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Editorial

Choose democracy: Environmentalists' socio-political responsibility

Environmentalists worldwide are working with local communities to improve natural resource management. But, is their impatience to establish 'sustainable' management techniques undermining long-term social and ecological sustainability? Is their choice to impose conservation and management agendas through non-democratic institutions undermining the long-run prospect for democratization and sustainable participatory management and use? The institutions environmental professionals choose for local community participation have profound effects on local democracy. In turn, local democracy shapes social and environmental sustainability. Theory tells us that representation in decision making—a trademark of democracy—is the mechanisms that results in the efficiency, equity and sustainability promised by decentralized and community-oriented forms of natural resource management. In practice, however, the majority of natural resource management interventions are not strengthening local democracy. As environmentalists, we need to take stock, ask why, and examine how we can do better.

Decentralization reforms swept the globe over the past decade (World Bank, 2000; Ndegwa, 2002). Most developing countries claim to be undertaking democratic decentralization in order to establish and democratize local government for purposes of democratization and to improve service delivery, local development and management (Crook and Manor, 1998; Oyugi, 2000, p. 16; Agrawal, 2001). Theorists expect decentralization to increase efficiency and equity (Mawhood, 1983; Manor, 1999). The logic of decentralization is inclusive and public. It is predicated on proximity and democratic processes reducing transaction costs, producing better downward accountability of decision makers, and enabling decision makers to match decisions and resources to local needs and aspirations (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). The same arguments imply that community-oriented forms of local natural resource management can also result in improved equity and efficiency. Decentralized approaches, however, only become effective when there is some mechanism to represent local needs and aspirations in decision making; representation, at its most basic, requires decision-making authorities or institutions that are (1) empowered to act on behalf of, and (2) accountable to the local population (Manin et al., 1999; Ribot, 2004).

Most developing countries are indeed building elected local governments with the expressed aim of improving public-sector accountability and public investments. Yet, in practice, governments and intervening environmental professionals are transferring few public powers over natural (or any other) resources to democratic local bodies (Mansuri and Rao, 2003; Ribot, 2002, 2004; Ribot and Larson, 2005). Despite the democratizing discourse associated with natural resource decentralizations and decentralization writ large, few decentralizations are transferring significant powers to democratic local bodies. Instead, environmental professionals avoid elected authorities and empower a mix of alternative local institutions, such as local offices of line ministries, NGOs, customary authorities, committees or private corporations and individuals (Manor, 2005; Namara and Nsabagasani, 2003; Ribot, 2004). Meanwhile, elected local authorities are frustrated by a lack of power, languishing on the sidelines while other institutions are empowered to take the initiative in rural development. The result is a proliferation of local institutions and a fragmentation or diffusion of public powers (Bazaara Forthcoming [2006]; Ribot, 1999, 2004; Namara and Nsabagasani, 2003; Ribot and Larson, 2005; Manor, 2005).

These local management interventions fit under different development styles, such as privatization, participatory or empowerment approaches, community-driven development, community-based development, NGO and civil-society support, pluralism, and social funds (Ribot, 2004; Prichett and Woolcock, 2004). Each approach to local development empowers different kinds of local institutions or authorities, with potentially different democratic and distributional outcomes. With this ongoing diffusion of public powers, fledgling democratic local governments are receiving few public resources and are in competition with a plethora of new local institutions. Little formal democratic decentralization is taking place and democratic local government is not being given the opportunity to represent or to engage local people in public affairs. (Crook and Manor, 1998; Ribot, 2004.)

Rather than local democratization, recent years are witnessing a spectacular comeback of less-inclusive authorities such as customary chiefs in Africa, and a re-emergence of claims to autochthony and authenticity that are narrowing forms of belonging rather than expanding

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citizenship. Further, despite a long history of integrated rural development efforts, 'development-new-style', with its plurality of approaches and local institutional interlocutors, is resulting in competing and conflicting fragmented forms of authority and of belonging, perhaps dampening the long-run prospects for local democratic consolidation. (Geschiere and Boone, 2003.) The atomized marketplace of institutions appears to be shattering rather than integrating and strengthening the local public domain (Namara and Nsabagasani, 2003; Ribot, 2004). While fragmentation and plurality can have advantages under representative systems, pluralism without representation is a formula for division and elite capture.

These dynamics are especially important in the environmental sector. In the developing world, most rural people depend on natural resources for their livelihoods. Natural resources are a source of subsistence and income for the rural world and of income and wealth for central governments and national elites (see Kaimowitz and Ribot, 2002; Anderson, 2002; Ribot, 2002, 2004). Natural resources are of great consequence to local people, giving them a reason to engage authorities who make natural resource decisions. For local authorities, holding these powers is part and parcel of their importance and legitimacy within local communities. Even a perfectly democratic authority is empty without meaningful powers. Natural resource management is now undergoing a global decentralization. It has the potential to strengthen local democratic authorities everywhere. Natural resource professionals can leverage democratization by empowering democratic authorities. Alternatively, they can make a grave global-scale mistake by pretending their interventions have little to do with democracy and political development.

Natural resources are critical for local democratic development. They are already in the local area, they are meaningful for local livelihoods, and they generate revenue—as opposed to health, education and infrastructure sectors. Because powers over natural resources can strengthen local authorities, it matters deeply whom environmentalists choose to empower—democrats or despots, representatives or autocrats. The choice influences the degree to which local people will be represented in meaningful decision making, the degree to which they will identify as citizens, the kinds of public democratic spaces that will emerge, and the institutional sustainability of natural resource interventions. In the long run local democracy should matter to environmentalists since it is the institutionalized form of community inclusion (or 'participation') with the potential to positively influence sustainable and just natural resource management.

To act conscientiously in natural resource management, environmentalists need to understand: (1) the logic of 'institutional choice',[1] and (2) the effects of 'recognizing'[2] different local institutions on local democracy. I use the term 'choice' here to attribute agency and therefore responsibility to large-scale environmental organizations and institutions—whether government or non-government—for the local interlocutors they *choose*. These large-scale organizations and institutions choose local institutions by transferring powers to them, conducting joint activities or soliciting their input. Through the institutional choices made by their designers, environmental projects and policies are transforming the local institutional landscape. I use the concept of 'recognition' to explore the effects of institutional choice on representation, citizenship and the public domain. A local institution is 'recognized' when it is chosen to speak for or act on behalf of local people. *Asking why* particular choices are being made helps to link their effects back to the project and policy design process. *Understanding their effects* helps us to identify approaches most likely to strengthen local democracy while serving the needs of local people and broader environmental and developmental objectives.

Governments, international agencies and organizations choose their local interlocutors for various reasons. Many have well thought out beliefs about causality—they follow theories about how specific institutional arrangements lead to specific outcomes (Putnam, 1993; Romeo, 1996; Tendler, 2000; Prichett and Woolcock, 2004; Ribot, 2004). Some are guided by populism, pluralism or republicanism, and/or the widespread Regan–Thatcher belief that government is bad (see Kymlicka, 2002; Young, 2002; Ribot, 2001). Others intervene based on expediency—e.g. working with NGOs is quicker than working with elected local authorities. In choosing local institutions, procedural objectives of new democratic processes often conflict with the instrumental objectives of donors or central ministries (Ribot, 2002; Shivaramakrishnan, 2000). Instrumental objectives—such as NRM project implementation—usually win out. A whole set of relations in which the state relates to local institutions and local people through instrumental objectives forms a symbolic violence—an implicit threat to locals who ignore the 'better' knowledge

[1] I want to distinguish here my use of the term 'institutional choice' from that of Ostrom (1999, p. 193). Ostrom uses the term to refer to the choices by local individuals among available alternatives (based on costs and benefits)—she is interested in how these choices lead to institutional formation. I use the term to refer to the choices made by governments and international organizations that impose the 'available alternatives' on local individuals—thus constraining their options. The two usages are not inconsistent. I, however, would argue that the choice of the institutions (for Ostrom institutions are basically rules) is not by the individual nor is it by any 'aggregation rule' by which individual choices result in larger-scale change. I do not think that institutions are merely organically emerging solutions to collective action problems. Institutions are created or cultivated by powerful interests. Arun Agrawal (pers. comm.) rightly points out that even choices made at institutional and governmental levels are ultimately made by individuals, and therefore these choices could still fit within Ostrom's framework. Nevertheless, as Sikor (forthcoming) points out, Ostrom's framework de-emphasizes the effects of larger political economic context on the formation of institutions.

[2] I take the term 'recognition' from Taylor 1994; Kymlicka 2002; and Fraser 2000.

and options of the state—preclude the emergence of discretionary local spaces (see Boutinot and Diouf, 2005).

Choices are also often driven by fear of role changes by government agents or by entrenched patterns of domination within a given sector—forest services are often accustomed to managing and mobilizing people rather than including them in decision making (Ribot, 1999; Ribot and Oyono, 2005). De-colonization of the sectors is a major frontier in the promotion of democratic decentralization. Central governments often have the will to decentralize, but they cannot fight entrenched sectoral powers. Forestry agencies in Africa still operate under a command and control approach inherited during colonial rule. They ignore executive branch decentralization reforms, continuing as oppressive and extractive regimes. Their discourse is supported by those who favor the instrumental objectives of forest management over procedural objectives of democracy. Unfortunately, environmental discourse often contributes to widespread resistance to local democracy (Ribot and Oyono, 2005; Oyono and Ribot, forthcoming; Ribot et al., 2007 forthcoming).

To inform project and policy processes, we need to grasp causal links between institutional choices and outcomes. Institutional choices affect at least three dimensions of local democracy: (1) representation, (2) citizenship, and (3) the public domain. Current institutional choices appear to result in problematic outcomes along these three dimensions. Representative forms of local government are receiving little support. Multiplication of forms of belonging and the strengthening of lineage- and interest-based forms of belonging over residency-based citizenship are fragmenting the local arena into competing and conflicting identity and interest groups. The public domain, the domain of democratic public decision-making, is being enclosed via various forms of privatization and desecularization of public powers. How do we assess the effects of the emerging local institutional mix on these three dimensions of local democratization processes? How do we assess institutional choice effects on efficiency and equity outcomes?

Recognition affects representation. If the recognized institution is representative, then representation is likely being strengthened; if it is despotic, then despotism is reinforced. But this simple formula can be misleading. Recognition through conditional power transfers can produce upward accountability toward the source of powers, undermining the downward accountability relations with the population that constitute local democracy. This is seen when transfers are contingent on demonstration of capacity or when the transfer is insecure and can be taken back based on central authority's discretion. Allocating powers in the form of mandates—to implement outside agendas—can also override representation. Conditionality and mandates shaped colonial rule—they are good tools for central control—and they continue to shape most environmental interventions today (Mamdani, 1996; Ribot, 1999). Recognition of multiple institutions also affects representation. Diffusion of powers among local institutions can create competition and conflict among institutions, which can lead to strengthening or undermining local democratic processes. Institutional proliferation takes powers from elected local authorities, sapping them of the substance of their effectiveness and legitimacy (Manor, 2005). Plurality of local institutions also, under some conditions, can lead to more-representative decision making (see Wollenberg et al., 2005).

Residency, identity and interest are the foundations of belonging. Residency-based belonging is associated with local government institutions (elected or appointed)—everyone in a given area belongs, has rights, can vote, etc. Residency is a strong basis of citizenship. Citizenship is an inclusive form of belonging. Identity-based forms of belonging can be based on ethnicity, race, lineage, gender, language, age, religion or origin. These are associated with customary and religious authorities such as chiefs or imams. Institutional choices that splinter people into identity groups can be divisive. Interest-based forms of belonging are predicated on free association and take the form of private individuals, private corporations, NGOs, unions, and other associations. These too can be divisive or integrative, depending on circumstance. Opting for local government is a choice for residency-based citizenship, choosing customary authorities produces and strengthens identity-based belonging, while privatization creates interest-based forms of belonging. Environmentalists must understand how the identities they are fostering interact, create mutuality or explode into violence.

Each form of belonging has implications for democratization and the production of broad-based forms of belonging and citizenship that form the basis for inclusive public decision-making and investment processes. If powers over resource management held by central government or other organizations are securely transferred to local government institutions, then public space is maintained or broadened. If they are under elected local authorities, then one can say that democratic space is being maintained or opened. Through privatization, public powers are transferred out of the public domain. Public powers and public space are enclosed and diminished. When powers are transferred to identity-based authorities, the public domain is further enclosed, but can also be desecularized. George Bush, for example, is desecularizing public powers to Christian authorities. In doing so, he is legitimizing his religious electoral (and ideological) base—people identify with empowered religious authorities because they become a source of aid and finance. Simultaneously, this approach delegitimates government—which is deprived of powers to respond to basic needs and disasters. This politics of recognition fragments citizenship and undermines democracy.

This editorial is decidedly focused on 'top down' environmental interventions—which is what most of us do, no matter how deeply committed we are to promoting bottom-up democracy. We need to understand the role of

projects and *policy*—among other factors—in shaping the local institutional landscape. Decentralization and community-oriented natural resource management *are* top-down affairs that can provide the infrastructure for popular, 'bottom-up', engagement and expression—particularly where there are no strong local social movements, and even where there are (Ribot, 2004). As Gaventa (2002) puts it, decentralization can open the spaces to initiate a more-active citizen engagement by promoting inclusive participation. It can open the space for new kinds of local agency. So, I focus on the effects of such policy. The object of this focus is neither to exclude local institutional categories nor to downplay local agency in the articulation between outside intervention and local institutions. Local institutions continuously define and choose themselves and impose themselves on outside actors (Boone, 2003; Bierschenk, 2005). But they do so facing constraints and enabling conditions created by policy choices in which they usually have little say. Environmentalists need to take responsibly for the structure and effects of the constraints and conditions they are creating.

Environmentalists have a large socio-political responsibility. The institutions they choose to work with in the local arena influence whether fledgling local democratic authorities will gain strength and legitimacy, who belongs and who does not, and whether there will be a broad-based collective project through which to build local democracy. Institutional choices matter. Choosing local democracy does not mean eliminating other institutions. It means making public representative authorities into the ultimate backstop and recourse in local decision making. Other local institutions will continue to flourish. But, when it comes to the transfer of *public* powers, they should flourish under the authority of representative institutions. Subordinating chiefs and NGOs—when they exercise public powers—to representative (presumably elected) local authorities should foster residency-based citizenship, cohesive and integrative forms of identity, and the public domain. In the long run, these are the elements of local democracy. They are also the elements of sustainable and just institutions for natural resource management. It is the responsibility of each and every environmentalist to understand and ask—over and over again—two key questions: Why are we choosing different local institutions? What are the long-term effects of these choices on democracy, development and natural resource management?

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