

Decentralization, Participation, and the Environment

Arun Agrawal

Introduction

Since the early 1980s, more than 100 national governments in the developing world have introduced sweeping changes in how they govern their environmental resources. Instead of centralized control, the keystone of environmental action by postcolonial states, one can now witness claims about widespread decentralization of environmental decision making, including efforts to involve local residents, communities, and institutions in the conservation of nature. Decentralization has become global.

Research Questions

The proposed research will focus on two types of environmental resources: forests and wildlife.

Three sets of questions related to recent environmental policy and institutional decentralization are the focus of analysis. The first set of questions relates to the *nature of contemporary decentralization*: What is the extent of contemporary environmental-policy related decentralization, and how is it best understood? What are the regional and resource-related variations in decentralization processes and institutions across the developing world and how can they be explained? The second set of questions are about the *origins of decentralization policies and institutional choices*: What are the actors and factors that have prompted the initiation of decentralization processes? What are the conditions that facilitate or undermine the consolidation of institutional choices leading to decentralized decision-making? And finally, the proposed research is concerned with *institutional outcomes*: What effects has decentralization had on resource governance outcomes? How do they vary and how is this variation best explained?

The research will focus on forests and wildlife as its two major renewable environmental resources. Forests and wildlife are the linchpin of livelihood for literally hundreds of millions of poor resource users. They form among the most visible arenas in which changing governmental actions unfold. But equally importantly, a comparative examination of these two types of resources also promises to provide a valuable opportunity to generate innovative theoretical findings about how variations in resource characteristics affect institutional success, and how shifts in the locus of environmental decision making affect resource governance outcomes.

Nature of Contemporary Decentralization Efforts

The proposed study will advance our understanding of decentralized institutions and environmental change by reconceptualizing what decentralization means. Existing studies of environmental policy decentralization view it as a change in the relationship between central and local governments. The proposed study suggests that the nature of decentralization-related changes must be considered along three critical dimensions: a) the creation of governmentalized localities; b) the emergence of regulatory communities; and c) the formation of environmental subjects. The governmentalization of localities is the usual subject of analysis for most scholars of decentralization — it refers to the shift in the political and economic relationships between central and local governments. The emergence of regulatory communities is an important part of decentralization related institutional regimes. It signifies a change in the nature of governance arrangements that connect local governments and those resource users who depend on forests

and wildlife. Scholars of common property have focused on community regulation of resource use most visibly- however, they have tended to underplay the relationship of communities with central governments. The formation of environmental subjects remains at best an under-investigated theme in analyses of the environment, but it is possibly the most interesting shift in human-environmental relationships in the late twentieth century. Property addressing this theme requires that we investigate the conditions and reasons that make some people become centrally preoccupied with the environment and the defense of environmental resources.

Origins of Decentralization-Related Environmental Processes and Institutions

The origins of environmental decentralization policies and institutions have typically been explained with reference to their presumed effects. Many scholars, thus, defend decentralization policies on grounds of greater efficiency, more equity, and higher participation. However, since decentralization involves a shift in political-economic relationships, it can be understood only by attending to the interests and strengths of relevant actors. The proposed research will focus on three actors that play a crucial role in whether new environmental institutions will be initiated and the extent to which they will be consolidated: central government actors, local elite and residents, and international donors and organizations. Different combinations of these actors, and variations in their commitment to decentralization explain the origins of decentralization policies.

Outcomes and Effects of Environmental Policy Decentralization

Decentralization of environmental policies produces effects in a cascading series. There are institutional effects that are reflected in the degree of governmentalization of localities and the production of regulatory communities. There are identity-related effects. These pertain to whether and to what extent some people become environmental subjects. And finally, there are resource management outcomes. They are about whether specific wildlife and forest resources are governed more equitably, sustainably, and efficiently. There is, as yet, no common metric to measure these effects simultaneously. The proposed research will develop effective measurements to assess these cascading effects of decentralization processes and institutions and also undertake to operationalize these measures in specific research sites in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Research Design

We will use two main empirical strategies to address the questions for the proposed research. The first of these will be based on statistical analysis of two datasets. The first dataset will contain macro-level information for countries in the developing world. For both forests and wildlife, we will identify how policies have changed over the last twenty years in all countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that have a population greater than 2.5 millions (see appendix 1). In addition, this dataset will also contain basic economic and political systemic information for each country. This dataset on resource policy changes will be coupled with a second dataset based on secondary literature. The second dataset will include specific examples of local resource governance for each resource type. For the second dataset, we will attempt to identify at least one case study of each resource type from each country. Countries that have not yet institutionalized decentralization policies will not yield cases for the second dataset. For each case in the dataset, we will ensure that we have information on approximately 60 critical dependent and independent variables (for the initial list of variables and questions, see appendix

2).

The second strategy will utilize original field-based research on environmental policy decentralization and its relationship with local resource management institutions in six countries: (Illustrative list: Cameroon, and Kenya in Africa (other possibilities - Uganda, Tanzania), India and Nepal in Asia, and Mexico and Bolivia (other possibilities?) in Latin America.

[Justification?]

Methods

The questions that the proposed research seeks to address about the nature, origins, and outcomes of environmental policy decentralization require innovative combinations of tools from different social and biological sciences. A complementary suite of cross-disciplinary methods and investigative tools, drawing from qualitative, quantitative, game theoretic, and experimental approaches, will be the means to collect data and evidence on which to base answers to our research questions.