Introduction to the Debate on Decentralization and Participation

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Introduction

From the 1970s onwards, development strategies focusing on decentralization and participation have been prominent in the development debate. This new emphasis was a reaction to earlier development strategies stressing economic growth through capital-intensive industrialization and centralized planning. For one thing, central planning and control had not achieved the goals, and secondly, income disparities between rich and poor had widened in many countries. The concept of development was stretched beyond economic growth as a primary objective to comprise growth-with-equity, emphasizing the basic needs of the poor. This had implications for the organization of development planning and administration. It was argued that the new development goals required wider participation in the economic, social and political processes and structures enabling the poor to help themselves to increase their productivity and incomes.

Arguments against centralized control and planning came from two quarters: one school may be termed **liberal interventionists** and another **radical populists**. While both argue that decentralization is a necessity to achieve growth-with-equity and poverty alleviation, their points of departure and strategies vary:

The **liberal interventionists** (exemplified by Cheema and Rondinelli as well as donor agencies) look at development strategies from the centre and argue for decentralization as a means to im-

prove government performance and thus the implementation of development programmes. They are concerned with individuals as actors and with increased citizen participation. Popular empowerment is desirable but not the major concern.

The **radical populists** look at development from below, focusing on the people, and they are primarily concerned with political decentralization. This is exemplified by Guy Gran's statement "the only way to dissolve concentrated power is to democratize it". They are concerned with groups as actors and the stress is on mass empowerment.

Local government institutions

Within political science, decentralization has a long tradition, and it is concerned with the extent to which power and authority should be dispersed through the geographical hierarchy of the state, and the institutions and processes through which such dispersal occurs.

Many of the arguments for decentralization follow the liberal arguments in favour of democratic local governments which are claimed to be good for national democracy and to provide benefits to the locality. It is assumed that institutions will be democratically recruited; that they will ensure political equality; and that they will be accountable and responsive.

Within development studies there is a broad-ranging literature on decentralization, the role of local institutions and institution building. By and large it is based on the liberal normative assumptions of decentralization, and the focus is on decentralization as a tool for development.

In the development literature it is common to distinguish between different forms of decentralization:

Deconcentration: redistribution of administrative responsibilities within the central government, i.e. to decentralized units of central government.
Delegation: to Semi-Autonomous or Parastatal Organizations.
Devolution: transfer of power to autonomous and independent local governments with corporate status, i.e. transfer of administrative and political power.
Privatization: transfer of functions from government to non-government institutions.

Since decentralization often entails a mix of these models, it is useful to use Diana Conyers' alternative classification which focuses on the criteria used in decentralization. She outlines five important elements or characteristics of decentralization:

1. **functional** activities over which authority is transferred (agriculture, health, education, etc. including sub-functions, e.g. day-to-day administration, curriculum design, etc.)
2. **type** of authority or power transferred (policy-making, financial powers, and power over personnel matters)
3. the **level** to which power is transferred (province, district, locality, etc.)
4. to **whom** power is transferred (political body, bureaucratic body, groups, etc.)
5. the **legal and administrative** means by which authority is transferred

For analytical purposes such a classification makes it possible to operationalize studies on decentralization and the degree of local autonomy. Thus, it is often found that although policy making is transferred, it is often executive powers, while the central government retains control over law making. Similarly, while financial powers may be transferred, there are often limits to the type of revenue which may be raised (as certain taxing powers remains with the central government).

Decentralization is seen as a means of achieving a variety of different objectives. These are usually put forward as rationales or promises of decentralization policies. The most common objectives include:

- it is a more **efficient** way of meeting local needs, by cutting red tape, making government/administration more flexible, **accountable,** and **responsive** by bringing government close to the people
- it is relevant for meeting the **needs of the poor through local-level participation**
- it allows for greater political and administrative **penetration** of national policies - support for development can be mobilized by decentralization
- it can increase **political stability and national unity** - by participating in decision-making local groups get greater *stake* in maintaining the political system
- it can improve the link between demand and supply of public goods
- it can increase local resource mobilization

Regarding objectives of decentralization, it is worth noting the quotation cited by Conyers to the effect that "for almost every principle one can find an equally plausible and acceptable contradictory principle".

Some of the objectives of decentralization may be explicit while others may be implicit. Part of the problem is that decentralization is usually advanced on the basis of normative statements, and the political objectives are not made explicit. As Smith has pointed out, decentralization may be presented and debated in the technical language of administrative efficiency or constitutional principles, and are thus depoliticised. I would argue with Smith that the objectives of decentralization are political objectives and need to be placed in a broader political and economic context. Like centralization, decentralization may be used for a variety of ends. To quote Smith: "decentralization may be judged differently, depending on whether it reinforces the position of those already dominant in local society or

whether it serves to increase the political power of classes hitherto subject to exploitation."

This different political objective of decentralization may be illustrated through two apparently similar decentralization strategies, one from West Bengal in India and one from Bangladesh.

Decentralization in West Bengal and Bangladesh

During the period of British colonialism, local government (union councils) was introduced in the late 19th century. The two areas of Bengal thus share a common long history of local government. They also share a traditional social structure characterized by patron-client relations where the big peasants control politics at the local level.

In **Bangladesh** (and earlier Pakistan) those in control of power at the state level have always strived to align themselves with the local power structure. Elections to local level governments have been used as a means to secure a power base in the rural areas by preserving the status quo through alignments with the rural elite (i.e. no attempt to break the patron client relations through mass mobilization). This political strategy continued with the local government reform introduced in 1982.[1] The focal point of local government was the upazila parishad which consisted of chairmen of the union councils and an elected upazila chairman. During the two elections to upazila parishad chairman - in 1985 and 1990 - there was no attempt at mass mobilization, and members of the rural elite got elected. These local politicians had some political power (primarily executive, whereas much legislative power rested with the central government which issued guidelines for the use of funds, etc.). The upazila parishads were also the lowest tier of administration, where

1 The decentralization reform of 1982 was abolished in 1990, but as of early 1993 no new structure has been decided upon.

government officials were deputed. They were part of the upazila parishads but without voting rights. In the strategy of the government there were no attempts at structural change. Being part of the rural elite, the members of the local government bodies had no interest in change - on the contrary.

In **West Bengal** the rural rich were also in control of the local councils until the Communist Party of India (Marxist) - CPI(M) - came to power in 1978. As was the case in Bangladesh, the CPI(M) also wanted to secure a power base in the rural areas, and as in Bangladesh the CPI(M) wanted to secure the power base through the elected local councils. However, instead of using the local councils (gram panchayats) to maintain the status quo, the party launched an all out campaign mobilizing the rural poor for the local elections. The first elections swept the rural rich out of power. Subsequently, the CPI(M) used the local councils to implement its structural reform program which challenged also the economic power of the rural rich through land reforms, improvement in the condition of sharecroppers, special credit to sharecroppers, and work programs for the landless.

In the West Bengal context the political objective was quite explicit, as decentralization was openly used to mobilize the masses and to increase the political power of the classes hitherto subject to exploitation. In the Bangladesh case the political objective was implicit, but it is clear that the objective was to secure and reinforce the position of those already dominant in local society and to use the local government institutions as a tool for the government's development programmes.

Participation

Participation, or popular participation, is a recurrent concept in the development debate. The concept is very nebulous: there is no

agreement on the definition of participation, and the concept is interpreted very differently.

Oakley has identified two different schools stressing participation as a major force in development thinking. One school sees participation as the key to the inclusion of human resources, i.e. if one could **include the human element in projects,** there would be a stronger chance that people would participate and that the projects would be successful, i.e. participation is seen as **an input** into a development project. Another school links participation to structural causes and sees participation as a **process** whereby poor people seek to **have some influence and to gain access to the resources** which would help them sustain and improve their living standards.

The first school can be identified with the liberal interventionist school which is concerned with performance and implementation of development programs. In the literature expressions like *seeking* and *directing* participation are common. The concept is not related to political power, let alone structural changes.

The second school may be identified with radical populists and neomarxists. They reject the liberal view of democracy with its stress on the right to vote. They focus on power relations and argue that genuine popular participation involves structural change, and the stress is on empowerment, implying the enablement of poor people to decide upon and to take the actions which they believe are essential to their development. This approach is found in e.g. UNRISD's Popular Participation Programme, where the struggle for people's participation implies an attempted redistribution of control of both resources and power in favour of those who live by their own productive labour.

Søren Lund has suggested a classification of the use of "participation" which is similar to Oakley's. He distinguishes between two **participatory strategies**: 1) a **public management strategy**, where the concept is used in an **instrumentalistic** sense, i.e. as **a means for development,** the assumption being that increased involvement

will improve development efforts, and 2) a **political strategy**, where the concept is used in a **normative** sense, i.e. as an ideal model or a **development goal**. Here the assumption is that the only way to improve conditions of life for the underprivileged is a transfer of authority and resources.

Lund further outlines six empirical categories of participatory strategies (or six different theoretical models): each of the two participatory strategies are subdivided into three subcategories on the basis of three different ways of conceptualizing the population (what he calls three paradigms of relations, viz. 1) national vs. local, 2) state vs. civil society, and 3) privileged vs. weak (see table below).

Table 1
Lund's Empirical categories of participatory strategies

Paradigm	National versus Local	State versus Civil	Privileged versus weak and excluded
Empirical categories of participatory management strategies (Participation as a *means* to development)	Deconcentration/ decentralization of certain functions from the authorities and the central bureaucracies located in a geographical center to public institutions in the local area	Delegation of certain tasks and responsibilities to civil institutions form public, government controlled institutions	Organization and mobilization of the weak and excluded by the State
Empirical categories of participatory political strategies (Participation as a *goal* of development)	More local autonomy: Empowerment of local institutions relative to central government	Retreat of the State: Empowerment of civil institutions and organisations relative to the public institutions	Development from below: Empowerment of the weak and the poor relative to the rich and powerful groups.

The UNRISD approach as well as neo-marxist writings analyze participation (or political decentralization) within a theoretical framework of power relations. The liberal school usually does not stress the political context or provide a theoretical framework. Cohen and Uphoff at Cornell have provided a useful operational framework for studying participation.

In my own study of local government in West Bengal I found that this operational framework could be incorporated within a theore-

tical framework of power relations, and using the UNRISD interpretation of participation given above.

The Cornell framework for studying participation consists of three dimensions of **What? Who?** and **How?**. Each dimension is broken down:

The **What** dimension consists of
- participation in decision-making
- participation in implementation
- participation in benefits
- participation in evaluation

The **Who** dimension consists of
- types of participants (e.g. local leaders or residents)
- characteristics of participants (age, sex, occupation, etc.)

The **How** dimension consists of
- the basis of participation (impetus, incentives)
- form of participation (organizational pattern, direct or indirect involvement)
- extent of participation (time involved, number of activities)
- effectiveness of participation (degree of power accompanying participation)

Local Level Organizations and Groups

The role of local level organizations in development is increasingly stressed. Local organizations are often referred to as the **third sector** (as opposed to l) bureaucratic structures and 2) market interactions). They are also referred to as **intermediaries** between the individual and the state. Local organizations comprise a variety of organaniza-tional types and differ in objectives, style, membership etc. Some

organizations are induced from the outside, while others are spontaneous.

Some proponents are concerned with local organizations as an alternative approach to rural development strategies, while others are more concerned with empowerment.

One approach to the role of local organizations is advanced by Esman and Uphoff who define their own position as a **structural-reformist one**. They see governments as not monolithic, and while regimes tend to protect the social and political status quo, most are coalitions of varying and conflicting interests. In their view, governments' attitude toward rural development and rural associations are not necessarily predetermined or fixed, so long as local organizations do not threaten to upset the existing system. Their structural-reformist approach emphasizes the search for institutional and organizational changes that can cumulatively shift the balance of socio-economic and organizational power. They argue that local organizations that strengthen rural people in large numbers through their own efforts are essential to the kind of incrementalism that this approach implies - building local power that can both limit and influence the actions of the state and of the private sector.

In their approach, the responsibility of the analyst is to discover and promote programs of incremental improvements which are feasible within the constraints of the social context that the poor actually face.

Esman and Uphoff are especially concerned with local organizations such as membership organizations, which may be self-help organizations or cooperatives where members pool economic resources for their own benefit. In surveying a whole series of experiences they found that rural development depends on a network of organizations linked horizontally and vertically and which represents a combination of institutions which pool the respective strengths of governmental, private and membership sectors.

Guy Gran's book on **Development by People. Citizen Construction of a Just World** exemplifies the approach to local organizations which stresses empowerment. The key strategies involve the promotion of self-reliance, local capacity building, mass empowerment, and equitable use of resources. Operationally, this involves outsiders as catalysts dedicated to serving and empowering the poor through the process of conscientization and group decision making, thereby presenting the poor with a new vision of society in which they can command greater access to power and resources.

Some Non-governmental organization[2] (NGOs) are local level organizations. Some are primarily concerned with development work in the sense of running programs aiming to increase the economic and social situation of the poor. Others may be termed action groups, as the stress is on conscientization, mobilization and organization of the oppressed, usually without an explicitly stated political perspective (very often such groups pose as being non-political). Increasingly, donor agencies are eager to channel funds through NGOs, partly because they are believed to be better able to reach the poor than government agencies, and partly because of ideological commitment to support the private sector.

Points for discussion

Above I have presented the main concepts and arguments in the development debate on decentralization and participation. By way of conclusion I would like to raise some of the points which I find problematic and which deserve further elaboration and analysis.

2 The definition of an NGO varies from country to country.

The language of the development debate:

The debate on the role of local level institutions and decentralization takes place on different planes - or in different "languages". One language is a "development" language as used by donor agencies. Both liberal interventionists and - more so - radical populists use this language in arguing "how to reach the rural poor", where concepts like empowerment and participation remain vague - they are descriptive and not analytical. Furthermore, in the liberal interventionist usage of the concepts they are devoid of any political implication. At a more academic or analytical plane, the positivist framework of the liberal interventionists is criticized by neo-marxists who insist on focusing on power structures. The former deemphasizes structural causes, while the latter tend to be reductionist and does not leave room for manoeuvre and to disregard actors.

Apart from different political and ideological perspectives the problem is that the debate concerns both **theoretical models** which aim at understanding processes of social change, and **policy models** which attempt to set out the ways in which development can be promoted. As Long and van der Ploeg have pointed out, the interrelations between theoretical and policy models are often left unexplicated and therefore remain unclear. They argue that it is important to focus on **intervention practices** by which they mean political struggles over access to, and distribution of, certain critical resources and, above all, as normative struggles over the definition of development and the role of the different actors. They argue for **an actor approach** which brings into the analysis some account of **human agency** which entails the idea both of individuals and groups developing social strategies on the basis of existing knowledge, resources and capabilities, and that of emergent organizational forms that both enable and constrain them. They thus argue that specific intervention processes must be viewed in relation to collective and individual memories.

Given the lack of the "political" in the development debate concerning decentralization and participation, some important issues are not stressed. This applies e.g. to the relationship between centralization, decentralization and political power and the implication for popular participation.

People centered development

Several instances could be cited where local action groups have been enabled to decide upon and take actions on matters essential to their development (ex. Bhoomi Sena Movement in Maharashtra in India, many NGOs in Latin America and women's groups all over the world). Oakley has also noted that self-reliance and participation help poor people to learn how to plan and implement and, on a broader front, prepare them for participation at the regional or even broader level.

Positive experiences with group action notwithstanding, policy statements tend to beg the question of what people centered development actually means in a wider political context. In this connection it is worth mentioning the point raised by Smith. In discussing community participation in neighbourhoods in Britain, he points out that voting and other forms of participation have been seen as viable political actions without questioning whether the institutions in which the poor participated could ever hope to have a jurisdiction over the forces that shape their lives. In much of the literature on participation such questioning seldom takes place.

The role of political parties

In the debate on decentralization, local action groups, and community organizations, the role of political parties are rarely mentioned.

It seems relevant to ask why this is so. In the liberal tradition it is assumed that political power derives from the right to vote and that institutions will be democratically elected. This is dismissed by neo-marxists and radical populists who argue for mass participation. But it would seem that political parties do have a role to play here, as is the case in the West Bengal example referred to in the main text. On the other hand, Kothari has argued for India as a whole that the rise of Non-Party Political Formations is a result of the failure of the democratic party system.

The role of NGOs

Many NGOs stress conscientization and group formation. These concepts are linked to the concepts of participation and empowerment. In discussing the World Bank's strategy of cooperating with NGOs, Daniel Fleming mentions that one may talk of a modernization consensus being within reach built around participation and sustainable development. But the strategy begs the question of who rules; and I would agree with Samoff that this is a basic question. This to me raises the question whether local action groups will be able to influence the forces that shape their lives without engaging in political struggles. In this connection it is worth mentioning a comment by Garilao: in discussing the future role of NGOs, he points out that indigenous NGO leaders will in the future enter the political arena and join national politics through their own parties. This leads to the question of when and how a local action group becomes a political movement.

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