Is Decentralization a Reliable Means of Increasing Equity?

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Decentralization is widely expected to empower local people. Empowerment implies increased equity, at least in terms of decision-making authority. Is it reasonable to expect increased equity from decentralization? The devolution of authority inherently involves a rebalancing of power relations between the center/national and the periphery/local, but the effects on equity between and within localities are not obvious. As critics of community-based natural resource management point out, decentralization alone cannot overcome social structural inequities within local communities. Yet some forms of decentralization have improved the situation of marginalized groups such as women and the poor. This paper evaluates the effects of decentralization of natural resource management for four forms of equity: equity between localities; equity in the division of rights and responsibilities between community and national decision-makers; political equity within communities; and economic equity within communities. The review focuses on natural resource management for forests and wildlife, especially in Africa and South Asia.

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Several other goals of decentralization depend upon meaningful empowerment. Improved responsiveness, for example, depends upon the accountability of decision-makers to local residents (Ribot 1999); empowerment enables people to utilize their formal rights to hold officials accountable. Improvements in the quality of policies depend upon access to and incorporation of local knowledge of existing conditions and practices (Kellert et al. 2000; Montgomery 1988). Confidence in the equity of decision-making processes encourages the bearers of local knowledge to confide in decision makers. The prospects for poverty alleviation also hinge on empowerment. Improvements in welfare can occur even if elites control the organizations and committees associated with decentralization but, in the absence of empowerment, the poor are likely to receive a very small share of any new resources (Platteau 2004, 232). Can decentralization enhance equity and thereby contribute to empowerment? Does decentralization increase equity and empowerment in practice? Or, must empowerment precede decentralization to achieve improvements in equity?

Although the relationship between empowerment, equity, and decentralization has important implications across policy sectors, the nature of the policy area makes a difference. For example, even after decentralization, responsibility for service delivery remains in the hands of a limited set of agencies.[1] In such cases, decisions about equity in provision depend upon the influence of existing power structures on decision-making within local government bodies. Management of many natural resources is inherently decentralized. Barring resort to high levels of coercion, government agencies (or private firms) cannot effectively exclude people from accessing and using common-pool natural resources such as forests, fisheries, or wilderness products (e.g., game, wild foods). Policies to decentralize management of natural resources are often motivated by a desire to regulate a system of management that already is decentralized, *de facto* if not *de jure* (Li 2002, 266 – 267). In such cases, the viability of decentralization depends not only on

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[1] Or, in the case of privatization, a limited number of firms provides the service.

formal empowerment in the sense of representation within decision-making structures but also on empowerment within the broader social structure. In the absence of changes in the underlying social structure, decentralization cannot fully close the gap between rules in form (i.e., the formal, legal system) and rules in use (i.e., the effective system of rules and practices). I focus on decentralization of natural resource management precisely because social structure is expected to be particularly important for success.

Decentralization refers to a shift in policy-making from the center to the local. Such shifts take a variety of forms. Deconcentration occurs when the execution of policies moves from administrative headquarters to field offices in the districts. If responsibilities for implementation of centrally defined policies move from the field offices to local agencies or representative bodies, delegation is under way. Local actors must gain decision-making authority for devolution to occur. When governments allow devolution, it is often limited in ways that undercut local authority. Retention of the authority to raise revenues and determine the distribution of expenditures across sectors is a common practice that effectively restricts local autonomy in setting priorities. Shifts from the center to the local in natural resource management occur within the context of projects described variously as community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), joint forest management (JFM), co-management, participatory development, or community-driven development.[2] The variety of terms used to describe the shift from centralized, exclusionary management to more local involvement in management undoubtedly contributes to the limited representation of natural resource management in keyword searches for sources on decentralization and equity.

An immense literature debates the goals and implications of this shift, often without placing it in the context of the broader move toward decentralization. Many authors mention equity; relatively few focus on it. A keyword search of Academic Search Premier for peer-reviewed articles concerning "decentralization and equity" yielded a mere 22 sources. A keyword search for "decentralization or devolution and equity or equality" within the Cambridge Scientific Abstracts' Sociological Index of English language journal articles found 59 sources. Many of these articles concern decentralization of service provision, especially health care; relatively few involved

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[2] This is not an exhaustive list.

natural resource management. Because authors frame their analyses in so many different ways, relationships between decentralization, empowerment, and equity can be difficult to discern.

Four issues related to equity emerge from the literature on decentralization of natural resource management. How equitable is the location of programs for decentralized natural resource management? Is the division of rights and responsibilities among parties to decentralized natural resource management (i.e., the state, local committees or NGOs, and local resource users) equitable? To what extent is equity achieved in the voice or influence granted to various groups in the local bodies responsible for managing natural resources? And how equitably are resources and other benefits distributed within the community? A discussion of two more general and fundamental issues frames the discussion of equity in decentralized natural resource management. I begin with a question: what do we mean by equity? In particular, how does equity relate to equality? I conclude by considering the feasibility of achieving equity in the absence of empowerment.

Equity and Equality

One of the database searches mentioned above treated equity as if it were equivalent to equality. The two terms are sometimes used interchangeably although, in fact, they mean quite distinctive things. Equity refers to whether something is fair, just, or impartial. Equality means sameness. Equity might entail equality, but not necessarily.

Imagine a village with a community woodlot that must develop a rule for the distribution of firewood. The principle of equality suggests that each individual in the community should receive the same quantity of firewood. Such a rule might be deemed equitable as well. Then again, many communities think of households, not individuals, as the relevant units for community membership. Such communities might see the distribution of an equal amount of firewood to each *household* as more equitable. Others would object to both rules for distribution. After all, neither takes into account the effort exerted. Why should those who do not contribute to establishing, maintaining, or protecting the woodlot benefit from it? Of course, only those who have the means can contribute. Shares based on contributions reflect and reinforce an underlying distribution of wealth that is often unequal and, in the eyes of many, inequitable. Several villages in

central India restrict quantities of forest products harvested based on actual requirements
(Ghate 2004). Despite its local acceptance, Ghate considers the rule to be inequitable; it
does not compensate poorer households for the loss of income from the sale of forest
products and it allocates larger absolute shares to wealthier households that "require"
more resources to support larger families (2004). The rule treats all households the same,
whereas Ghate would direct a disproportionate share of benefits to poorer households
(2004, 3).

These examples highlight both the distinction between equity and equality and the
contextual nature of equity. Evaluations of what is equitable cannot be divorced from the
specific cultural contexts in which they are made. Even within a single culture, different
principles of equity apply in different circumstances. What is deemed fair in dealings
with strangers may be shameful in dealings with kin and neighbors. The existence of
multiple standards for equity complicates cross-site - much less cross-national -
comparisons.

Locally defined standards of equity are not merely a matter of local culture. Those
with political and economic power also have cultural influence. The elite cannot impose
self-serving norms, but they influence interpretations of culture.[3] Those concerned with
equity must determine when it is reasonable to accept established notions of equity and
when other notions of equity should override local standards. Influential actors in
developing countries often deride appeals to universal standards as imperialistic
impositions of western standards. Yet, the alternative means accepting extreme social,
political, and economic inequality simply because those inequalities have been accepted –
or at least have not been successfully challenged – in the past. There is little way to know
whether those at the bottom of the hierarchy accept norms promoted by those at that top,
given the strong incentives in such systems to at least appear to respect those at the top
(Scott 1990).

The entanglement of cultural definition with power structures throws into
question the feasibility of separating equity from empowerment, even on a conceptual
level. The review of empirical studies in the next section casts further doubt on the

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[3] On the malleability of culture, see Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Comaroff and Roberts (1981).

possibility of improving equity through decentralization unless the process is accompanied by empowerment.

Equity in Decentralized Natural Resource Management

Decentralization of natural resource management takes two general forms. In community-based natural resource management, local resource users receive greater rights and responsibilities for managing natural resources. An NGO or local committee represents community interests in interactions with government officials and oversees execution of the community's management responsibilities. Less frequently, responsibility for natural resource management is devolved to a local government body, typically as part of a more general program for decentralization. Local governments in developing countries, confronted by numerous other obligations and limited resources, often give low priority to natural resource management (Andersson 2003; Andersson et al. 2004; Gibson and Lehoucq 2003; Larson 2002, 18). To simplify presentation, I use the term "decentralized natural resource management" to refer to both varieties unless otherwise specified. Both forms occur around the world; decentralization to local governments seems most common in Latin America (Larson 2002, 17).

Decentralization of natural resource management affects the equity of four types of relationships:

1) Between communities: the choice of resources and locations for decentralization;

2) Between state and non-state actors: the distribution of rights and responsibilities between the state, any mediators such as NGOs or donors, community bodies such as committees or local governments, and local residents;

3) Between politically relevant groups within the community: the voice or influence of distinctive groups within the community; and

4) Between economic groups within the community: the distribution of resources and other benefits associated with decentralized natural resource management.

I discuss each in turn.

Locational Equity: Between Communities

Locational equity plays out differently for the two forms of decentralized natural resource management. Generalized programs of decentralization apply simultaneously to all locations (e.g., municipalities, districts, provinces), yet locations differ in their ability

to make use of the new opportunities. If natural resource management is not the top priority for local politicians or the people they represent, decentralization can result in little to no management (Andersson 2003; Larson 2002). Community-based programs for natural resource management are typically introduced on a selective basis. Even if the program applies to all locations in principle, the process of setting up committees and negotiating memoranda of understanding (MOUs) takes time. These practical demands result inevitably in asynchronous implementation. In other cases, community-based natural resource management occurs in the context of site-specific donor programs or pilot programs that are never expanded. In all of these situations, communities gain differential influence over the management of local natural resources.

Proponents of decentralized natural resource management tend to assume that rural residents depend on natural resources for their livelihoods and are content with sustainable management of those resources for non-commercial use (Li 2002, 267). In fact, rural circumstances vary and conservation sometimes imposes high opportunity costs (Baland and Platteau 2000, 19-23). Even where rural residents rely on natural resources, they often aspire to different lifestyles and practice unsustainable natural resource uses in an effort to change their prospects or the prospects of their children (Li 2002, 268 - 69). From the perspective of rural residents, conservation or sustainable management of natural resources may mean forfeiting opportunities for economic development and even absorbing losses (e.g., wildlife damage, disease) (Alexander and McGregor 2000; Emerton 2001, 209).

Once the costs of conservation and sustainable management are taken into account, the expectation that decentralization inevitably improves natural resource management seems terribly naïve. Indeed, the devolution of natural resource management to local governments has not resulted in unambiguous improvements. In many Latin American countries and some countries in Africa and Asia, municipalities or local governments have gained substantial authority over forest management. In Bolivia, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, most municipalities give a low priority to forestry management (Andersson et al. 2004; Andersson 2003; Larson 2002). In Nicaragua, local residents expect their governments to provide services, including water and electricity (Larson 2002, 22). Municipal governments in Bolivia also give higher priority to the

provision of services such as education, health services, and drinking water (Andersson 2003, 21). The implications of low prioritization depend upon the demand for natural resources and the effects of externalities from other activities. In Nicaragua, some local politicians intervened more actively in forestry management to increase in revenues, resolve conflicts, or respond to pressure from NGOs or social groups (Larson 2002, 23 – 24). Likewise, Andersson et al. found that municipalities in Guatemala gave higher priority to forestry than Bolivian municipalities, and that the Guatemalan municipalities invested more in forestry management. Guatemalan politicians had greater authority over forestry resources and were able to use forestry management to deliver benefits to constituents When motivated to actively manage forest resources, financial resources, legal jurisdiction, and long-term commitment influenced whether local politicians had the capacity to do much (Larson 2002, 28).

Both the motivation and capacity to manage forest and other natural resources can be expected to vary spatially. The importance of active forest management need not correspond with motivation and capacity, nor is a positive correlation between motivation and capacity particularly likely. Urban areas generally have greater financial resources than rural areas where livelihoods depend more directly on natural resources. Resource scarcity intensifies distributional conflicts and undermines the capacity to take actions to resolve conflicts. The same legal right to decentralized management does not translate into the same capacity for local or regional governments to mange their natural resources. Is it really equitable to ignore differences in the importance of natural resources or the capacity to manage them locally?

Programs for community-based natural resource management are typically implemented in a limited number of locations. In some cases, the underlying policies restrict application to resources in certain conditions, often those that highly degraded. In other cases, policies permit widespread application. Since officials lack the capacity to set up these arrangements everywhere simultaneously, decisions must be made about sequencing. Three conditions recur as the primary factors influencing decisions about where to introduce community-based natural resource management: the short-term financial value of the resource base, the perceived importance of particular ecosystems, and the force of grassroots demand for local autonomy.

Decentralization in forestry often occurs in degraded areas with low commercial value. Forest officials seek the participation of local residents in restoring these areas, often expecting locals to forsake immediate consumption of forest products to allow regeneration. In Nepal, for instance, the government introduced community forestry in the heavily degraded hills in the 1970s, but maintained centralized management over profitable areas. When community forestry spread to the more valuable forests of the *terai* (lowlands), the government sought to limit community benefits from commercial use of their forests to the hills (Agrawal and Ostrom 2001, 500). Likewise, in India, Joint Forest Management (JFM) initially applied only to degraded lands (Campbell 1992, 40). Since the Forest Department supported JFM as a way to improve regeneration, it might very well reclaim central control once the commercial value of the forests improved (Campbell 1992, 40).

Ecosystems perceived to be particularly fragile or important on a global scale attract the involvement of international non-governmental organizations and aid agencies. These international agencies emphasize the risks of losing unique ecosystems and endangered species. From their perspective, the high stakes justify strongly pushing their preferred strategies for protecting endangered species and ecosystems, even in the face of government resistance. Many international agencies promote community-based approaches to conservation. They point to the failures of state management of natural resources and the need for local cooperation in effectively protecting natural resources, especially extensive or mobile resources that are particularly difficult to oversee centrally (Hulme and Murphree 2001a, 2001b). As evidence of the shortcomings of community-based approaches accumulates, a number of influential ecologists and international agencies have begun to call once again for strict exclusion.[4]

Although the ecological hot spots that international agencies focus on may be quite large, aid generally targets particular parks or reserves and, with community-based approaches, the surrounding settlements. The result is a patchwork of approaches, especially in countries that have not developed coherent national policies for natural resource management and depend heavily on donor support. In Uganda, for example, strategies for forestry and wildlife management vary from park to park, reflecting the

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[4] See review in Wilshusen et al. (2002).

preferences of donors and relations with local residents (Poteete 2003). In Nepal, community forestry spread throughout the country, but the details in each region reflect the priorities of particular donors within their spheres of influence. The spatially uneven involvement of donors with diverse strategies for natural resource management results in spatial variation in decentralization. Some donors insist on greater local participation in resource management than a government would ordinarily allow; others urge governments to insulate fragile eco-systems from human influence, potentially limiting the scope of home-grown programs for decentralization. Some observers may consider it just to give the most vulnerable areas extra attention. Does the premise of varying management according ecological conditions justify differences across communities in autonomy and authority over natural resource management?

So far I have focused on decentralization initiated from above by government officials or international agencies seeking to achieve their own goals. Sometimes, decentralization occurs in response to local mobilization. Violent resistance of centralized natural resource management has prompted at least partial decentralization in a number of countries. Violent uprisings, including the torching of plantations and official buildings, led the British to decentralize management of forests to forest councils in Uttarakhand, India, in the 1930s (Agrawal and Ostrom 2001; Guha 1989; Rangan 1997) – sixty years before the 1990 order that established JFM as a national program. Violence against forestry and wildlife officials also encouraged greater participation of locals in the management of national parks and forest reserves in some parts of Uganda (Hamilton 1984, 61 – 63; Hulme and Infield 2001). Other communities seek greater influence over resource management through non-violent means, ranging from the tree-hugging associated with the Chipko movement in India (Guha 1989; Rangan 1997) to mass demonstrations and use of mass media in Zimbabwe (Alexander and McGregor 2000, 621).

Despite some success and the pervasiveness of grievances against state incursions, collective mobilization by rural residents is relatively rare. To the extent that decentralization occurs in response to pressure from resource users, it tends to be *ad hoc* and limited in both substantive and spatial scope. Since groups differ in their capacity to initiate and sustain mobilization, bottom-up pressures for decentralization are spatially

and temporally uneven. Thus, the British responded to violence in Uttarakhand, India, by establishing forest councils only in the affected provinces of Garhwal and Kumaon. In Uganda, the level of local involvement in park management in the 1990s varied according to how badly relations between residents and officials had deteriorated (Hulme and Infield 2001; Poteete 2003; Scott 1998).[5] The result is uneven decentralization, with even the best-organized groups able to gain greater influence only with extraordinary effort. Centralized management remains in place elsewhere, unless actors at the center have their own reasons to decentralize, such as those discussed above.

The most socially and economically disadvantaged groups also face the most severe obstacles to mobilization. Poverty leaves few resources to invest in mobilization and raises the risks of failed mobilization. Economic and political refugees have less extensive social networks. Low social status restricts the breadth of response to calls to mobilize and leaves disadvantaged groups vulnerable to having their interests superseded by the interests of those with greater wealth and status. What is equitable about allowing decentralization to occur only where people are organized enough to demand it?

Equity in Rights and Responsibilities: Between State and Non-State Actors

Decentralization of natural resource management alters the distribution of costs and benefits between the community and the government. In fact, the prospect of lowering government expenses by shifting responsibility for monitoring and enforcement activities to local residents is one reason governments pursue decentralization. Governments recognize that local people will not take on new responsibilities unless they can at least gain legal recognition of established patterns of resource use and possibly new benefits. Nonetheless, government officials frequently resist moves to legitimize local resource use. Opposition to local resource use is particularly strong among officials trained within traditional forestry or wildlife conservation programs, with their historical emphases on state-management of forests for revenue generation and of wilderness areas for conservation.[6]

Rights and responsibilities can be divided between state and non-state actors in myriad combinations. Scholars have suggested a number of typologies and frameworks in

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[5] Donors also influenced willingness to include local residents in resource management.
[6] For discussions of scientific forestry, see Guha (1989) and J. Scott (1998, chapter 1). And, on wildlife conservation, see Hulme and Marshall (2001b) and Wilshusen et al. (2002).

an effort to make some sense of the diverse forms of decentralization. Most typologies hinge on the balance of rights and responsibilities gained by local bodies and give particular weight to decision-making rights. The distinction between delegation and devolution, for example, differentiates between increased responsibility with minimal increase in rights and significant advances in decision-making rights accompanied by the capacity to enforce decisions.

Focusing on decentralized natural resource management, Agrawal and Ostrom (2001, 489 - 491) use a framework for categorizing bundles of property rights to highlight more fine-grained distinctions across policies. Property rights range from basic rights over withdrawal or extraction, through rights over management decisions, to rights to exclude individuals or groups from using the resource, and to alienate or transfer rights to others. Decentralization programs vary in the extent of property rights gained by local bodies. Community-based natural resource management often focuses on sharing benefits, including usufruct rights, with no devolution of management or other rights (Alden Wily and Mbaya 2001). Benefit-sharing creates "authorized users" at the local level; the delegation of management rights as well as use rights creates "authorized claimants"; "proprietors" also enjoy the right of exclusion (Agrawal and Ostrom 2001, 490 – 491).

Barrow and Murphree suggest a three-way categorization of community conservation that follows a similar logic (2001, 31 – 33). They associate the creation of authorized users with "protected area outreach," a label that underlines the continued centralization of authority. Local resource users gain management rights under "collaborative management." Locals gain the most rights under "community-based conservation," although Barrow and Murphree note that the state often retains some rights of "last resort" (34). Whatever rights of exclusion or alienation the community gains through community-based conservation seem to be variable and possibly subject to revocation.

The Agrawal-Ostrom and Barrow-Murphree frameworks focus on the division of rights between the state and the local community. They do not distinguish between multiple levels of government or explicitly allow for the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The assumption of a direct relationship between the

central government and local resource users best describes community-based forms of decentralization. Yet, many programs for community-based management require the involvement of an NGO, either as an intermediary in establishing the decentralization program (Platteau 2004) or as a product of decentralization. Even where NGO involvement is not required by law, the mismatch between local skill levels and the complexity of bureaucratic procedures means that few communities can gain rights to their resources without NGO assistance. When local authorities are the legal recipients of decentralization, rights and responsibilities are divided among central government, local government, and local resource users. The framework must be expanded to include three actors, whether the central government, local government, and local resource users, or the central government, an NGO, and local resource users.

The focus on rights in the Agrawal-Ostrom and Barrow-Marshall frameworks obscures the importance of responsibilities. Yet, it is difficult to evaluate alternative distributions of rights in terms of equity without considering the distribution of responsibilities as well. Rights without responsibilities encourage free-riding and unaccountable behavior that is unlikely to result in sustainable resource management. Lack of responsibility discourages rights-holders from thinking about the consequences of their actions and thus is likely to result in inequitable outcomes. On the other hand, responsibilities without rights encourage shirking. In practice, responsibilities are inherent in many rights. The right to exclude, for instance, implies the responsibility to balance the level of demand – both in terms of the number of users and consumption per user – with the availability of resources. Likewise, the right to make management decisions about allowable uses, the timing and location of uses, and so forth entails a responsibility to make management decisions with judicious consideration of the implications for different resource uses, interactions among various resource uses, variable dependency upon resource use, and so forth.

Distributional Equity: Within Local Communities

For many observers, equity in decentralization has to do with the distributional outcomes within local communities. Critics worry that decentralization, whether focused on natural resource management or generalized, reinforces local asymmetries. Decentralization influences equity within local communities by altering (or reinforcing)

power relations, the distribution of income streams, and the balance of costs and benefits associated with natural resource management.

Political Equity: Who Gains Influence?

Interests vary by age, gender, ethnicity, religion, economic activities, physical location, and any number of other attributes. Definition of the relevant group and actual participation in group activities influence which interests get heard and which are given the most weight in decisions. Problems associated with defining communities and heterogeneities within communities have received considerable attention (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Li 2002). Equitable solutions have proven difficult to develop. Governments generally decentralize natural resource management to spatially defined communities. Spatial definition of communities corresponds to the notion that communities *adjacent to* the resource of interest are the most dependent on the resource and the best positioned to engage in sustainable management. Although proximity to the resource may be an accurate indicator of dependency in some circumstances, this criterion misses mobile populations who use resources on a seasonal basis,[7] those affected by externalities, and people who are end-users of goods derived locally but transported to other areas. Identification of these more dispersed stakeholders and institutionalization of their involvement in natural resource management poses huge administrative challenges. Most governments and donors choose to ignore such complexities and focus on more readily identified local communities.

In some cases, governments and donors also ignore or downplay internal heterogeneities. Communities involved with community-based natural resource management are often assumed to be indigenous, and indigenous communities are assumed to be homogeneous (Kumar 2002; Li 2002). In Indonesia and the Philippines, the people living in or adjacent to forests are as likely to be immigrants as indigenous, engage in diverse economic activities, and have a variety of aspirations (Li 2002, 268 – 269). In India, communities involved with JFM are not solely indigenous and, even among the indigenous populations, there are multiple castes and tribes and other internal divisions (Kumar 2002, 764). Internal inequality may be less extreme in indigenous

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[7] Some groups may use resources even less frequently, yet depend heavily upon them during critical periods. Pastoral people, for example, move their herds long distances in search of good fodder during severe droughts.

communities than elsewhere in India, but it exists and is significant. In Ranchi district (Jharkhand state), the more well-to-do, landed households have a greater interest in managing the forest for timber production, implying a preference for allowing sal to shade out other species (Kumar 2002, 769). The less well-to-do, marginal or landless households rely more heavily on non-wood forest products associated with the greater species diversity in forests with clearings. The tendency to ignore these sorts of divisions allows local elite groups to dominate the forest committees, sometimes to the complete exclusion of more marginal groups. The well-to-do advocate management rules that favor the production of sal, and thus the closing of clearings and loss of forest diversity (Kumar 2002, 770). These rules decrease the value of participation in JFM for marginal groups.

At least some governments and donors recognize and seek to address the heterogeneities within spatially defined communities. Even the most ambitious efforts have mixed success. Rules governing representation in community decision-making set a floor for participation. Agarwal's (2001) study of JFM in India and Community Forestry in Nepal found wide variations in membership rules. In Nepal, membership is based on households, with a male representing each household. This arrangement is also found in India, especially among self-initiated groups that build on customary arrangements. These rules ensure representation of the full array of economic positions and by all castes in the village. Nonetheless, representation based on households overlooks distributional issues and different interests within households (Cornwall 2003, 1329). In many parts of the world, household divisions of labor mean that interests in natural resources differ with age, gender, and status within the household. Some Indian states take a more progressive position, mandating representation of each household by one man and one woman; even this arrangement excludes other household members who may have different interests (Agarwal 2001, 1626). At the time of Agarwal's study, only three Indian states extended membership to all village adults.

Some community-based organizations in Botswana have adopted an alternative approach. In at least some extremely rural communities, small groups of families (usually but not always related) form the most basic level of organization within settlements (Flyman 2001; Gujadhur and Motshubi 2001). Even before the introduction of community-based natural resource management, these family groups routinely shared

resources such as food and money. To form legally recognized community-based organizations, each family group elected one man and one woman to a committee. Where the committees proved too unwieldy, a committee elected an executive body from its membership. The nature of the family groups system ensures representation of different ethnic and economic groups.

Inclusion in the general membership does not guarantee representation in executive bodies or equitable influence over decision-making. Many Indian states reserve seats for women on JFM executive committees. Given social strictures on participation in public meetings, women often fail to speak up. Moreover, the women selected for committee membership often hail from well-to-do families and have greater commonality of interest with well-to-do men than with men or women from less-advantaged households (Cornwall 2003, 1330). Representation on decision-making bodies does not eliminate inequities in the underlying social structure. Although acknowledgement of inequity may be the first step to alleviating inequity, disadvantaged people know all too well that they risk retaliation when speaking out.[8] If community-based natural resource management is to improve equity, more is needed to overcome entrenched inequities than rules to guarantee representation of specific groups.

Multi-sector decentralization programs convey new rights and responsibilities to geographically based local governments. Community-based natural resource management generally involves the creation of new, sector specific committees. In some cases, the village as a whole is taken as the relevant group and membership in the committee will be based on residence in that geographically defined community. This approach is typical of community-based approaches to forestry management in rural areas where all residents rely on natural resources to some extent. In other cases, larger or smaller groups may be formed based on the perceived spatial scale of resource use.

Which is better for decentralized natural resource management: existing multi-purpose local authorities or newly created single-purpose committees? Policy-makers often create single-purpose committees to guarantee that a particular policy area receives attention or to circumvent perceived problems with existing local authorities. The central

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[8] See examples involving local electoral politics in India (Agrawal 1999, chapter two) and a participatory development project in Uganda (Cornwall 2003, 1333 – 1334).

government (or a donor) may avoid working with local authorities because they are seen as inefficient, conflict-ridden, inequitable, or non-cooperative. Granting authority over natural resources to existing local authorities does nothing to make those authorities more accountable to disparate local interests (Ribot 1999). In the African context, existing local authorities often means chiefs. Although chiefs have a certain (spatially and temporally variable) legitimacy, the ability of local people to hold chiefs accountable vanished once chieftancies were absorbed into the colonial and then post-colonial state. The political-administrative framework often makes even directly elected local officials more accountable to the center than to local constituents (Ribot 1999, 26). If local authorities are not accountable to local users of natural resources or if they exercise little discretion over the management of natural resources, there is little reason to expect formal decentralization of natural resource management to improve either the sustainability of management or equity in the distribution of costs and benefits.

Problems of legitimacy and accountability also afflict new single-purpose committees, with important implications for equity (Manor 2004). New single-purpose organizations are unlikely to escape conflicts that plague existing local organizations or the domination by local elites. Local factions will try to capture or undermine new organizations. Single-purpose committees often lack an institutionalized system for selection and change of leadership (Manor 2004). Elections, when held, typically occur in a less formalized setting. Voting often occurs during organizational meetings, disenfranchising those unable to attend the meeting. The informal setting encourages meeting organizers to dispense with the secret ballot. Mechanisms for addressing electoral disputes may not exist or, if they exist, are cumbersome. When asked to elect representatives to work with government officials, many rural communities select members of the local elite. Committees may fail to set clear limits on terms in office. In many rural communities, social disapproval of open conflict discourages competition for office or challenges to the sitting leadership when it is time for reelection. Each of these issues leaves new single-purpose organizations vulnerable to capture by the local elite and undermines incentives for accountability.[9]

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[9] As Manor (2004) stresses, weak electoral procedures also allow for manipulation by the lower-level bureaucrats often charged with creation of user committees.

<u>Economic Equity: Who Gets What?</u>

Representation in local government and on local councils or committees matters in part because these bodies influence the transformation of natural resources into income streams for local residents. Even where central governments retain authority over management decisions, local bodies can influence those decisions by providing information about patterns of resource use and needs that could be met by changed resource uses. All too often, elite dominance of local committees biases the flow of information to central decision-makers; they ignore resource uses important for women and the poor, promote changes that impinge upon disadvantaged groups, and downplay the value of changes that might help those groups.

Decentralization of natural resource management alters the distribution of costs and benefits associated with natural resources. Decentralization of management usually means that locals take on responsibility for monitoring resource conditions and use. Often, local residents are also expected to identify and apprehend rule-breakers. Increasingly, decentralization of natural resource management depends on the preparation of management plans. In Bolivia, indigenous people can gain legal rights to their traditional territories, but only if they prepare a management plan (Becker and León 2000). Communities in Botswana must develop management plans before they can benefit from commercial use of natural resources (Twyman 2001, 49). In these and other cases, management plans must meet fairly strict criteria and require considerable technical expertise. All of these activities represent costs for local communities. In addition, the management plans themselves may include restrictions on resource use that decrease the flow of benefits from natural resources, at least for the short-term. In the case of wildlife management, communities also bear the on-going costs of living with wildlife. These costs range from the loss of crops through the destruction of property to predation of both livestock and people.

In exchange, decentralization of natural resource management promises to increase the benefits local people receive from natural resources. In some cases, decentralized management diverts some share of existing revenue streams toward local communities. Elsewhere, as in the examples from Bolivia and Botswana, officials hope that decentralization will encourage commercialization and generate new revenue

streams. Or, officials may desist from prosecuting forms of resource use that had been deemed illicit, decreasing the risks associated with resource use and thus increasing the expected value of existing patterns of use. The changes in costs and benefits can be substantial. Is the new distribution of costs and benefits equitable? The equity of the new arrangements can be assessed in terms of the distribution of costs and benefits both among community members and between the local community and the government (or other relevant actors).

Community members share in their new rights and responsibilities to varying degrees; the net benefits are not the same for all community members. Communities adopt various arrangements for meeting their monitoring and guarding responsibilities. Some hire a designated guard; others adopt a system of rotating guarding responsibility among households in the community (Agrawal and Goyal 2001, 77). In some places, guarding is a male responsibility; elsewhere, women are also involved.[10] Depending on the community's choice, the costs of guarding may be spread relatively evenly among community members or concentrated on just a few. Restrictions on resource use often hit subsistence uses particularly hard. Forests or grazing areas may be closed for a period of several years to allow regeneration. Seasonal restrictions on particular resource uses may be introduced. Because they rely more heavily on subsistence uses, these sorts of restrictions disproportionately affect poorer households. Collection of natural materials for subsistence does not cease because of local restrictions. Rather, those responsible for collecting these goods – usually women – have to travel longer distances or on more precarious terrain to meet their daily needs.

On average, the increased costs associated with decentralization of natural resource management fall most heavily on the poorest households and on women. Unfortunately, increased benefits rarely compensate for the higher costs. When new benefits take the form of a share of an existing or new revenue stream (e.g., park entrance fees, safari concessions, hunting fees), these benefits are generally channeled through the community organization, whether an existing local authority or a special-purpose committee. In Zimbabwe, revenues from the CAMPFIRE program are filtered through several layers of government (Alexander and McGregor 2000). Except in wildlife rich

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[10] In India, women are sometimes but not usually involved in guarding (Agarwal 2001, 1628 - 1629).

areas, households ultimately get a small amount of cash, or the local government might decide to use the revenues for a public project such as a school (Campbell et al. 1999; Metcalfe 1994). Equal distribution of funds cannot be considered equitable, given the unequal distribution of costs. Likewise, the establishment of public facilities does not target the households that bear the highest costs associated with natural resource management. Communities near parks in Uganda receive funds for community development projects, either as a share of park revenues or from donors (Adams and Infield 2001; Hulme and Infield 2001). Officials established special committees to select community development projects for financing, creating the possibility for either duplication of effort or competition with the local council system. Management of revenues is a serious challenge for the new committees established to manage wildlife areas in Botswana (Arntzen et al. 2003). Some communities lost revenues to fraud or waste, but deadlock is a more common outcome; the community-based organizations simply cannot decide how best to use the funds, with the result that money gets banked and nobody benefits from it.

When decentralized management allows commercialization of resource use, the distribution of benefits among individuals is likely to be even more skewed. In many parts of the world, commercial activities are dominated by men, so that men are better positioned to take advantage of opportunities for commercialization of natural resource use. The advantage does not hold across the board. In much of Africa, for example, women dominate both the collection of wild products and trading. The need for capital– especially the means for larger-scale collection and transport to markets – restricts the ability of both men and women to take advantage of opportunities for commercialization. Africa is known for prosperous women traders, an indication that the gender barrier is not absolute. Access to capital becomes as important as the gender division.

Even when commercialization occurs in a more centralized manner, as with a regulated expansion of tourism, individuals benefit through employment in the tourism industry. Divisions of labor based on age and gender mean that these jobs will not be equally distributed. The distribution of jobs between men and women, young and old, locals and outsiders depends on the relative need for housekeepers, cooks, game trackers, experts in medicinal plants, singers, dancers, and story-tellers. The Cgaecgae Tlhabololo

Trust in Botswana opted to diversify from concessions with game hunting safaris to self-managed cultural tourism in part because cultural tourism offers more equitable local employment opportunities (Gujadhur and Motshubi 2001, 26 - 29). The community receives more income from hunting safaris, but most local employment from hunting is seasonal and limited to men (e.g., as game trackers). Cultural tourism showcases both the women's skills as gatherers and singers and the men's skills in hunting, tracking animals, and dancing. Although some communities in Botswana have tried to negotiate with tourist operators to create a wider variety of jobs, job creation is difficult to reconcile with the high standards of western tourists (Rozemeijer 2001).

Can Decentralization Improve Equity?

In practice, decentralization of natural resource management fails to deliver reliable improvements in equity. Are these shortcomings inevitable, or could greater attention to equity considerations in institutional design result in better outcomes? Shortcomings persist despite serious, on-going efforts to promote enhanced equity. Careful institutional design helps minimize inequities, but does not offer a panacea.

No voting rule guarantees equity. Consensus is sometimes promoted as a way to strengthen those who are vulnerable but numerically weak. Yet consensus does not eliminate power inequalities. Consensus empowers those who are the most stubborn, willing to accept the status quo unless their preferred changes are accepted, and either immune to or willing to accept social sanctions associated with pushing their own agenda. Consensus does not guarantee that every member actually agrees with group decisions. It is not uncommon for people to assent to decisions in a consensus setting because of social pressures or because they cannot afford to wait any longer for a decision. Plurality rule discourages individuals or minorities from engaging in flagrant bullying to achieve preferred outcomes. Power rests in the hands of the largest number of active participants. The largest number of active participants need not be the majority, especially once one allows for uneven participation. Moreover, the plurality need not opt for equitable decisions.

Consociational arrangements create vetoes for designated groups (Lijphart 1977). The typical example of consociationalism involves the representation of well-defined ethnic groups in the government of highly divisive societies. Each ethnic group is

guaranteed representation in government and has the right to veto at least those policies that touch upon policy areas deemed critical to that group. Thus, consociationalism protects minorities against inequitable policies supported by a plurality or even a majority. Consociational arrangements are based on status quo. Although disadvantaged groups can prevent policy changes that increase inequality, favored groups can also veto changes that diminish existing inequities. Moreover, representation includes all *recognized* groups and veto power is granted over areas *recognized* as critical. Yet marginal populations in many societies lack official recognition and the issues they care about are often dismissed as lacking a legal basis. The indigenous rights movement, for example, has had to fight both for recognition of indigenous groups as distinctive people with rights and to get the issues they care about onto the public agenda. The severe inequities that deny standing to marginal groups of people cannot be overcome by consociationalism.

Inequity can be reinforced by formal institutions and by cultural norms, such as norms that treat women and some ethnic groups as legal minors. Governments and donors sometimes respond to culturally-enforced inequities by mandating greater equity. Quotas for women or historically disadvantaged ethnic or religious groups, for example, attempt to enhance equity from above. Such rules guarantee representation but, as discussed above, cannot guarantee influence. Moreover, legislating representation and other legal guarantees of equity runs inherently counter to the goals of decentralization and devolution of authority.

Ultimately, we return to the fundamental question: what is fair? Should equity be based on the status quo, as with the principle of Pareto improvements? Although the idea of making changes only if the changes result in improvements for some without deterioration in conditions for others sounds equitable at first glance, this principle allows not only for the preservation of severe inequalities, but also for increasing inequality (as long as those at the bottom do not sink). Why should we accept current inequity just because it exists? The alternative requires the assessment of equity relative to normative ideals – and thus a decision about whose ideals should guide the assessment of equity. What is fair from the perspective of one person may not be fair from another's perspective.

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