



Accountable representation and power in participatory and decentralized environmental management

J.C. Ribot

Jesse C. Ribot is Senior Associate in the Institutions and Governance Program, World Resources Institute, Washington, DC, USA.

Note: The themes presented in this article are further developed in Ribot, 1999a.

Elected local government is the appropriate institution to entrust with representation of local populations in matters of public resource use.

PROMISES OF DECENTRALIZATION AND PARTICIPATION

Decentralization and participation are both means of bringing a broader section of a given population into public decision-making processes - in a role of informing and/or controlling those processes.

Most justifications for participatory and decentralized forestry are built around the assumption that greater participation in public decision-making is a positive good in itself, and/or that it can improve efficiency, equity, development and resource management. By bringing government decision-making closer to the citizenry, decentralization is widely believed to increase public sector accountability and, therefore, effectiveness (Fox and Aranda, 1996). "At its most basic, decentralization aims to achieve one of the central aspirations of just political governance - democratization, or the desire that humans should have a say in their own affairs. In this sense, decentralization is a strategy of governance prompted by external or domestic pressures to facilitate transfers of power closer to those who are most affected by the exercise of power" (Agrawal and Ostrom, 1999).

[In Burkina Faso, control over woodfuel management has been devolved to local committees](#)

According to economic and public choice theory, participation and decentralization can increase economic and managerial efficiency by:

- allowing the local populations who bear the costs of resource use decisions to make those decisions, rather than leaving them in the hands of outsiders or unaccountable locals (i.e. increasing efficiency by internalizing economic, social and ecological costs and benefits);
- reducing administrative and management transaction costs via the

proximity of local participants, access to local skills and local information;

- using local knowledge and aspirations in project design, implementation, management and evaluation for better matching of actions to needs.

As Crook and Manor (1998) argue, bringing government closer to people increases efficiency by helping to "... tap the creativity and resources of local communities by giving them the chance to participate in development". Decentralization is believed to increase coordination and flexibility among administrative agencies and effectiveness in development and conservation planning and implementation (Agrawal and Ostrom, 1999). Participation and decentralization are also believed to promote equity through greater retention and more equal distribution of benefits from local activities. Participation in the benefits from local resources can contribute to development agendas by providing local communities with revenues.

There is, of course, uncertainty about whether such outcomes can be attributed to greater participation or decentralization. Aid organizations and national agencies charged with managing public resources often assume that greater participation in resource management results in better environmental practices (Poffenberger, 1994; Shiva, 1989), but this claim is not a demonstrated fact (cf. Little, 1994).

If participation and decentralization are to lead to better natural resource management (or to equity, efficiency and development), theory suggests that it will be through the mechanisms of greater local voice in and control of significant decision-making. That is, it will derive from greater accountability of decision-makers to their constituents. An implication of this concept is that locally accountable representation in public decision-making must be in place in order to test the hypothesis that participation and decentralization lead to greater efficiency, equity, development and environmental outcomes.

Studies attempting to measure the effects of participation have rarely met these criteria; indeed it seems that there are few instances where the hypothesis can be tested. In some instances of "participatory" or "decentralized" forestry there is locally accountable representation without any significant powers. In others, there is devolution to non-representative or unaccountable bodies in the name of participation. In yet other cases the participation is in benefits alone and not in decisions - a kind of charity that does not feed directly into decision-making. These cases cannot be expected to lead to many of the outcomes that theory supposes.

In short, the environmental effects of decentralization and participation can only really be evaluated if two components of decentralization are in place: locally accountable representation; and significant public powers over which the representatives have freedom of decision (i.e. a domain of independent local decision-making). Development of good decentralized or participatory policies depends on these central elements.

ACCOUNTABLE REPRESENTATION

Rulers claim to be responsible to their people; people try to hold them to account. Accountability is thus the measure of responsibility.

Lonsdale (1986)

Since only in very small communities is it possible for all voices to be heard,

community-based decision-making requires that the population in question be represented in an accountable manner (cf. Green, 1993). In the absence of such representation, there is a danger that decision-making could be taken over by elite groups; dissent swept under the rug; and women, lower castes and minority ethnic groups, religious sects and other marginalized social groups be excluded from the forum. Representation must be ensured for the diverse interests of communities, which are generally highly stratified along gender, age, caste, class, religious, livelihood, lineage and other lines (Painter, Sumberg and Price, 1994). There must also be mechanisms to keep the representing body responsive to the community as a whole.

Elections are the most commonly evoked mode of representative accountability, although not all elective structures create accountability. In Senegal, for example, where candidates for local elections can only be presented by party list, candidates are ultimately accountable to the nationally registered parties based in the capital, rather than to the local population. In Mali, however, there will be independent candidates in the 1999 local elections. In both Senegal and Mali, local government will receive decentralized forest management powers. Only in Mali, where the decentralized authority has been designed to be downwardly accountable, will the reforms in the environmental realm constitute decentralization; Senegal's forestry reforms can be described as a deconcentration, considering the upward accountability of the local authorities involved.

Even when elections are perfectly structured, machine politics and cronyism can reduce the downward accountability of elected representatives. Thus elections are not sufficient. Other mechanisms for increasing local or downward accountability of elected, appointed or any other local actors are still needed (Ribot, 1999a). These may include:

- central state sanctions;¹
- recourse through accessible courts;
- third-party monitoring by the media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or independently elected controllers;
- political pressures and lobbying by associations and associative movements;
- civic education and the provision of information on roles and obligations of government;
- public reporting requirements;
- a free press;
- embeddedness of leaders in their community;
- belief systems of leaders and their communities;
- moral obligations;
- measures to increase the civic dedication and pride of civil servants and other leaders;

- orchestrated participation;
- social movements, threats of social unrest and threats of resistance;
- earned-income taxation systems.²

¹ Tendler (1997), however, cautions against a sanction-based approach, pointing out that greater degrees of local autonomy can improve government performance of community services.

² See Moore (1997) on the critical matter of the relation between fiscal flows and accountability.

Such accountability measures serve to increase local voice in and control over public decisions. They can all increase the enfranchisement of local populations. Some of these measures also have the power to make non-elected bodies (such as environmental NGOs or chiefs) and professional and appointed authorities (such as forest service agents or prefects) more locally accountable.

PUBLIC POWER TO WHOM?

Depending on to whom they are devolved, new powers can strengthen accountable as well as unaccountable authorities. Since natural resources are public resources, it is most appropriate to devolve their management to a public institution - or at least to institutions accountable to the public.

In Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE programme, hereditary village chiefs are sometimes called on to make public decisions, but they may not be accountable to the people over whose resources their decisions apply

Attacks on government over the past two decades have created a movement among donors to dismantle government in favour of civil and private organizations (cf. Evans, 1997), as if these bodies represent society. However, government has an appropriate role, both in representation and in the management, protection and allocation of public resources. Local government is an appropriate institution to involve in decentralized natural resource management, but it must be empowered and legitimized; to achieve this it must be entrusted with real resources and powers. While there are often good reasons not to trust state institutions (well documented by Krueger, 1974; Bates, 1981; Bhagwati, 1982), there are reasons to entrust them, particularly when measures are taken to improve accountability so that trust does not have to be blind or naïve. One reason to entrust them with public powers is that they can be the basis of sustainable - as in institutionalized - and spatially replicable representation.

In the developing world, entrusting local government often means building up or legitimating this part of the state. Natural resource management can play an important part in the transition to entrusted, locally accountable local government. A large part of local autonomy over the disposition of nature could be devolved into the hands of accountable representatives without any threat to the local ecology, particularly in the Sahel, for example (Ribot, 1999b). Greater control over natural resources can empower and legitimate local government by providing revenues and by giving local representatives powers of decision over resources that affect the everyday lives of their constituencies. Further, empowered representative bodies can also serve as bodies around which civil society actions can crystallize. Interest groups are likely to form and rally around bodies with real powers who have responsibilities over public

matters and who are, because of their accountability, accessible to public influence (A. Joshi, personal communication). Without powers, representative bodies can offer nothing but a channel of communication to higher-level empowered decision-makers. Power of decision over valuable resources is part of what makes representative bodies meaningful.

Many non-state groups on which participatory and decentralized approaches depend are not necessarily downwardly accountable. In the Nazinon forest of Burkina Faso, for example, powers over woodfuel management have been devolved to committees whose members are mostly private interested parties. There is only one local representative, who, as one of four committee members, has no definitive say in decisions. Further, the committee's decisions must be approved by foresters. The committee is not a downwardly accountable body, yet it controls a public resource (Ribot, 1999a). In some cases under Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE programme, hereditary village chiefs are called on to make public decisions (Dzingirai, 1998). These authorities may not be accountable to the people over whose resources their decisions apply. Interestingly enough, in the CAMPFIRE programme, representation is emphasized. There is often, however, a difference between initial intentions and practice.

Because devolution strengthens those it entrusts, it may be counterproductive to support the devolution of public powers to chiefs and other hereditary customary leaders, project- or administration-organized non-representative committees, groups that are temporarily mobilized through orchestrated participatory processes, cooperatives, interest groups, private voluntary organizations or NGOs. These groups may be well meaning (or not) but they are not necessarily representative of, or accountable to, the public. While all such groups can (and should) be subject to the accountability measures mentioned above, they are less appropriate choices than the representative system of a permanent electoral local government with accompanying accountability measures. Such bodies have an appropriate role as consultants and advisers to, or agents of, representative bodies, but they should not be considered representative of a whole population, nor therefore should they be independently entrusted with the population's resources or decisions.

In environmental (and other) decentralization, the kinds of relations of accountability in which empowered actors are embedded shape the potential to derive expected benefits from the decentralization. As Fox and Aranda (1996) note, decentralization will strengthen autocratic local rulers or democratic rulers, depending on which local authorities the decentralization involves.

CONCLUSION

To be sustainable, local representation and local representative control of public resources must be institutionalized. Elected local government is the appropriate institution to entrust with representation of local populations in matters of public resource use. Local government can be made downwardly accountable and, as it is a permanent institution, it is sustainable over time.

Empowering other institutions such as NGOs and village chiefs can undermine local government by depriving it of resources and of the legitimacy that it requires to meet other needs of the society.

Where locally accountable local government does not exist, establishing sustainable participation is extremely problematic. Decentralization or environmental policy

analysts must make it known to the countries in which they work that empowered, downwardly accountable representation is part of a simple set of conditions that make the task of sustainable, equitable, participatory natural resource management possible.

Accountable representation without powers is empty, and devolution of powers without accountable representation can be dangerous. Establishing locally accountable representation with powers is a moral statement on the part of the state that it values participation and democracy. The failure to establish accountable representation blocks the development of local democracy and its benefits.

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