

CHAPTER 11

**USER COMMITTEES: A POTENTIALLY DAMAGING
SECOND WAVE OF DECENTRALIZATION?**

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Forthcoming in a special issue of the
European Journal of Development Research
Volume 16, Number 1, Spring 2004

Guest Editors: Jesse C. Ribot and Anne M. Larson

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Hans Binswanger and Swaminathan Aiyar for sharing material relevant to this study, to Ruth Alsop for sharing evidence and alerting me to numerous references, and to P. Sundaram, Andrea Cornwall and Mark Robinson for useful insights.

Summary

Decentralizations in the 1980s transferred powers to multi-purpose local governments. In recent years international donors and central governments are increasingly turning toward single-purpose user committees. Although these committees appear to be less democratically accountable and less representative than local government, donors view user committees as a mechanism to give local peoples greater say over the development decisions that affect them. Central government officials establish user committees at the insistence of donors but then manipulate them by selecting committee members and by reigning in their powers. The article explores how these proliferating single-purpose committees are undermining the democratic processes that were presumably institutionalised with the creation and strengthening of elected local governments in Third World countries. This new approach fragments local participation, reducing its coherence and effectiveness, and the poor may even be worse off than before. These committees appear to usurp local government functions and deprive local governments of revenues. These myriad problems result in destructive conflicts and the undermining of local government authority.

Introduction

This article explores the rapid and widespread proliferation of ‘user committees’ in less developed countries (LDCs) since the mid-1990s. These committees are said to give ordinary people at the local level some voice and influence over the implementation (and, at times, the design) of the development programs and/or specific projects of individual government ministries.

This proliferation has reached immense proportions. One recent study stated that the ‘development landscape is littered with committees...mandated as “user groups”’ [Cornwall and Gaventa 2001:9]. If we consider just one type of such committees (women’s self-help groups) in just one Indian state (Andhra Pradesh), fully 10,000 user committees have lately been established. When we take into account the large number of other types of committees (water user committees, watershed development committees, parent-teacher committees, health committees, forest management committees, and many more) and the large number of other countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America where many such bodies have been established, the massive scale of this trend becomes apparent. It follows a first wave¹ that saw more than 60 governments across the LDCs and eastern/central Europe experiment with the devolution of powers and resources to elected councils at lower levels in their political systems. That initial wave began in the early 1980s or in a tiny number of cases even before², and is still proceeding,

¹ We need to recognize that some user committees existed prior to the ‘first wave’ of democratic decentralization. The point here is that their *proliferation* has mainly occurred *since* the ‘first wave’ became well established.

² For example, the government in the Indian state of West Bengal was active on this front in the late 1970s.

albeit slowly and with some reverses in very recent years. The second wave has important implications for peoples' participation and influence, for the issue of equity, for development, and for the institutions created in the first wave.

Readers will have noted the question mark at the end of the title of this article. It is there because it is impossible on present evidence to resolve the following three questions.

- ◆ Since (as we shall see) user committees are often quite dissimilar to the decentralized councils in the 'first wave', is it justified to describe them as a 'second wave' since those words imply that it is akin to the first?
- ◆ Since user committees are sometimes (and perhaps usually) largely controlled from above, to what extent does this new trend qualify as an example of 'decentralization'?
- ◆ Is the proliferation of user committees 'damaging' to the first wave and perhaps to much else? We have clear evidence that it has sometimes but not always proved damaging, but more empirical studies of specific cases are needed before we can speak with confidence about how often that has happened.

Our capacity to answer all three of these questions is limited by the shortage of solid empirical evidence on user committees³. This article should therefore be seen as a *preliminary* assessment, and as an invitation to others to undertake research in order to develop more satisfactory answers to these questions.

User committees—which go under various names including 'user groups' and 'stakeholder committees'—differ in several ways from the elected institutions created during the first wave⁴. Many of these differences will emerge in the course of this discussion, but five are worth noting here at the outset.

- ◆ *Origins*: Their creation has for the most part been driven by international donor agencies' sectoral programs, in contrast to the first wave, which (especially in the early years) was mostly undertaken by LDC governments on their own initiative—donors' interest and support emerged later [*Manor, 1999:29-31*]. This has meant that in numerous cases, LDC governments have been less enthusiastic about user

³ Later notes in this article refer to some of the often-valuable work that is currently available, but there is clearly a need for a great deal more. Consider for example, accessible World Bank documents, identified by searching the World Bank website using the terms 'user committees' and 'stakeholder committees'. Roughly half of the documents that emerge deal with such committees located wholly or mainly at *higher* levels in political systems, often in connection with consultations about Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. The rest deal with lower-level committees, the concern of this article (which in some cases are an aspiration, and not yet a reality) in a diversity of countries—India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Malawi, Tuvalu, etc. But most simply state that user committees have been or ought to be established. The repetition of the same phrases about such committees in World Bank documents on diverse topics—they 'meet periodically, elect functionaries, assign tasks...' etc.—indicates the incorporation of these institutions into Bank orthodoxy. But only limited analysis is available at present. Ruth Alsop at the World Bank is doing research on such committees in India, but her final findings are not yet available.

⁴ During the first wave, some exercises in decentralization lacked democratic content. The discussion of the first wave here focuses on those *with* some sort of democratic content—which is to say, the large majority of cases.

committees' initiatives, and more inclined to manipulate them in ways that donors do not intend, than was true during the first wave.

- ◆ *Remits*: The institutions created in the first wave dealt with a *multiplicity* of subjects (education, health, minor roads, sanitation, women and child welfare, etc.), but most (though not all⁵) user committees are *single-purpose* bodies. A committee might deal with primary schools or forest management—to the exclusion of all else.
- ◆ *Funding*: User committees tend to be well-funded by LDC governments, often using donor funds—in contrast to elected multi-purpose councils from the first wave, which are frequently very short of resources.
- ◆ *Democratic character*: As we shall see, user committee members are often selected by less-reliably democratic means than are most elected councils at lower levels, or by undemocratic means.
- ◆ *Lifespan*: In many though probably not most cases (we badly need evidence on this), user committees are created for a limited lifespan—for the specific period in which a time-bound project or initiative is intended to exist. This appears to dampen popular engagement with some committees, since people reckon that they will not survive long enough to justify participation. And since poorer groups tend to develop the skills, confidence and organizational capacities to participate effectively only over time, this makes it easier for prosperous groups to dominate some user committees than is true with the multi-purpose institutions created in the first wave. The latter, unlike many user committees, are usually permanent bodies that have firmer constitutional or legal status than user committees possess. For these reasons, the work of many user committees—and many of the development outcomes that result from them—appear to be less sustainable than in the case of elected, multi-purpose councils.

Donor enthusiasm for user committees arises in part because they enable donors to extract themselves from the often exasperating business of micro-managing development initiatives. But an important part of the explanation lies in a growing (and admirable) donor belief in the importance of giving people at the grass roots greater influence over decisions that affect them. Donors reckon that this will help bring people's knowledge of distinctive local conditions to bear on the implementation of projects. This is expected to make projects more sustainable because people will feel more inclined to maintain and possibly contribute funds, time and labor to projects over which they have had some say⁶. These perceptions are shared by senior figures in some LDC governments, but by no means all (or perhaps even most), and there is far less enthusiasm for these views by government actors at *lower* levels.

⁵ Some—most notably, self-help groups, but also watershed committees—are intended to have an impact in multiple sectors. I am grateful to P. Sundaram for stressing this point.

⁶ It should also be said, however, that some donors *expect* people to make contributions, especially of funds. I am grateful to Andrea Cornwall for stressing this point.

The proliferation of user committees is in some respects welcome⁷. Many LDCs lack strong, extensive institutional frameworks that draw citizens into consultations with governments and with the policy process. When user committees are established in connection with government programs, those that actually give local residents significant influence may provide such frameworks.

It is also important to stress that user committees sometimes play quite constructive roles in political systems that are heavily controlled from the top. In such cases, they may provide people at the grassroots with a very rare opportunity to assert themselves, at least to a limited degree. They may also catalyze the beginnings of autonomous civil society activity at the local level, so that a start can be made in prying open such closed political systems—at least a little. There is evidence of these trends from, for example, Vietnam⁸.

But most political systems in LDCs are not as centralized and closed as Vietnam's. In many other cases, as we shall see, the available (and still limited) evidence indicates that the working of user committees is attended by worrying problems and ambiguities that prevent the good things noted in the two preceding paragraphs from happening.

The discussion that follows begins with an assessment of the methods employed to select members of user committees, followed by a more detailed examination of those methods that at least appear to be democratic. It then considers the powers given to non-officials who become members of user committees. These are sometimes quite limited, and when that is taken together with questions about selection procedures, it raises suspicions that user committees are often manipulated by LDC governments to catalyze but also to co-opt, contain and even control civil society at the local level—a topic discussed below. A dangerous myth—that user committees can somehow insulate development processes from 'politics'—is then examined. The analysis concludes with an assessment of the often troubled relations between single-purpose user committees and the multi-purpose elected bodies created in the first wave of decentralization, and the significant damage clearly being done in some (perhaps many) cases.

Methods of Selecting User Committee Members

There are three main methods by which members of user committees are selected: [A] They may be composed (largely or entirely) of all persons within a particular category—those who use water for irrigation, parents of school children, etc. [B] They may be largely or wholly appointed from above, usually by officials from government line ministries. Or [C] they may be selected by some sort of 'democratic' process. At times, as we shall see, two of these methods—especially 'A' and 'C'—are combined. Let us briefly consider the first two of these methods, before moving on to a more detailed assessment of the use of 'democratic' means.

It is worth re-emphasizing that at present we have only a preliminary and imperfect understanding of how often the three methods (or combinations thereof) are used. Two issues receive special attention in this discussion: (i) the implications of various methods for issues of

⁷ For countervailing evidence to some of the points made in this article, see for example Kumar et al. [2000a,b].

⁸ I am grateful to Elizabeth McColl of UNDP for this information.

equity, and more importantly here, (ii) their implications for bottom-up participation in decisions about development.

User committees whose members are drawn from a particular category

Certain types of user committees are composed of people from a particular category (or persons chosen by the totality of those in such a category). All parents of school children may, as noted, be drawn onto 'education committees' or 'Parent-Teacher Associations'. All of those who collect forest produce or who live in a forested area may be drawn onto a 'Joint Forest Management committee'. And so it goes on.

Despite the apparently neutral nature of this method of selection, some committees composed in this way tend to serve the interests of prosperous groups. This may occur because of the way eligible members of a category are defined. Water users' committees present a clear example. They are often composed not of all people who drink water, but of those who use it for irrigation. Such committees usually consist of the owners of plots of irrigated land, a category that often (depending on local conditions) substantially or entirely excludes poor people.

Other types of committees selected in this way contain both prosperous and poor people—for example, those consisting of all parents of school children within a local arena. The usual practice here is to invite everyone within a category to participate, although poorer members of the category may feel too intimidated or incapable to accept or make much use of invitations, so that prosperous groups acquire disproportionate influence within committees. The voices of poorer members of such committees may carry weight if they greatly outnumber prosperous people on them, but even where this is true, the higher status and wealth and the greater self-confidence, political skills and connections of prosperous people may give them a dominant voice. In such circumstances, the poor gain little from the work of these committees, and may actually be placed at a greater disadvantage than before⁹.

Concerns about user committees' impact on equity are reinforced by one further tendency—which is apparent *no matter which* method is used to select members. Special representation for women and members of other disadvantaged groups appears to be provided far less often on user committees than on the multi-purpose decentralized bodies created in the first wave.¹⁰

It appears that the only situations in which the influence of poor people reliably predominates are those in which committees selected in this way consist largely or entirely of poor people. This can arise in two different ways. First, the category from which committee members come may consist, virtually entirely, of the poor. Some joint forest management committees, for example, are composed of people who go into government-owned wooded areas to gather forest products for fuel or consumption, to feed their animals, or to sell for a small profit. Such people are usually almost all poor. Second, a user committee may be created in a locality where virtually the entire population is poor, so that no matter what sort of committee is established, more or less all of its members will necessarily be impoverished. That is true, for example, of many of the local

⁹ I am grateful to Christopher Colclough for stressing this point.

¹⁰ This comment is based in part on discussions with social scientists and donor agency officials who focus on Africa and Latin America [see also on India, *PRIA, 2001a:1* *PRIA, 2001b:11*].

education committees created by the government in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh (often in ‘tribal’ areas) to oversee new primary schools that have been created in villages that never had access to schools before¹¹.

User committees whose members are appointed from above

In some cases, the members of user committees are largely or entirely nominated from above, usually by low-level civil servants from line ministries—the very people with whom they are to interact once the committees are formed, and over whom the committees are supposed to exercise oversight and influence. (Politicians and civil servants at higher levels also occasionally play a role in the nominating process.) For example, a health committee at or near the local level might consist of a small number of medical personnel working there plus a larger number of residents selected by local health professionals and/or a bureaucrat from the health ministry who works at a somewhat higher level. There is often a danger that low-level bureaucrats and service providers (in this case, health professionals) may collude in the selection of members and the subsequent functioning of such committees to minimize the influence of local residents and thus to maintain practices that lead to poor service delivery¹².

User committees constituted by appointment do not always fail to be relatively autonomous and representative¹³, but there is a serious danger that they will. Bureaucrats often prefer to give most of the seats on such committees to cooperative individuals, which weakens the capacity of committees to assert community interests. Bureaucrats also tend to select prominent local figures (which is usually to say, the non-poor). They may include a few people from poorer groups, but these people rarely have much influence in such exalted company. This device might still benefit poorer groups, if the power of appointment were used to ensure that poor people and their allies dominated or strongly influenced these institutions. But while this practice is not unknown, it appears to be highly unusual.

Appointment from above leaves members beholden to bureaucrats for their places on committees. Even where this device is not intended—as it sometimes is—to co-opt prominent locals (a topic discussed later in this article), committee members who lack an independent mandate find it hard to take issue with higher authority.

User Committees Selected by ‘Democratic’ Methods

We badly need a careful, systematic survey of the methods used to select user-committee members in various LDCs. At present, estimates are merely that—approximate reckonings. But it appears that in most cases, some sort of democratic or semi-democratic process is used, at least in part, to choose members. Consider for example a distinctly non-scientific survey, conducted by this writer, of specialists in decentralization and natural resource management from a

¹¹ These comments are based on this writer’s interviews with knowledgeable people in that state in 2000, 2002 and 2003.

¹² I am grateful to Andrea Cornwall for this point.

¹³ There is for example, evidence from Malawi of appointed committees being ‘relatively autonomous and relatively representative’. I am grateful to Joyce Stanley of the United Nations Capital Development Fund for this information.

diversity of LDCs at a conference in early 2002. The countries were Brazil, Cameroon, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Mongolia, Nepal, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam and Zimbabwe.

Respondents were asked to identify the methods employed to select members of user committees known to them. The three methods noted above were considered: [A] including all members of a particular category (or persons chosen by them); [B] nomination by bureaucrats and/or politicians; and [C] some sort of ‘democratic’ process. When two of these methods were employed simultaneously, the resultant mixed systems were placed *between* categories A, B and C. The total number of cases was 23. Of these, two did not fit within or between any of the three categories—cases in which ‘traditional authorities’ (African chiefs) and/or their designees provided the members of user committees.

The results of this exercise suggested that some sort of election from below is important most of the time. Ten of the remaining 21 cases fit entirely within category C (‘democratic’ processes). Three other cases entailed a mixture of category C and category B (external nomination), and two others entailed a mixture of category C and category A (membership for all within a particular group, or their chosen representatives).

At first glance, this evidence encourages the conclusion that user committees promote bottom-up input into development programs and projects, but discussions in some depth with people who are closely involved in such processes raise doubts about this. Two questions are especially important here. First, how free and fair are such elections? Second, how much power do elected members of user committees have once they are in place? The second question is addressed in the next section of this article, but let us consider the first here.

To examine the character of these ‘elections’, this writer and a colleague conducted discussions with members of user committees, other local residents and observers from civil society organizations who are closely involved in two Indian states—Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka¹⁴. Both states offer unusually promising conditions for genuine bottom-up involvement in decisions. By LDC standards, both have decidedly liberal governments. The chief ministers of both, unlike many of their counterparts in India and elsewhere, are largely uninterested in exercising top-down political control of events at the local level and genuinely enthusiastic about bottom-up participation in development projects. This writer’s interviews with both leaders elicited forceful comments about how such participation yielded better developmental outcomes than top-down approaches, and about how this was more politically advantageous for incumbent governments than attempts to control matters from on high¹⁵. Interviews with leading civil servants in those state governments indicated that the chief ministers’ views were widely shared in the upper reaches of both administrations.

And yet, despite these promising conditions and an extremely strong tradition in both states of free and fair elections to local councils and higher-level bodies, people at the grass roots expressed serious reservations about the character of ‘elections’ to user committees of all kinds.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Anand Inbanathan for input on Karnataka, and to the New Delhi office of SIDA for enabling us to pursue this investigation in 2002. In Madhya Pradesh, the nongovernmental organizations Samarthan and Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) provided crucial assistance.

¹⁵ Interviews with S.M. Krishna, Bangalore, 14 October 2001, and Digvijay Singh, Bhopal, 28 April 2002.

The main complaint was that ‘elections’ were conducted in a rather informal, cursory manner by low-level bureaucrats from the line ministries that deal with the subject to be addressed by user committees—the forest guard in the Joint Forest Management program, the schoolteacher in the primary education sector, etc. Such ‘elections’ did not entail the rigorously secret ballots and independent counting of votes common in other elections in India.

It is very common—although on present evidence, we cannot say precisely *how* common—for members to be named after a consultation of some description with those residents of a locality who happen to attend a public meeting. The names of certain persons are suggested by those attending the meeting and/or by outsiders such as low-level bureaucrats from a concerned ministry who attend and often conduct the meeting. The decisions on whom to include in the user committee then tend to be taken by acclamation or what is sometimes called ‘consensus’.

These processes are not secret. Voters’ preferences are visible to all—including powerful local figures on whom some voters are dependent and/or whom some voters have reason to fear. This can easily inhibit voters from poor and vulnerable groups from expressing their genuine preferences. And people from such groups often tend to avoid attending public meetings in the first place¹⁶. Where secret votes are cast, the counting tends to be done by low-level officials from the line ministries—the very people over whom the user committees are expected to exercise oversight and influence. The worry about all of this is that such processes tend to provide over-representation on user committees for elite and pliable individuals within local arenas.

In many localities, the result was seen to be highly dubious, with user committees being filled by persons whom low-level officials deemed preferable and amenable. Many local residents therefore believed that user committee members owed their places on committees to these officials. Even where this perception was inaccurate (as was apparently the case in some localities), the suspicion lived on and affected the working of the user committees.

Note once again that this pattern emerged in two places with a strong democratic tradition, and with senior politicians and bureaucrats—but *not lower-level* bureaucrats—firmly committed to genuine bottom-up development. In most other LDC settings, where one or both of these conditions are either absent or present in far less strength, we can surely expect similar skepticism. Where such skepticism exists, we can in turn expect user committee members to be less assertive in their dealings with low-level officials than full-blooded bottom-up development processes require.

Those in charge of constituting user committee members could of course save themselves the trouble of conducting separate ‘democratic’ exercises and turn to the existing (and usually, more reliably elected) decentralized council, or a sub-committee of it. But this appears to be very unusual across the LDCs. That naturally inspires suspicions among analysts of decentralization, and among local residents, about whether those constituting user committees are actually interested in seeing that these bodies are genuinely representative. It appears that in many cases they are not.

¹⁶ This has been documented in a study of this process in another Indian state, Uttaranchal [Mohanty, *n.d.*:9].

This is a concern that donors should take more seriously than at present. It is seldom the donors who decide to employ these inadequate methods to select members. That decision is usually taken by higher-level politicians who may be interested in packing user committees with loyalists, and/or by higher-level bureaucrats who prefer to see the committees peopled by tractable local notables. Donors are too often content with assurances from those in LDC governments that the processes are ‘participatory’ and ‘transparent’. In reality, the participation is often seriously constrained, and the main thing that is transparent is the vote of a poor person—which goes a long way toward negating his or her freedom of choice.

It may be unrealistic to expect user committee members to be elected through processes that are as elaborate as those used to choose members of local councils, with (often) careful, elaborate and expensive provisions to ensure the secrecy of ballots and the impartiality of vote-counting. But there is an easy way to mitigate the damage to participatory development that follows from this. User committees could be placed under the influence or control of local councils that have been elected by more reliable methods (a topic discussed in detail in the final section below). That would ensure that properly elected representatives have significant leverage over decisions by user committees. It would erode the heavy influence or dominance that line ministry officials often retain (see the next section of this article).

But LDC governments, and indeed donors, are reluctant to go down this road. In a few places, local councils enjoy some influence over user committees and the low-level line ministry officials with whom they work. Occasionally, subject-specific sub-committees of local councils (dealing with education, health, forestry, sanitation, etc.) have simply become the user committee for that subject. This is particularly useful when some seats on the local council have been reserved for members of socially excluded groups—women and perhaps members of other disadvantaged groups. But in most cases, such arrangements have not been adopted (and such reservations on user committees are, as noted above, unusual). Line ministry officials, who usually operate separately from officials overseeing local government systems and usually are relatively or wholly free of influence by local councils, prefer user committees that stand at one level removed from elected, multi-purpose local councils.

This creates a discontinuity between general-purpose local councils and single-purpose user committees. And despite some overlap in membership between the two bodies in many cases, this gives rise to the serious problems identified in the last section of this article.

The Powers of Non-Official Members of User Committee

Let us now turn to the question of how much influence non-officials who become members of user committees can exercise once they are selected. We should first note that the powers supposedly bestowed on such committees vary from case to case. Some of them are not granted any significant powers even in theory. Others are assigned the task of selecting beneficiaries of programs of projects—a rather limited role. In other cases, however, user committees are explicitly given powers to influence the implementation of policies or (most generously of all) both design and implementation. But even where that occurs, the formal ‘remit of these committees generally remains confined to ensuring the efficiency of delivery rather than to give citizens more of a voice in determining the kinds of services they want or need’ [*Cornwall and*

Gaventa, 2001:10]. At present, we have little evidence on the number of committees that fall into these various categories (research is urgently needed here).

There is, however, a good deal of scattered evidence to indicate that powers granted in theory often fail to materialize in practice. We saw above that when elections are heavily managed by line ministry bureaucrats, in full view of large numbers of local residents, it encourages the (often accurate) impression that user committee members owe their posts to the people whom they are meant to oversee and influence. This makes it very difficult for these members to play a critical, questioning, assertive role in user committees.

In some cases (it is impossible to say how many on present, fragmentary evidence) bureaucrats who are pressed hard by governments to form large numbers of user committees ‘form’ some of them on paper but not in reality. This has occurred in Andhra Pradesh state in India [*also see Baviskar, this volume*].¹⁷

When user committees are real, as is usually the case, government officials often extend only limited powers to their members. Evidence from Africa and India indicates that user committees often lack the power to set or amend agendas for meetings. They are also frequently denied much in the way of discretionary power. It appears to be quite unusual for them to have any influence over the *design* of programs and even small projects, and many also lack the power to alter the *implementation* of projects so that they conform to distinctive local conditions and thus yield better developmental outcomes.¹⁸ Indeed, sometimes user committees are not even briefed on what their powers and functions supposedly are [*Poffenberger and McGean, 1996*]. The frustration that all of this inspires among committee members sometimes causes attendance at meetings to decline [see for example, *Veerashankarappa, 2000*].

The result of all of this is often ‘simply cosmetic, and tokenistic’: ‘By denying people the agency to make choices outside the frame of reference afforded by their role in these programmes and by overlooking the complexity of relations of power between service providers and community members... they operate with a very limited conception of “participation”’ [*Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001:11-12*].

We need to consider one other important factor in determining the varied degree to which governments in general and the low-level government employees with whom user committees must deal tend to pursue top-down control: the specific sector or sub-field with which the committee deals. There are at least three strands to this.

The first is less important than the latter two, but it still makes some impact. The traditional roles played by low-level government employees vary from sector to sector. For example, schoolteachers and health professionals have long been trained to act as sympathetic servants of citizens. This does not prevent many of them in LDCs from shirking their duties, but it is part of their self-image nonetheless. By contrast, low-level employees of forest services have

¹⁷ I am grateful to Benjamin Powis for this information.

¹⁸ These comments are based on interviews with decentralization specialists from five African countries, and on research in five Indian states by Anand Inbanathan, Benjamin Powis and this writer, all in 2001-03 [see also *Farrington, Turton and James, 1999; Poffenberger and McGean, 1996; Saxena, 2000*].

traditionally been cast in a role akin to policemen or gamekeepers. Their relationship with local residents has been adversarial: they have been given the task of preventing citizens from intruding upon forests and making off with forest products to use as fuel, fodder, etc.. In recent times, all of these varied types of government employees have been pressed to develop partnerships with local residents that at least theoretically enable the latter to participate in decision-making—often through user committees. It is far easier for teachers and health professionals to make this transition than for people like forest guards, since the traditional relationships of the former with citizens are much less adversarial than those of the latter¹⁹.

Second and more importantly, governments and their employees tend to be more inclined to sustain top-down approaches when the sectors in which they work yield significant financial resources to governments, government actors, and/or powerful private interests. Here again, the forest sector is a prime example. Governments often gain substantial revenues from taxation on logging, or from the sale of forest products, including timber. And it is well known that private interests frequently profit massively from logging—often pursued illegally in concert with corrupt governments or their employees. In such circumstances, governments and individuals are exceedingly reluctant to see forest user committees curtail their traditional incomes, and top-down approaches tend to survive as a result. In the primary education sector, by contrast, governments and their employees derive little or no financial benefit, so when top-down approaches persist in that sector, as they sometimes do, considerations of revenue and profit seldom loom large.

Third, top-down approaches tend to survive more often in technologically and technocratically complex sectors than in sectors that are simpler to manage. This point, and, to a degree, the second point noted above, is illustrated by a comparison of various sub-fields of the natural resource management sector²⁰. The participants at the 2002 Bellagio Conference on Decentralization and the Environment, most of whom are environmental specialists, generated the following outline of various sub-fields and the practices that often develop within them²¹.

¹⁹ Despite this, specialists in the study of primary education tend to regard parent-teacher associations in LDCs as largely ‘regressive’—that is, they tend to benefit prosperous groups more than the poor. This occurs because prosperous parents often make greater voluntary contributions to local schools, which gives them greater leverage than poorer parents, because where fees are charged some poorer parents cannot afford to send children to school, and because prosperous parents have the confidence, skills and connections to assert themselves more effectively. I am grateful to Christopher Colclough for stressing this point.

²⁰ I am grateful to Robin Mearns for initially stressing this point.

²¹ I owe this to the team of specialists who gathered at Bellagio, Italy in January 2002 to discuss decentralization and natural resource management.

Sub-Field	Likely degree of top-down intervention
Watershed management (including soil erosion control)	High, because of technological complexity.
Irrigation systems, large	Usually high, because of a perceived need for strong central control or at least coordination.
Irrigation systems, small, medium to low	More bottom-up collaboration possible.
Wildlife	Medium, because governments nearly always organize or run a protection agency.
Forest management	Variations, but usually high when forest products yield (a) major profits for private interests and/or government actors, and/or (b) major government revenues.
Grasslands	Low (with some variations), owing to the comparative simplicity of the management of the sub-field.

One last mitigating comment is in order here. Even when non-official members of user committees (or the committees themselves) have little power, they can still perform one useful function. Committee members who develop an understanding of government programs are usually able to explain them more effectively to ordinary people (their neighbors) in local arenas than can bureaucrats. This sometimes yields positive results. Committee members can, for example, explain how pre- and post-natal care will benefit mothers and children in language that ordinary folk can grasp—so that the uptake on such programs increases. This helps both the poor and the non-poor, but it fails to compensate fully for the problems identified above.

User Committees as a Means to Catalyze but also to *Co-opt* Civil Society

User committees, like other forms of decentralization, catalyze civil society at the grass roots. When fresh powers and funds are injected into lower-level arenas, as is usually the case with user committees, residents within those arenas discern this and respond by becoming more active in order to influence the use of those powers and resources. Members of existing voluntary associations become more active, those associations acquire new members, and new associations emerge.

Some LDC leaders and many donors recognize this and see it as a welcome by-product of the change in policy because they see a more vibrant civil society as desirable in itself and as a means to deepen democracy and generate better developmental outcomes. But even when high-level leaders in LDCs take this view, their enthusiasm tends not be shared by officials in line ministries, especially at *lower* levels in bureaucratic hierarchies. Low-level bureaucrats see a more assertive civil society as a threat to their autonomy. They therefore often seek to curtail the influence of voluntary associations and user committees by employing methods that co-opt these committees so that their control of development processes survives.

In many cases, senior leaders (politicians and civil servants) in LDCs share this desire with bureaucrats at lower levels. This is especially true (as noted above) when the activities with which user committees deal yield profits to private and/or government actors, when they yield significant revenues to governments, or when the subjects are technocratically complex—but not only then. Such senior figures know that they must create user committees in order to obtain donor funds. But they also know that there are ways to manipulate these processes so that the cooptation, containment and even substantial control of committees and of civil society organizations result. On the present limited evidence, they appear quite capable of succeeding in their efforts.

This poses a serious danger to the legitimacy and popularity of governments in LDCs. When decentralization stimulates increased efforts at participation by citizens (because it appears to offer fresh opportunities to influence matters that affect their well-being), and they then discover that those opportunities are largely illusory, they react with renewed exasperation and cynicism about government [see for example, the case of Ghana in *Crook and Manor, 1999: ch. 5*]. Such cynicism can deepen when user committees are required to levy user fees for public services. Senior leaders (and, more often, low-level bureaucrats) pursue this approach at their peril.

The Myth that User Committees Can Insulate Development from Politics

When user committees are discussed, we sometimes hear it said that it is important to ensure that they are insulated from ‘politics’. This view is often expressed by senior and junior civil servants in LDCs (this writer has encountered it in Zambia, South Africa, Bangladesh and numerous Indian states), and less often by politicians. It is also found within some international development agencies, especially among economists. And it is not unknown in academic circles (where economists again stand out) and in some international nongovernmental associations (where non-economists appear to provide the main body of believers).

This notion is a myth—and a dangerous myth at that. ‘Politics’, that is, the interplay of interests and forces in pursuit of power, resources, status, etc., is pervasive. A user committee may be thoroughly sealed off from interest groups in a society, and from other arenas and institutions in a political system. But the pursuit of power and resources will still occur among those with some leverage within it, and among individuals and groups outside it who seek some influence over it. If bureaucrats arrange things so that they exercise all or most of the leverage within a user committee, they are not excluding ‘politics’ from it. Rather, they are ensuring that they dominate the ‘politics’ within it.

The choice facing governments and societies is not between including or excluding ‘politics’ from certain arenas, but between different types of ‘politics’ that inevitably pervade all arenas. It entails in part a choice between top-down, commandist ‘politics’ and bottom-up, participatory ‘politics’—a central issue in the case of user committees and of decentralized systems more generally.

When middle- and low-level bureaucrats and/or politicians sustain predominantly top-down approaches, they sometimes do so in collaboration with prosperous groups at the local level for

mutual gain. When that is true, they do not insulate the administration from grassroots ‘politics’; rather, they intrude into local ‘politics’ and reinforce the influence of powerful interests there, in order to benefit themselves.

And yet many people continue to cling to the myth. Some do so out of naiveté, while others do so out of cynicism. These two things are in many ways opposites, but they produce very similar results.

The evidence currently available suggests that cynicism is a good deal more common than naiveté. When cynical officials speak of insulating user committees from ‘politics’, they are dignifying efforts to sustain or extend commandism. What they really mean is that they are insulating them from participation from below, or indeed from democracy. That was, for example, clearly the view of the head of an important Zambian line ministry, speaking in 2001 to a conclave of his colleagues from other ministries (attended by this writer). He said that he favored nominating user committee members from above because this would ensure that they consisted of sophisticated and cooperative people who would not create trouble. He characterized this as insulating the committees from the ‘politics’ of Zambia’s largely powerless elected local councils. His colleagues voiced their agreement, even though the purpose of the conference was to strengthen local democracy²². Very similar views were expressed on this subject in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh by the civil servant who oversees that state’s system of elected local councils.²³ These are by no means isolated cases.

Relations between User Committees and Elected Decentralized Councils

The proliferation of user committees, most of which are single-purpose bodies, has (it appears) often had a damaging impact on elected multi-purpose bodies created in the first wave of decentralization. This need not have happened and, as we shall see presently, the trend might still be reversed. But the ways in which many LDC governments have managed user committees—at times with donor encouragement—have caused it to happen. Where that is true, user committees may have had some beneficial effects, but their overall impact on democratic decentralization has been negative.

The damage takes several forms. User committees often *produce confusion and dislocation*. This occurs in part simply because in a particular place, a user committee operates at a different *level* from an elected local council—it might cover a cluster of villages while a local council exists for each individual village, or vice-versa. There is also often confusion about overlapping *jurisdictions* of the two types of bodies if, as often happens, both are given responsibility for a particular subject like sanitation, primary education, forests, etc.

Much more damage is done when user committees *usurp roles and functions* that had previously been *assigned to elected multi-purpose councils*. On occasion (it is not clear how often), they also *deprive them of revenues*, even though user committees are usually well-funded while local councils are strapped for resources.

²² This occurred just outside Lusaka on 7 March 2001.

²³ These remarks were made in an interview with Benjamin Powis in Hyderabad in early 2002.

Readers might wonder why LDC governments that have created local councils should disempower them in this way. There are two main answers. First, in virtually every country, some politicians at higher levels—typically legislators—resent the loss of powers and resources to decentralized bodies and urge national leaders to claw them back. They sometimes get results. Second, lower-level bureaucrats seize the opportunity provided by the creation of user committees to erode the power of elected members of multi-purpose councils whom they regard as unlettered rustics with too much influence—whether or not higher-level leaders wish this to occur.

Evidence on usurpation emerges mainly from this writer's field research in South Asia and Southern and Central Africa, and from numerous interviews with social scientists and development agency officials who have knowledge of other cases. But see also the studies by one of the few organizations to examine relations between user committees and multi-purpose councils—the Indian NGO Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). It found that water user groups in the huge state of Uttar Pradesh had usurped local councils' role as overseers of water projects [PRIA, 2001b:7]²⁴. In Gujarat state, Joint Forest Management user committees had deprived village councils of their legally mandated supervision of forest products—and of the not insubstantial income from their sale [PRIA, 2001b:7]—something that appears to have happened in a great many Indian states. And in the state of Haryana, bodies very like user committees that dealt with local construction projects have taken over functions that (again by law) had been given to multi-purpose local councils [PRIA, 2001a:9,13]. PRIA's [2001a] research, together with interviews in other Indian states by this writer, indicate that such displacement of multi-purpose decentralized councils has occurred in several other sectors.

We have noted that user committees usually have more, often far more, money than do multi-purpose councils [see for example, PRIA, 2001b, 7,12-3; Mohanty, n.d.:13]. In some (and, apparently, many) cases, this *produces a destructive paradox*. Local councils are expected to perform tasks for which they lack adequate funds—so that they are crippled by *unfunded* or *badly underfunded* mandates. And yet in the same localities, user committees have such an overabundance of funds that they cannot manage them effectively—they face *excessively funded* mandates. This situation of feast and famine, side by side in the same place, creates huge problems not only for relations between the two types of bodies, but also for constructive development outcomes.

All of these problems tend to create destructive conflicts between the two types of bodies even where senior politicians do not set user committees against multi-purpose councils, as they sometimes do. To say this is *not* to argue that increased conflict within local arenas is always a bad thing. Certain kinds of conflict are essential if pre-existing hierarchies, inequalities and patterns of social exclusion are to be challenged—as they should be. But the kinds of conflicts that often arise between user committees and elected multi-purpose bodies tend strongly *not* to lend themselves to such challenges. Indeed, they undermine them, often by reinforcing the exclusion especially of women, but also other disadvantaged groups—a point on which there is abundant evidence [Agarwal, 1998; Cleaver, 1997; Mehra, and Esim, 1997; Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 1997; Mehta, 1998; Mosse, 1997; Poffenberger and McGean 1998; Vettivel, 1992; World Bank, 1998:ch.4].

²⁴ The authors were drawing upon research by a partner NGO, SKK in Lucknow.

This raises questions about an important and for the most part valid argument long advanced by Norman Uphoff. He has repeatedly stressed the utility of providing local residents (not least the poor) with multiple channels through which to engage with governments. User committees, which are placed alongside elected, multi-purpose local bodies and pre-existing bureaucratic structures, clearly constitute new channels for people at the grass roots. This may at times produce benefits for local residents, but the dislocation and conflicts noted above often appear to outweigh any such benefits.

Indeed, in addition to all of the problems identified just above, the creation of user committee often *fragments popular participation, making it less coherent and effective* [for example, this point is suggested by *Mohanty n.d.:15*]. Part of the problem is that people are often drawn into user committees that lack real power, and their time and energy is sapped in vain attempts to make an impact, often in single sectors, so that their capacity to engage in other, more promising areas of governance is undermined. The fragmentation of popular participation sometimes (and perhaps often) occurs in ways that undermine the influence of poorer, low-status groups [*see for example, Jairath, 2001:15*]. That is surely not what donors intended when they pressed for user committees.

These problems could have been greatly eased if the two waves of decentralization had been *integrated*. User committees could have been linked to and placed under the control or strong influence of multi-purpose elected councils, or made organic parts of those councils²⁵. Indeed, this remains an option. Donors are quite capable of seeing the utility of integration. For example, a World Bank report stressed precisely this, and noted correctly that subject-specific subcommittees of multi-purpose local councils (a common feature) already amount to user committees [*World Bank, 1999*]. Unfortunately, many (and probably most) donor loans—especially but not only for sectoral programs—make it more, not less difficult for integration to take place²⁶.

To recommend integration is not to claim that members and leaders of elected multi-purpose councils always behave in exemplary ways. They plainly do not. But if they err, their constituents have the option of registering their displeasure at (and indeed before) the next election. And the frequency with which incumbents have been voted out in a great many LDCs indicates that this check on misbehavior has substance²⁷.

The integration of user committees and elected multi-purpose councils is patently feasible. We have clear evidence of this from the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The government there has

²⁵ We have evidence of the success of this sort of arrangement from some African countries. In these cases a user committee has handled tasks ‘delegated to it by the local council’—and operated as an entity ‘dominated by community interests, to plan, supervise the implementation of and eventually run, the community assets being created’. Clear benefits followed. I am grateful to Ronald McGill of the United Nations Capital Development Fund for this information.

²⁶ I am grateful to P. Sundaram for stressing this point.

²⁷ Communications from two different field representatives of the United Nations Capital Development Fund illustrate this point. Joyce Stanley rightly expressed concern about members and leaders of elected local councils behaving constructively. But Ronald McGill noted that when user committees were made subordinate to local councils, the arrangement worked very well.

turned user committees that deal with single sectors into single-subject sub-committees of village governments (which in that state means village councils plus mass meetings that deliberate on decisions). In so doing, it has simplified matters and streamlined the local decision-making process. Instead of having two different local institutions that are likely to come into conflict because they duplicate labor (for example, a parent-teacher user committee with plenty of funds alongside a penniless education sub-committee of the village council making decisions with no practical effect), the two are fused. There is thus no confusion about what body is responsible for decisions in any given sector, and no risk that conflict between the two bodies will occur, or that the weaker of the two will lose legitimacy and credibility.

It should be stressed that one device sometimes used under the name of integration does more harm than good. In some places, Uganda for example, separate parallel bodies for women (and occasionally, young people) are created alongside multi-purpose councils—and function very like user committees for these groups. The clear danger here is that such a policy ‘hives off women’s concerns into a political cul-de-sac’ [Brock, *et al*, 2002:43]. The reservation of a percentage of seats on multi-purpose councils for women does not always guarantee that they will have significant influence. They are often willfully excluded from influence (and occasionally even from the councils²⁸) by males. But there is also evidence from several countries—not least India—that over time, women members develop the confidence and skills needed to assert themselves at least somewhat effectively [Crook and Manor, 1999:40-42, 78].

If such approaches are avoided, the integration of user committees and elected, multi-purpose councils would reduce or eradicate most of the problems listed above and several difficulties that have recently been caused concern at the World Bank²⁹. Let us consider these in a little detail.

- ◆ Integrating user committees with multi-purpose councils would ease worries about dubious ‘elections’ to user committees, since council elections are usually conducted in more reliable ways. They are by no means perfect, but they are usually far more satisfactory than the methods employed with user committees. More reliable elections enhance the likelihood of a transition to a system in which accountability upward (to bureaucrats) is matched by accountability downward (to voters). User committees are often manipulated and dominated by bureaucrats, and when that happens, it reinforces the predominance of upward accountability.
- ◆ Integration would ease one of the most crippling problems faced by multi-purpose councils in most countries—their inadequate funds—since user committees tend to be generously resourced.
- ◆ It would help overcome the isolation of local communities both from each other and from higher levels in the political system. User committees on their own usually do little to tackle this problem, because they are themselves cut off from similar bodies elsewhere. Integrating them with multi-purpose councils could help in two ways. (i) Local councils are usually linked into national systems of such councils (often including councils at higher levels), systems through which information about

²⁸ Joyce Stanley informs me that this has occurred, for example, in parts of Uganda.

²⁹ I draw here on recent work by Hans Binswanger and Swaminathan Aiyar.

problems and successes in specific local arenas often flows readily to other localities and upward. (Most user committees have to rely on low-level bureaucrats to transmit such information, and such bureaucrats are frequently hostile and manipulative and do not cooperate.) (ii) Local council leaders often belong to relatively independent national or regional associations of council chairpersons, which enhance their confidence, collective influence and the flow of information among them. (There are seldom counterpart associations for user group leaders.)

- ◆ Within a single local arena, user committees also tend to be somewhat cut off from one another. This tends to fragment both the local community and various local development initiatives. If they were integrated with multi-purpose local councils, their isolated pursuit of development projects would be more effectively coordinated by leaders of those councils—indeed, coordination is one area where such councils excel. Even when multi-purpose councils function imperfectly, they tend to draw government employees from several different line ministries together to discuss projects in a single sector—so that the outcomes from such projects improve. (A plan for a fish pond profits from consultations with not only the fisheries specialist, but also the irrigation specialist, the sanitation specialist and the government engineer [See *Crook and Manor, 1999:ch. 3*], for evidence from Bangladesh). Single-sector user committees often impede such coordination.
- ◆ Integration can also ease the problem of accountability to various donor agencies being Balkanized. This tends to occur when each donor supports a program in a different sector and insists on the creation of a separate user committee to oversee its program in each locality. Here again, the tendency for multi-purpose councils to achieve greater inter-sectoral coordination produces benefits.
- ◆ Integration can also reduce the danger that narrow interests in a locality may keep important information to themselves, decide on projects that benefit them more than the whole community, and exclude some sections of the community from the implementation and monitoring of projects. When they operate in isolation, some user committees make these problems worse because they represent a limited sub-set of the whole community.
- ◆ Integrating user committees with multi-purpose councils can also ease the difficulties that low-level bureaucrats and community representatives have in working together. Bureaucrats and members of multi-purpose councils that have existed for several years have often begun—uneasily but substantially—to establish working relationships in which each side accommodates a little.

Despite all of this, few LDC governments are inclined to adopt a policy of integration. Their reluctance owes something to donors' naïve enthusiasm for a discrete set of user committees for each developmental sector. But it also suggests that LDC governments are either unaware of the damage that is being done to democratic decentralization, or content (and in some cases eager) to see it occur.

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