shaped by many factors: local capacities; incentive structures; ideologies; political and social histories; forms of local social organization; degrees of local stratification; unresolved land and forest tenure relations; failure to account for time and insecurities (and often retrenching) produced by change; strength and manipulations of elite actors; state and government resistance; and government, NGO and development agency commitment to ‘traditional’ or private and third-sector institutions over democratic authorities. Further, decentralizations are often implemented with primarily instrumental goals of intervening agencies, such as improving environmental management, pacifying local opposition or meeting donor demands, rather than as a complex, integral political project. Unfortunately, the commitment to democratization and popular participation may be minimal or secondary.

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6 When real power transfers take place to the periphery, it is usually due to economic crisis, political crisis, successionist movements, or conditionalities from international donors. In exceptional cases, as in Kerala State in India, it has occurred due to ideological commitment to decentralization and popular participation. [See Ribot 2002a.] Bazaarra [2002] and Muherea [2003] have argued that decentralization in Uganda, which is publicly justified on efficiency, equity and democracy grounds is actually about resolution of fiscal and political crises.

7 As Cooper [1993:89] once said, if the ‘...model treats the most important problems as exogenous factors to be invoked to explain why things do not work out correctly, perhaps the model and exogenous factors should change places’. But, it is important when making such changes not to throw out what the models have to offer. We may be able to keep the ‘if-then’ propositions while querying the problems of getting to ‘if’.
Whether it is due to practical difficulties of reform, government resistance strategies or naïve populism of development agents and NGOs, non-implementation takes several forms and can still be, at least partly, measured against the models that are used to justify these reforms. Models help us to recognize decentralization when we see it: we know they are not being implemented because governments transfer inadequate powers to actors who are not accountable to local populations.

**The Articles in this Volume**

While the articles in the volume are sketched below, these sketches are not designed to condense or summarize each article’s main points. Rather they are written to complement the abstracts found at the beginning of each, with an eye to highlighting the newest insights.

Amita Baviskar’s article throws into relief the often-seen chasm between decentralization discourse and practice. In Baviskar’s Madyha Pradesh, India case, the chasm is produced by the contradiction between procedural participatory objectives of decentralization and the instrumental objectives of donor programs [also see Shivaramakrishnan, 2000]. Donors pre-specify objectives that local people are supposed to adopt as their own—or to ‘participate in’, while creating incentives for project managers to achieve these objectives through specific success indicators. In Baviskar’s case, this development formula made a watershed management project into a theater where successful participation and ecological improvement were performed for the donor audience. The performance was enabled by separating participation from power—that is, by using or creating representative structures but locating real decision making elsewhere. Structures of representation and participation are well crafted, but project decisions are made by project personnel, accountable to their bosses to demonstrate success through overly specified indicators of pre-conceived outcomes. Project personnel must perform success.

Baviskar shows the process by which donor-required success is manufactured, how local elite and project managers participate and benefit, and how the ecology and wellbeing of the population remains unchanged. To avoid delays and the ‘politics’ of the panchayat, the administrators, in collaboration with local elite farmers, circumvent the committees and the inconvenience of local democracy [also see Ferguson, 1994], avoiding the ‘politics’ that are the heart of democratic decentralization [also see Manor, this issue]. In short, Baviskar points out that project and funding imperatives and the incentives they create for administrators can lead projects to undermine the very processes they purport to be supporting [also see Mosse, 2001; Hirschmann, 2003; Vivian and Maseko, 1994; Kassibo, 2002]. The need to identify such ‘successes’ subverts any real attempt at building longer-term, locally rooted and locally accountable institutional processes.

Ben Cousins’ and Thembele Kepe’s article describes a ‘decentralized’ natural resource management initiative in South Africa’s Wild Coast that also purports, but fails, to promote local participation and empowerment. In spite of its accompanying rhetoric, the Spatial Development Initiative (SDI) in Mkambati fails to establish the kind of decentralization that would make local participation possible. Instead of working through democratic local authorities, decision-making powers remain centralized or are given to elite actors unaccountable to local people. Democratic participation is minimal, hence the local realities of resource use never enter the decision-making
processes, and local institutions that frame resource access, rights and conflicts are marginalized. The case reflects how the disenfranchising of people through the disabling of democratic processes disenfranchises their local experience, knowledge and institutions [also see Xu and Ribot, 2003]. As the authors argue, prospects for development interventions to integrate successfully with the lived realities of local peoples would be significantly enhanced if they were based on locally accountable institutions that effectively represent local understanding, needs and aspirations [also see Oyono, this issue].

The Mkambati case also illustrates the destructive confusion that arises when privatization is done in the name of decentralization [also see Johnson and Forsyth, 2002]. Privatization is not decentralization—its accolades are attributed to its exclusive logic, rather than the inclusive logic that is behind the efficiency and equity benefits of decentralization [Ribot, 2002b]. The two are often conflated since decentralization and privatization are both possible routes to state downsizing. But decentralization is about strengthening local government—something these and other authors point out is also enhanced by the presence of a strong and dedicated central state [also see Meynen and Doornbos, this issue; Xu and Ribot, this issue; Ribot, 2002]. While privatization is an option for powers pried from central governments under dominant and widespread neo-liberal economic policy—including structural adjustments—it is not the only option.

In the Makambati case, privatization through ‘outsourcing’ facilitated elite capture by providing ‘opportunities for opportunists’. Prospects for local democratic institutions to contribute to development were further undermined as local political and business elite harnessed development committees (set up for popular ‘empowerment’) for personal accumulation [also see Manor, this issue; Baviskar, this issue; Oyono, this issue]. Further, this privatization was undertaken in a context of deep social conflict, and both privatization and elite capture were met with disputes and resistance—undermining the project itself. Without local input into decisions and fair resolution of deep-seated land-tenure disputes, for example, projects like the SDI in Mkambati are doomed. Strong central intervention may be needed to apply new decentralization laws and help clarify conflictual land-tenure arrangements.

Anne Larson’s article encourages us to explore the ways that decentralization is leveraged from below. Definitions of decentralization usually refer explicitly only to the formal, legal process of power and resource redistribution as designed and implemented by central governments. As we see in many of the cases in this volume, central governments resist institutionalizing the formal structures necessary for local participation and democracy to flourish. Larson argues from the Nicaraguan experience that formal decentralization needs grassroots demand to overcome central resistance [also see Baviskar, this issue; Meynen and Doornbos, this issue]. In Nicaragua, as the formal structures have been put in place, local capacity to make demands has increased, the political power and legitimacy of local governments has grown, and central leaders have begun to see political advantages in making local government allies, which makes them more amenable to furthering the formal process, and so on. Larson refers to the local dynamic—whereby local leaders make decisions, with or without formal decentralized authority, in a context of increasing local legitimacy—as decentralization ‘from below’.
Larson argues that natural resources are particularly amenable to decentralization from below, at least in part because they are already physically located in the local arena, within a particular history and tradition of every-day resource use and management [also see Kaimowitz and Ribot, 2002]. Local leaders, however, may be more likely to ignore natural resources and concentrate on the service and infrastructure investments that many consider to be their top development priority, or they may only be interested in resource exploitation as an economic opportunity. Like central governments, though, local governments respond to grassroots pressure from constituents [see also Brannstrom, this issue; Gibson and Lehoucq, forthcoming, Larson and Ferroukhi, 2003], who increasingly turn to their local elected officials to address resource-related problems and conflicts. Effective and responsible decentralized natural resource management will arise, therefore, from a dynamic process involving decentralization not only from above, but also from below. Decentralization reforms from above create the infrastructure of participation by broadening opportunities for people to influence government. Decentralization from below is when people use that infrastructure along with other channels of political leverage to seize and realize the new opportunities.

Demand, however, cannot come from below when people are subject to arbitrary authority. Lungisile Ntsebeza’s article is about tension between ‘traditional’ chiefs and local democracy where contradictory laws recognize both. Due their historical relevance to local populations, traditional leadership is often celebrated as being a more legitimate or appropriate recipient of decentralized land decisions than are elected local authorities [also see, for example, Oyono, this issue]. But conflicts over a new system of land administration in post-apartheid South Africa illustrate that some chiefs are not downwardly accountable. Drawing on Mamdani [1996], Ntsebeza argues that rural residents dependent on hereditary traditional leadership are not citizens, but subjects. Though some traditional leaders promote local participation, leaders who cannot be selected—or removed—by constituents have only limited downward accountability. Ntsebeza argues that democracy should be both participatory and representative, and that rural citizenship requires that the South African government return to its commitment to create and support democratically elected local governments.

Ntsebeza’s South Africa case also highlights the importance of central government accountability to local authorities and the complexities of transition. Ntsebeza shows that higher-level governments must also be accountable to lower-level elected authorities [also see Xu and Ribot, this issue]. Local government needs the support of central government to carry out its functions and to gain local people’s confidence. In rural South Africa, in Transkei, central government administrators failed to even acknowledge local government in their constitutionally sanctioned role in land allocation and integrated rural planning. The failure of elected local government to perform this role undermined the authority of local representatives and forced local residents to turn back to tribal authorities for access to basic resources—although many residents would have preferred to work with their elected authorities. Because central authorities do not support new local governments, apartheid-era laws remain in force. Further, the failure to resolve conflicting authority over land has led to a breakdown of old resource management systems, also largely under the authority of traditional leaders, without the clear establishment of new ones. The resulting state of confusion and insecurity leads to an absence of rules and an ‘open access’ problem for natural resources. Similar concerns affect Mongolia and Indonesia [see Mears, this issue; Resosudarmo, this issue].
Pablo Pacheco’s article provides a detailed study of Bolivia, where significant forest management responsibilities have been decentralized to local governments. It shows that local governments have been given powers to allocate forest resources to local populations, and central authorities have provided these local authorities with technical support. In contrast, most of the outcomes observed in the articles presented in this volume are often not the outcomes of democratic decentralization but rather of hybrids, deconcentration, privatization, or partial, poorly designed or highly circumscribed decentralization. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to indicate that, under the right circumstances, the theory can hold true: democratic decentralization can improve efficiency, equity, democracy and resource management [see also Ferroukhi, 2003; Larson, 2003a; Ribot, 2002, forthcoming]. Bolivia’s decentralization, although more advanced than others in Latin America, however, is also only partial.

Though some powers are being transferred in Bolivia, like other cases in this volume, local-government decision making, and access to and control of benefits from the forestry sector, is still limited and circumscribed by government controls. Further, despite elected local authorities, downward accountability remains highly problematic [see also Resosudarmo, this issue]. Pacheco points out that the structure of elections—particularly party involvement—does not foster downward accountability [also see Ribot, 1996,2002a on elections and alternative accountability mechanisms, Larson and Ferroukhi, 2003]. Outcomes associated with Bolivia’s decentralization are highly diverse—both positive and negative for local populations and for the forest. Pacheco finds that whether outcomes improve the lot of marginal people or reinforce asymmetries of local power relations in favor of the elite, depends on the degree to which authorities are accountable to local constituents. The involvement of elected authorities in forest management is a function of the degree of local livelihood dependence on the resource.

Ida Adu Pradnja Resosudarmo and Robin Mearns describe decentralizations in Indonesia and Mongolia that cannot be understood in isolation from other simultaneous sweeping national reforms. The rapid transition from strong, authoritarian central government to more decentralized, democratic structures, has led to what is hopefully a temporary breakdown of each nation’s natural resource management systems. In the midst of the crisis of change, the rules of natural resource governance are highly vulnerable to insecurity, particularly where resources are valuable, as in Indonesia, or under common property management, as in Mongolia. In Indonesia, where central authority included violent repression, decentralization has also fostered violence [also see Peluso, 2002].

Resosudarmo’s article highlights the importance of historical context for understanding the response of local governments and citizens to new opportunities such as those offered by decentralization. In Indonesia, 30 years of authoritarian central government ended in political and economic crisis in the late 1990s. Citizens in the Outer Islands in particular deeply resented years of marginalization and, above all, their ongoing exclusion from the lucrative timber trade. When political reforms finally began, local governments scrambled to find new sources of income to assert their political autonomy from central government. Logging contracts became one of those sources, leading to the proliferation of small-scale contracts. In the reforms, central government transferred to lower-level governments rights to a significant portion of the income and the power to allocate harvesting and use in areas up to 100 hectares of highly lucrative forest resources. The result has been a substantial increase in logging with little regard for
environmental consequences, as local people and governments take advantage of a new income-generating opportunity. Resosudarmo attributes over-exploitation to insecurity and a lack of confidence that these new local rights will last—especially since central authorities have already tried to reconcentrate some of these powers.

Resosudarmo also shows that local authorities have only limited downward accountability to the population, since the popular vote is restricted to the election of a political party list, rather than individual candidates chosen locally—as is true in most developing countries and is a major problem for decentralizations [also see Pacheco, this issue]. And while local people have benefited to some degree from new access to forest resources, the primary benefits have not gone to those who need it most. The Indonesia case highlights the importance of downward accountability as well as the need for a balance of powers between central and local authorities in decentralization. It highlights the danger of decentralization that happens too fast and with almost no central government oversight, and the dangers of reactionary re-centralization threats that increase insecurity.

Mearns’ article illustrates similar problems in Mongolia. At present, decentralization in Mongolia’s pasture management is structured as deconcentration, as the local authorities being given management powers are not elected but rather appointed by the central government. Elected local authorities have little power and almost no fiscal resources. In the Mongolia case, ambiguous authority and power transfers make it unclear which rules take precedence in determining who grazes where and when. As a result it is increasingly common for the herders themselves to make unilateral decisions. While the passage of time—which should lead to the gradual consolidation of new institutions—may be an important part of the solution to these problems, Mongolia’s pastures could benefit from greater transparency and downward accountability of those with resource management powers, including public participation in land management decisions, and greater clarity in terms of the definition and use of those powers.

Further, Mearns argues that for pastoralists in Mongolia, incomplete or ‘empty’ decentralization has increased social differentiation and vulnerability, and led to an ‘open access’ crisis of the commons. Transfer of responsibilities to local levels of government constituted a withdrawal of the state, rather than decentralization. Without the devolution of fiscal resources or means for holding local authorities accountable, Mongolia’s post-socialist transition produced increased need—in the form of unemployed urban laborers who returned to the countryside to herd—and a provision vacuum—in the form of unfinanced and unaccountable local government. This effective disengagement of the central state resulted in: increased vulnerability for pastoralists; increased social vulnerability as the newer, less-experienced, and least socially connected herders failed and dropped out of herding; and reconfiguration of grazing patterns with profound consequences for the pastoral environment. Poorer herders remained close to settlements, leading to overstocking, while vast more distant areas remained underused, due to the lack of investment in water supply, transport infrastructure and service provision resulting from the fiscal constraints on local government.

Jianchu Xu and Jesse Ribot’s article shows how the provincial government of Yunnan, China undermines its tentative moves toward decentralized forest management by continuing to allow

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8 For notable exceptions see the cases of Mali and Uganda (Kassibo, 2002; Bazaara, 2002,2003).
powerful central policy makers to implement far-reaching decisions affecting peoples’ livelihoods without any local participation or accountability. The provincial government’s fairly weak decentralization efforts are completely overshadowed by drastic top-down measures that have severely undermined local livelihoods by limiting economic alternatives in the interest of protecting forests and watersheds. These higher-level authorities have failed to account for livelihood needs in their conservation-oriented decisions. The article implies that because the democratic part of decentralization involves only the lowest level of political administration, the ‘administrative village’, there are no democratic mechanisms in place to hold higher-level government offices downwardly accountable to the local elected administrative village heads or to the local population. Because of this, decentralization remains limited. The article also suggests that this downward accountability of higher-level authorities will be key to establishing effective democratic decentralization and bringing indigenous people’s livelihood concerns into decisions [also see Ntsebeza, this issue; Cousins and Kepe, this issue].

Phil René Oyono’s article emphasizes the sociological context of decentralization initiatives, arguing that decentralization does not lead to automatic benefits but must be implemented in such a way that reinforces democratic practices and social responsibility. Even where systems are established for elected local leaders to receive important decision-making powers, as in Cameroon, the results may not benefit either local peoples or the forest. Rather, in spite of elections, as we have seen in several cases, some local leaders do not represent local peoples’ interests, but rather are establishing themselves as a new local elite. Not all communities are able to demand or enforce downward accountability of their leaders. In contrast with Ntsebeza’s article discussed above, Oyono argues that the failure of this new local leadership is partly related to the marginalization of traditional leaders, who have greater legitimacy but have been left out of this process. Even so, many local villagers, as well as these new forestry committees, believe it is time to get their ‘fair share’ from the forest, and support rapid and extensive logging to increase local revenues. This is in part because of the history of forest centralization and elite exploitation in Cameroon and because decentralization has been implemented as an administrative procedure, with purely instrumental managerial interests, rather than as a value-laden package for good governance and resource management in the common interest.

James Manor’s article outlines a major shift in the local institutional basis of the current decentralization movement. The first wave of the current movement, in the 1980s, transferred powers to multi-purpose (hence integrative) local governments. In recent years, however, international donors and central governments are increasingly turning toward single-purpose user committees. Manor argues that donors see user committees as a mechanism to give local peoples greater say over the development decisions that affect them. Central government officials, however, establish user committees at the insistence of donors but then manipulate them to their own ends by limiting their downward accountability—through the selection of committee members—and by reigning in their powers and jurisdiction [also see Baviskar, this issue].

While Manor argues that these committees are less democratically accountable and less representative than local government, they are often justified in the name of keeping politics out of what are purported to be ‘scientific’ or ‘technical’ decisions [also see Baviskar, this issue; Fergusson, 1996]. But, as Manor (and Baviskar [this issue]) make evident, keeping politics out of decision making is far from the central government’s intention—which is simply to maintain its
own hegemony. Besides, politics is not to be avoided—as if it could be—as an inconvenience, rather it should be embraced as the mechanism by which local preferences and needs are registered, integrated and responded to.

Manor’s article emphasizes how these proliferating single-purpose committees are undermining the democratic processes that were presumably institutionalized with the creation and strengthening of elected local governments in Third World countries. Grassroots participation is fragmented, reducing its coherence and effectiveness, and the poor may even be worse off than before. Fundamentally, these user committees, which tend to be ‘over-funded’, next to under-funded elected multi-purpose local government bodies, generate confusion over the division of responsibilities, usurp local government functions and deprive local governments of revenues [also see Ribot, 2002]. These myriad problems result in destructive conflicts and the undermining of local government authority. Ironically, governments, donors and NGOs, in the name of participation and democracy, are undermining democracy through the naïveté of their actions, their failure to recognize the eminently political nature of decentralization, and, in some cases, an effort to destroy local democratic processes. Manor suggests that the solution is to place local committees under the authority of elected local governments [also see Ribot and Oyono, forthcoming; Blair, 2000].

Christian Brannstrom’s article focuses on larger-scale single-purpose watershed management committees that encompass multiple local jurisdictions (what Ostrom, Schroeder and Wynn [1993] call special districts). Territories of elected political institutions are rarely contiguous with larger ecologically defined watershed or forest zones. Their jurisdiction is often too small for the scale at which these resources require management. As such, integrated management of these resources poses a challenge for decentralization. Usually, these larger-scale resource zones are managed by technical ministries of the central state. Some countries, such as Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua, are approaching decentralized management of such resources by creating federations or consortiums of local governments [Larson, 2003c, Pacheco, 2003, Vallejo, 2003]. In other places, new jurisdictions are created with elected authorities to govern such specially defined ecological districts [Ostrom, Schroeder and Wynn, 1993].

In Brazil, other alternatives have been tried. Brannstrom compares three different committee-based approaches to watershed resource management in the three Brazilian states. In spite of the presence of local governments (as a minority of members) on two of the regional (catchment-scale) committees, the author argues that all three cases represent decentralization largely to upwardly accountable actors. Unlike Manor, who argues that elected local governments are critical for user committee accountability and democracy, Brannstrom argues that only in the state that mandated the inclusion of civil society representatives on the water resources committee was there a degree of downward accountability. He presents evidence that civil-society groups exerted significant pressure on other members to be downwardly accountable and played an important role in opening debate on controversial water issues and in organizing water-user groups. Obviously, the civil society and local government approaches are not

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9 In a WRI organized workshop on Decentralization and the Environment held in Cape Town in March 2001, Agrappinah Namara and Dr. Nyangabyaki Bazaara presented arguments on what they called ‘the committee effect’ in Uganda. They noted the proliferation of committees and many of its negative effects—including the creation of a professional class of committee members.
mutually exclusive. Brannstrom also points out that local governments tend to demand short-term political returns on their decisions, whereas other groups may have longer-term horizons. Brannstrom emphasizes that it is most productive when the state creates new ways to pry open government to multiple influences and to find ways for local government and civil society to work together.

Brannstrom’s article also indicates some important limits to civil-society approaches. In the case where civil society organizations were committee members, there were no organizations representing shantytown dwellers or water consumers. The government did, however, organize small farmers into associations to include them in decision making—indicating that central government can play a role in assuring broad-based inclusion, especially of marginal segments of the population [also see Crook and Sverrison, 2003]. Brannstrom makes the further point that although NGOs may be able to hold government accountable, it remains unclear what or whom these NGOs represent [also see Manor, this issue; Ribot, 2002a]. In addition, Brannstrom points out that the committee in São Paulo became the focus for grassroots activists, ‘who previously would have lobbied individual municipal governments or bureaucratic headquarters’. This is another illustration of Manor’s point that these committees take powers and relevance away from elected local governments [also see Ribot, 2002a,b, forthcoming]. Inclusion of ‘civil society’ institutions in public decision making can certainly be a positive force—but it probably does not hurt to keep it in check via dependence on representative authorities [i.e. Manor, this issue; Blair, 2000].

Wicky Meynen and Martin Doornbos’s article articulates the often unstated conceptual differences and policy objectives regarding decentralization and natural resource governance, which often give rise to conflicting institutional arrangements that are not compatible with democratic decentralization or sustainable resource management. In particular, the authors argue that the same donor agencies often promote, on the one hand, market liberalization and privatization of natural resources for commercial exploitation, and decentralization, on the other, to enhance popular participation and community-based subsistence strategies. While it is not clear that donor agencies in fact view local participation through decentralization as limited to defending subsistence interests, this article elucidates the problems that can arise when different priorities, power struggles and inaccurate conceptions of ‘the local’ result in a mixture of contradictory policies at the national level and conflicting institutional arrangements locally.

Drawing on examples from India, in particular, Meynen and Doornbos demonstrate the following responses to decentralization: active state opposition to devolving power and resources; conflicting relations among state agencies, local user groups and local elected officials; intra-village conflicts over new boundaries; and selective privatization and other forms of exclusion that discriminate against marginal groups. While similar problems are apparent in many of the articles, this article is particularly useful because of the way in which the authors link these institutional outcomes to unresolved conceptual contradictions. For effective democratic decentralization, the authors highlight the importance of a strong central state [also see Cousins and Kepe, this issue], particularly for redressing inequalities and resolving conflicting or exclusionary natural resource management initiatives, and flexibility of implementation to address diverse local realities. Fundamentally, however, they argue that decentralization will continue to be fraught with contradictions unless there is organized and
effective civil society pressure combined with countervailing global forces that would fundamentally reverse current priorities.

**Ways Forward/Research Agenda**

The first step forward would be to implement the decentralization experiment. This might involve identifying the appropriate powers to transfer (and to keep central) and building the kinds of representative locally accountable institutions that make decentralization effective. It would involve opening public dialogues with governments, development institutions, NGOs and local communities on which powers should be public and which private, which central and which local [see Larson 2003b, 2003d, on the results of national workshops doing just that in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala]. It would involve public dialogue on the implications of the mix and hierarchy of local institutions that governments, development agencies and NGOs are choosing to work with and on the constitution of representation in the local arena. Promoting local enfranchisement through decentralization will also involve thinking through the timing and sequencing of reforms to reduce uncertainties and the shocks of change, and giving the experiment time to take root. Decentralization should, if established, also create multiple channels of influence that grass roots movements and individuals can use to influence the authorities who wield power over them. Such influence is a key part of the production of citizenship. But citizens also need to know that they have channels of influence and also must learn to exercise the powers that are accessible. Testing democratic decentralization will most certainly involve developing effective strategies for avoiding elite capture and for countering government resistance to dialogue and to change at every turn.

Baviskar [this issue] indicates three arenas in which the link between people and the state can be opened. First, strong grassroots organization, particularly of subaltern groups, is imperative to overcome central-government resistance to democratic decentralization. Where local people are unable or unwilling to make demands on state administrators or even on their own elected committee members or local governments, they become collaborators in the charade of decentralization—even more so when they participate in corruption, help manufacture the charade of success and/or benefit economically from it. Second, she suggests the importance of understanding the complex history of relations between the state and local populations to understand the furthering of such collaboration. Third, she points out the need for researchers and other third parties to take a closer look at decentralization processes and publicize their findings as another important accountability mechanism. Research has a positive role to play in identifying positive alternatives and in ‘raking the muck’ to force governments and development agencies to act according to their promises.

Further research will help us to clarify where decentralizations are falling short, where they are moving forward to produce positive outcomes, and how we can leverage productive change. Some research needs to focus on seemingly technical matters. For example, better subsidiarity principles are needed to guide the choice of powers—to identify which should remain public, which can serve society best when privatized, and to indicate which belong at each level of the political-administrative hierarchy. Such research could then feed into the public dialogues mentioned above. Institutional choices also require guidelines. More research is needed on the

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10 For an extensive research agenda on democratic decentralization, see Ribot 2002a.
implications of local institutional proliferation, inter-institutional relations, arrangements of nesting and hierarchy, and mechanisms of inter-institutional accountability. More must be understood also about the scale of institutions and how to match larger ecological scales of management to political-administrative districts without undermining fledgling local democratic institutions. More work is also needed on how ‘rights-based’ approaches [see Johnson and Forsyth, 2002], and minimum-standards approaches (also about establishing a domain of local freedoms) [Ribot, 2002b, forthcoming], can enhance the domain of discretion, the powers, the effectiveness, and ultimately the legitimacy of local democratic authorities.

As Martin Luther King [1963] said ‘freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed’. More work is needed to understand how local people come to demand representation and services. To what degree is local mobilization a matter of producing empowered and representative local authorities that people feel they have a reason to influence, to what degree is it about civic education, political organizing, or even rebel rousing? How do people become engaged as citizens rather than managed as subjects? Of course, while technical criteria can be produced to guide decentralizations, ultimately they are always political and therefore require public engagement and debate. That debate can be effectively informed by good research on the many factors that appear to shape the establishment of decentralization and its outcomes. It can also be informed by research on the views of local people, which are often excluded from public debate. Research can shed light on the local legitimacy of different government and non-government regimes, on the preferences and desires of local people, and on the structures that exclude these perspectives from public discourse.

Lastly, we need to use what we are learning to produce new theories, models and analytic approaches that can help us locate the micro- and macro-structures of decentralization in a larger political economy of state formation, governmentality, popular movements, resistance and counter resistance. The stomping out of fledgling democratic institutions prescribed by democracy theorists and democratic decentralization advocates alike is a political problem. It is no wonder that democratic decentralization as a political solution is threatening many actors and facing widespread resistance.
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