
POLITICAL DECENTRALISATION – A COMPLEMENTARY RATHER THAN A SUBSTITUTION APPROACH

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Background and evolving meanings of Decentralisation

Since the 1970s, decentralisation in various forms has often been identified as a missing link between poverty-reduction and anti-poverty efforts in developing countries. This is accompanied practically the world over by a feeling of disillusion with centralised governance [Manor 1995] and mounting criticism against a model of development which centres on large projects and on centrism. Centralised governance has not exactly covered itself with glory. The state's poor track record has much to do with the feeling of dissatisfaction with centralised paradigms of governance. Almost as a corollary to this, the past decade has witnessed the proliferation of NGOs. The success these NGOs and other civil society groups have had in fostering people's participation for better local governance structures and in ensuring operational and maintenance of infrastructure facilities on decentralisation led to the genesis of the decentralisation approach.

Decentralisation by Rondinelli and Nellis (1989:5) is described as transfer of responsibilities for planning, management, and the raising and allocation of resources from the central government and its agencies to field units of the central government, semi-autonomous public authorities, regional authorities, or non-governmental, private or voluntary organisation. There are different forms of decentralization- namely de-concentration and devolution, which are distinguishable by their different characteristics, policy implications, and conditions for success, and may culminate into simple "administrative rearrangements" to the formation of "local-governments". In cases of de-concentration, resources such as civil service positions or budgetary funds are reallocated from central government to a lower administrative unit while the decision-making authority remains with the central government and local staff answer to their upstream superiors. When authority is devolved down to a lower level, decisions about the use of the resources are made locally, and administrative staff tends to be accountable to local political leadership. (Bossuyt 2000)

Political Decentralisation

Political decentralisation is a top-down process, which by delegating power can help to reduce the centre's control over the social, economic and cultural life of its citizens. Political decentralization aims to give citizens or their elected representatives more power in public decision-making. It is often associated with pluralistic politics and representative government, but it can also support democratisation by giving citizens, or their representatives, more influence in the formulation and implementation of policies. Political decentralization, in contrast to administrative decentralisation, is not concerned primarily with increasing efficiency--improving service delivery by the government, removing bottlenecks and reducing delays, increasing the ability to recover costs--but with the devolution of power to the grassroots and leading to the formation of "local-level" governments.

Virtues of Political Decentralisation

The concept of political decentralisation however strongly rests on the belief that the selection of representatives from local electoral jurisdictions allows citizens to know better their political representatives and allows elected officials to know better the needs and desires of their constituents. The proponent of political decentralisation state a number of benefits arising from this kind of a decentralisation process. The main argument in favour of political decentralising is that decision-making that is more appropriately left to local or regional governments is essential for promoting democracy and good governance. Decentralised government can provide space for people to participate in local development. It can ensure a more efficient allocation of resources, enhance local resource mobilisation and improve local governance. This, in turn, may pave the way for more effective poverty reduction strategies. The other arguments in favour of political decentralisation are :

- § Decision-making power will be in the hand of local-authorities who are more aware of the local situation and hence are in a better position to take judicious decision.

- § There would be a greater cognisance of community preferences in decision-making which would lead to a greater participation of people in the governance processes and their greater sense of belongingness towards the infrastructure set up. This would have positive implications on the sustainability of infrastructure.
- § Decision-making at the lower levels would imply a significant reduction in the time-taken for taking a decision as well a reduction in the administrative costs.
- § There will be greater spaces for participation of marginalized communities in the governance processes as the local –government would comprise of local, popularly-elected representatives.
- § Political decentralisation would lead to a balanced regional development as many inefficiencies arise from attempting to administer a very backward economy through a highly centralized political authority and the development of that area often gets neglected.

Some of the claims of the proponents of political decentralisation stand validated in cases where there was a clear political leadership and transparency in carrying out the decentralised process and enough time was given to the decentralised institutions to develop organisational and human resources capacity to handle the inflow and use of power. For example, reforms in Ghana, Nepal and Uganda have led to transfer of significant authority to lower-levels of government to decide their development needs and priorities and now have more control over the resources. Further, in Ghana and Uganda, districts can raise some of their own revenues and negotiate directly with external donors for additional assistance.

It would be prudent to state, that under democratic settings, political decentralisation and elections provide direct political accountability. Since many developing countries have weak representative decision-making process and local elites are often firmly entrenched, participation and accountability can be enhanced through explicit promotion of transparent budgeting process. Experience in Mexico and particularly Brazil has demonstrated that participatory budgeting for government expenditures can serve as a critical link between communities and government. In both Nepal and Thailand too, more democratic processes have boosted the chances of meaningful participation.

Exaggeration of Decentralisation Claims

In spite of the positive trends heralded by political decentralization, the concept is certainly not a panacea (Landau and Eagle, 1998:10) and rather has been presented as a solution to a larger number of problems- some of which may not be directly linked to the decentralisation process. Decentralisation is a popular prescription for governance problems affecting poor countries, in particular. (Moore and Putzel, 2000) In reality, political decentralisation could be expected to contribute to some key elements of good governance, such as increasing people's opportunity for participation in economic, social and political decisions; assisting in developing people's capacities; and enhancing government responsiveness, transparency and accountability. Nevertheless, more often than not, political decentralisation fails to achieve its objective because of the complex phenomenon involving many geographic entities, and societal factors. The geographic entities include the international, national, sub-national, and local levels, and the societal actors include government, the private sector and civil society.

Political decentralization often requires constitutional or statutory reforms, the development of pluralistic political parties, the strengthening of legislatures, creation of local political units, and the encouragement of effective public interest groups. National governments are however often reluctant to fully undertake political decentralisation as it implies relinquishment of power and have to be accompanied by the devolution of financial resources to make political decentralisation work.

Further, advocates of political decentralization often always assume that decisions made with greater community participation will be better informed and more relevant to diverse interests in society than those made only by national political authorities. Conditions however exist when the motives behind decentralisation could itself be political in nature spurned by people who want to attain political power by breaking the existent political regime. For instance, in the late colonial period, political decentralization sometimes was used as a device to enlist the cooperation of local leaders and

broaden the base of support for colonial rule. Similarly in South Africa, under pressure to become more democratic and less authoritarian, the apartheid state responded in the 1980s by introducing a programme of regional and urban decentralization. While ostensibly democratic, the real intent of the administrative reforms was to increase the power of the centre over local government, depoliticise the black population and produce a new group of political collaborators. Those who opposed apartheid and aspired to a democratic society resisted administrative decentralization and concentrated their efforts on gaining control of the central state apparatus itself. The motives behind political decentralisation are therefore not always in the best interest of the people and may be tainted with political aspirations of a few.

The proponents of political decentralization often strongly link this process to initiation of decentralised planning with the involvement of local stakeholders— a case which may not hold true in all situations. A locally-elected official could have a mindset which refuses to take cognisance of the knowledge held by communities and their capacities to take judicious decision based on the given knowledge set. And on the other hand, political centralisation in no way restricts decentralised planning.

Organisation of marginalized and minority groups becomes of paramount importance in cases of political decentralisation if these groups are to be included in the service delivery bracket of these institutions. There is always a risk of the institutions becoming more discriminatory in their actions due to the buttressing of heavy hand of the local elites as they acquire more power and clout with the shifting of decision-making on their home turf.

Political decentralisation efforts often fail in absence of efforts towards strengthening of accountable local government institutions and fostering popular participation. If the people do not exercise democratic control over the central apparatus of the state, it is unlikely that decentralization of the state will be accompanied by increased political power of the people. Like Ghana, in spite of having some success with political decentralisation is having to strengthen devolution by introducing greater accountability and democracy.

Political decentralisation has also other setbacks. It can result in the loss of economies of scale and control over scarce financial resources by the central government. Weak administrative or technical capacity at local levels may result in services being delivered less efficiently and effectively in some areas of the country. Administrative responsibilities may be transferred to local levels without adequate financial resources and make equitable distribution or provision of services more difficult. Decentralization could also sometimes make coordination of national policies more complex and may allow functions to be captured by local elites. Also, distrust between public and private sectors may undermine cooperation at the local level.

Further, political decentralisation is a very time-intensive activity. It could be done fairly quickly if it implies mere shedding up of responsibilities to lower-levels of government, but if it aims at strengthening democracy and empowering citizens then it would have to be a process-oriented activity. Badly planned decentralisation could worsen regional inequities, and rich regions would develop much quicker than poorer ones as they can generate more funds and hence receive more in matching grants. Devolution of fiscal responsibilities in a non-transparent atmosphere, and where people do not have the capacity and expertise to manage budgeting could lead to widespread corrupt practices and appropriation of funds. (de Mello 1999)

End Note

Even when national governments decentralize responsibilities, they often retain important policy and supervisory roles. They must create or maintain the "enabling conditions" that allow local units of administration or non-government organizations to take on more responsibilities. Central ministries often have crucial roles in promoting and sustaining decentralization by developing appropriate and effective national policies and regulations for decentralization and strengthening local institutional capacity to assume responsibility for new functions. The success of decentralization frequently depends heavily on training for both national and local officials in decentralized administration. For instant, going against a widespread tendency towards re-centralisation in much of the Third World, the introduction of provincial government in Papua New Guinea sought both to bring government closer to the people, and to contain the spread of sub-nationalist movements. Its main effect has been to create a new focus for political activity, between and interacting with local and national politics.

Thus, political decentralisation is not an alternative to centralisation. The complementary roles of centralised and decentralised institutions need to be identified and strengthened by analysing the most effective ways and means of achieving a desired objective. To reiterate, it is important to stress that decentralisation is not a universal panacea for all social or development problems. Territorial cohesion and a minimum level of political stability are basic preconditions for any policy of political decentralisation. Indeed, the over-zealous promotion of decentralisation can tip a dangerous balance between micro-regionalism and national cohesion in favour of civil conflict.

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