

# African Decentralization

## *Local Actors, Powers and Accountability*

*Jesse C. Ribot*

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**UNRISD**

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## Acronyms

<b>CIFOR</b>	Center for International Forestry Research
<b>CODESRIA</b>	Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa
<b>DANIDA</b>	Danish Agency for Development Assistance
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>GBF</b>	Government of Burkina Faso
<b>GOC</b>	Government of Cameroon
<b>IDRC</b>	International Development Research Centre
<b>IDS</b>	Institute of Development Studies
<b>IIED</b>	International Institute for Environment and Development
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>PRA</b>	participatory rural appraisal
<b>PVO</b>	private voluntary organization
<b>ROM</b>	Republic of Mali
<b>RON</b>	Republic of Niger
<b>ROS</b>	Republic of Senegal
<b>RRA</b>	rapid rural appraisal
<b>SSRC</b>	Social Science Research Council
<b>UNCDF</b>	United Nations Capital Development Fund
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Programme
<b>UNRISD</b>	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>WRI</b>	World Resources Institute
<b>WWF</b>	World Wildlife Fund

## Defining Decentralization

**DECENTRALIZATION** is any act in which a central government formally cedes powers to actors and institutions at lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Mawhood 1983; Smith 1985).

**POLITICAL, OR DEMOCRATIC, DECENTRALIZATION** occurs when powers and resources are transferred to authorities representative of and downwardly accountable to local populations (Manor 1999; Crook and Manor 1998:11–12; Agrawal and Ribot 1999:475). Democratic decentralization aims to increase public participation in local decision making. Through greater participation, democratic decentralization is believed to help internalize social, economic, developmental and environmental externalities; to better match social services and public decisions to local needs and aspirations; and to increase equity in the use of public resources.<sup>1</sup> Through entrustment of locally accountable representative bodies with real public powers, the ideals of public choice and participatory or community-based approaches to development converge.

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<sup>1</sup> See the following literature on participation, public choice and federalism: World Bank 2000; Manor 1999; Hilhorst and Aarnink 1999; Crook and Manor 1998; Hoben et al. 1998; Huther and Shah 1998; Sewell 1996; Romeo 1996; Baland and Platteau 1996; Parker 1995; Hesselting 1994; Cernea 1989; Rondinelli et al. 1989; Cheema and Rondinelli 1983; Musgrave 1965. Participatory or accountably representative approaches to natural resource management are lauded for their contribution to economic efficiency, equity, environmental management and development.

Democratic decentralization is in effect an institutionalized form of the participatory approach. This review uses the terms political and democratic decentralization interchangeably. These are “strong” forms of decentralization from which theory indicates the greatest benefits can be derived (see, for example, Oyugi 2000:15).

**DECONCENTRATION, OR ADMINISTRATIVE DECENTRALIZATION**, concerns transfers of power to local branches of the central state, such as *préfets*, administrators, or local technical line ministry agents.<sup>2</sup> These upwardly accountable bodies are appointed local administrative extensions of the central state. They may have some downward accountability built into their functions (see Tandler 1997), but their primary responsibility is to central government (Oyugi 2000; Manor 1999; Agrawal and Ribot 1999).<sup>3</sup> Generally, the powers of deconcentrated units are delegated by the supervising ministries. Deconcentration is a “weak” form of decentralization because the downward accountability relations from which many benefits are expected are not as well established as in democratic or political forms of decentralization.

**FISCAL DECENTRALIZATION**, the decentralization of fiscal resources and revenue-generating powers, is also often identified by many analysts as a separate form of decentralization.<sup>4</sup> But while fiscal transfers are important, they constitute a cross-cutting element of both deconcentration and political decentralization, rather than a separate category (Oyugi 2000:6; Agrawal and Ribot 1999:476).

**DEVOLUTION** is often used to refer to any transfer from central government to any non-central government body—including local elected governments, NGOs, customary authorities, private bodies and so forth. The term devolution is not used in this review as it is too general.

**DELEGATION** is when public functions are transferred to lower levels of government, public corporations, or any other authority outside of the regular political-administrative structure, to implement programs on behalf of a government agency (Alex et al. 2000:3; Ostrom et al. 1993).

**PRIVATIZATION** is the permanent transfer of powers to any non-state entity, including individuals, corporations, NGOs and so on. Privatization, although often carried out in the name of decentralization, is not a form of decentralization. It operates on an exclusive logic, rather than on the inclusive public logic of decentralization (Oyugi 2000:6; Balogun 2000:155; Agrawal and Ribot 1999).

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Enormous thanks go to Diana Conyers, Aaron deGrassi and Peter Utting for their constructive comments on drafts of this review. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Dutch Government and USAID for their support of the Institutions and Governance Program at the World Resources Institute to conduct a portion of the research that informed this document. I especially would like to thank Thandika Mkandawire, Director of UNRISD, and Jean-Michel Labatut, Senior Program Officer at IDRC, for inviting me to write this review.

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<sup>2</sup> In earlier literature, transfers from central to administrative and elected units of local government were often conflated and called *devolution* (Rondinelli et al. 1989:75). This conflation is easily made when theorists and practitioners assume that the choices and needs of local populations are automatically taken into account by local administrators.

<sup>3</sup> Note that local governments may also have technical agents and administrators, but when they are accountable to local representatives (see Blair 2000) it still constitutes part of “democratic” decentralization.

<sup>4</sup> Wunsch and Olowu 1995; Manor 1999; Crook and Manor 1998; Prud’homme 2001.

## Foreword

The concepts and ideological currents that characterize development discourse are constantly changing. “Neoliberalism” remains a dominant approach, but it has been challenged or complemented in recent years by others associated with “good governance” and “rights-based development”. Such approaches have focused on issues of democracy, public sector reform, accountability, participation and equity. In practice, the principal international development and finance agencies have internalized these perspectives by adopting a fairly standardized set of policy recommendations for developing countries. One of the most prominent is “decentralization”, involving the transfer of responsibilities from central to local government with the objective of improving efficiency and accountability in public sector management, as well as the responsiveness of state agencies to local needs.

A central feature of UNRISD’s research agenda has always been to inquire into the effectiveness of new international policy approaches in developing countries. The Institute’s work on the Green Revolution, participation, structural adjustment and sustainable development has shown that there is often a sizeable gap between discourse and reality, and that international agencies often fail to understand how issues of power, culture and social relations affect policy implementation and outcomes. Along similar lines, Canada’s IDRC attaches a great deal of importance to the study of processes of policy formulation and implementation. Past research on these subjects generally failed to take into account political economy issues, such as the political feasibility of policy options, vested interests and governance systems that influence how policies are made and how programmes are implemented and delivered. IDRC attempts to develop in its own programming a systematic approach to these issues. As a result of these concerns, UNRISD and IDRC asked Jesse Ribot to review the literature on the experience of decentralization in Africa.

His findings suggest that the efficiency, equity and democratic goals of decentralization are far from being achieved. There is often a mismatch between the transfer of responsibilities and resources. Furthermore, institutions to ensure downward accountability may be weak, and the benefits of reallocating powers and resources may be appropriated by local elites. Clearly, it is necessary for international agencies and policy makers to be better informed about the realities of decentralization. For this to happen, however, there needs to be systematic comparative research on the implementation and outcomes of decentralization in different country and local contexts. Yet, as the author points out, despite the attention to decentralization in international policy circles, such an inquiry has been extremely limited. In this review, Ribot thus provides an extensive outline of research questions and priorities.

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## Summary/Résumé/Resumen

### Summary

African governments have undergone repeated decentralization reforms since the early colonial period. However, in the most recent wave (beginning in the late 1980s), the language of reform has shifted from an emphasis on national cohesion and the management of local populations to a discourse more focused on democratization, pluralism and rights. This review is concerned with the degree to which the new language is being codified in laws and translated into practice.

Decentralization is any act in which a central government formally cedes powers to actors and institutions at lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy. Decentralization reforms are usually about strengthening both central and local governance in ways that support the objectives of national unification, democratization, and greater efficiency and equity in the use of public resources and service delivery. A primary objective of decentralization reforms is to have governments that are able to perform or support all of these functions with appropriate roles at multiple levels. This review focuses on local government and local institutions, as they are the key recipients of decentralized powers.

It has been argued that democratic mechanisms that allow local governments to discern the needs and preferences of their constituents, and that provide a way for those constituents to hold local governments accountable, are the basis for most of the purported benefits of decentralization. The underlying developmentalist logic of decentralization is that local institutions can better discern, and are more likely to respond to, local needs and aspirations. Theorists believe this ability derives from local authorities having better access to information and being more easily held accountable to local populations. Downward accountability of local authorities is central to this formula. When downwardly accountable local authorities also have discretionary powers—that is, a domain of local autonomy—over significant local matters, there is good reason to believe that greater equity and efficiency will follow.

These assumptions must be approached with caution, as surprisingly little research has been done to assess whether such conditions exist or if they lead to the desired outcomes. In practice, there is considerable confusion and obfuscation about what constitutes decentralization. In the name of decentralization, powers over natural and other resources are being allocated to a variety of local bodies and authorities that may not be downwardly accountable or entrusted with sufficient powers. Many reforms initiated in the name of decentralization are not structured in ways likely to deliver the presumed benefits of decentralization and participation, and may ultimately undermine efforts to create sustainable and inclusive rural institutions. The term “decentralization” is also often applied to programmes and reforms that ultimately are designed to retain central control. It has been argued, for example, that the legal and political design of local government in Africa can actually weaken the cultivation of a democratic culture at the local level, and that it can hamper the ability of local authorities to take initiatives in the field of ser-

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