

Community Based Natural Resource Management and Political Capital: Lessons from Asia and Africa.

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Introduction

During the past two decades there has been a shift from predominantly 'top down' centralised approaches to natural resource management, towards more devolved models, often referred to as 'Community Based Natural Resource Management' (CBRM). Such models are part of the broader processes of decentralisation and constitutional reform that is underway in many countries of Asia and Africa, and gain further credence in light of the need build the adaptive capacity and resilience of marginal communities in the face of a climate change. It is assumed that the devolution of decision making and control over natural resources to local communities can bring multiple benefits (social, economic, ecological), improves 'good governance' through greater participation and accountability, and has the potential to empower the poor.

Yet to what extent does the 'reality' match the 'rhetoric' of community based, or participatory, NRM? Do such strategies go any way to enhancing the rights of the poor to land and other natural resources? Has sufficient attention be given to the complex social and political contexts within such strategies are being pursued? How can the 'political capital' of local communities be strengthened in such a way that the benefits of NRM are not captured by 'local elites', or that traditional collective forms of resource management are not undermined? What is the role of the State, donors and NGOs in creating the conditions necessary for effective devolved resource management?

Drawing on a number of studies of NRM initiatives in Africa and Asia over the last twenty years, this paper reviews the already extensive literature and challenges the notion that a devolved or CBNRM approach can produce 'automatic' improvements in local governance. Instead, it argues that that greater cognizance needs to be given by donors, state bodies, and other stakeholders to the importance of power relations and 'political capital' in such contexts, and the need to integrate a 'rights based approach' into NRM planning and programming. .

Community Based Natural Resource Management

The issue of control over natural resources (such as land, water, forests) is considered closely linked to issues of power and 'good governance', in particular within resource rich African countries: "Access and control over resources (in Africa) is considered the major governance issue, especially for rural people, and is the bread and butter issue on which democracy must deliver. NRM is central to good governance and increasing enfranchisement of rural peoples", argued USAID in 2004 (p3). One decade on the issues remain at the forefront of contemporary development policy debates, not least as competition for, and conflicts over, land and other resources have intensified in a resource hungry and climate constrained world.

Over the past several decades there has been a significant paradigm shift in conservation and natural resource management (NRM), away from 'top down' and predominantly centralised approaches, towards more devolved models in which local people play a much more active role – often referred

to as 'community based natural resource management' (CBNRM) (Bass, et al 2005; Ballet, et al 2007; Dalal and Clayton 2003; Roe, et al, 2009; Tyler 2006). This shift in thinking was brought about by an increased recognition by national governments, donors and other stakeholders that centralised decision making, control and enforcement of natural resource management, through government agencies, has often proven ineffective, or brought about resource degradation rather than sustainable use (Agrawal 1999; Wyckoff-Baird, 1997). One such example is Nepal, where the substitution of communities traditional governance for modern structures set up by the government in the 1980s contributed to rapid deforestation (Agrawal 1999). As Hesse and Pattison (2013) observe in a more recent policy brief, formal 'top down' planning often fails to benefit from the insights and experience of communities that have learnt over time how best to exploit the ecological and economic dynamics of their own local environments – mobile livestock keeping, or pastoralism, being a case in point.

Market based solutions on the other hand, focusing largely on property rights, tend to produce social costs through inequity and exclusion of marginalised groups, and has often led to unsustainable land use practices (Ballett, et al 2007). CBNRM has thus emerged and developed as a 'third way' between government administration and market orientated management (ibid).

CBNRM is the management of natural resources under a detailed plan developed and agreed by all concerned stakeholders. The approach is 'community based' in that, "the communities managing the resources have the legal rights, local institutions and economic incentives to take substantial responsibility for sustainable use of these resources" (Uphoff, 1998, npn). Under the natural resource management plan, communities become the primary implementers, although in most cases they are assisted and monitored by technical services from outside (ibid).

CBNRM has, furthermore, been shown to strengthen 'social capital' (Ballet, et al 2007; Fernandes-Gimenez, 2008; Ostrom 1990), which many would argue is the key to 'adaptive capacity' - "the potential of individuals, communities and society to be actively involved in the process of change in order to minimise negative impacts and maximise benefits" (Pettengell, 2010, p.7). Though social capital can mean different things to different people, it is broadly accepted that this concept refers to "the features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinating actions" (Putnam, 1993 p.167). Whereas 'political capital' - of which more later - generally relates to 'vertical' claims and rights (eg vis-a-vis a landlord, the State), social capital relates to 'horizontal' claims (vis-a-vis peers) (Carney 2002).

Since the mid 1990s, and throughout the 2000s, CBNRM projects and programmes became increasingly common across countries of the South and have been introduced in a number of natural resource sectors, including, watershed, forests, wildlife, irrigation, fisheries and coastal zone management. Some better known examples of this approach include: 'Joint Forestry Management' (JFM) or 'Participatory Forest Management' (PFM), which originated in India and which has been adopted enthusiastically by Kenya, Tanzania (where more than 3.6 million hectares are now managed as Village Land Forest Reserves) and several other African countries (Lele, 2000; IUCN, 1997; Alden Wily 2007; Roe, et al 2009); the community based wildlife and eco-tourism programmes in Zimbabwe (such as CAMPFIRE¹), Namibia, Botswana and elsewhere (Dalal-Clayton, et al, 2003; IUCN, 2000; Jones and Carswell, 2004; SLSA, 2003); and the *Gestion de terroir* form of land use management planning, popular in the Sahelian countries of West Africa (Dalal-Clayton, et al, 2003; Hesse and Trench, 2000; Roe et al 2009).

CBNRM has also been considered an important strategy for pursuing the goals of various multilateral environmental treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate

¹ Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE)

Change (UNFCCC) (Roe et al, 2009). More recent global initiatives, such as Reduced Emissions from Deforestation (REDD) – an international finance scheme linked to the UNFCCC whereby developed countries pay for the conservation of forests and carbon sequestration in developing countries – offers an opportunity for revitalization of CBNRM approaches.²

Such strategies and shift in thinking have usually been driven by broader decentralisation and local government reform policies which involve restructuring the power relations between central state and communities through the transfer, or ‘devolution’, of decision-making and control to local level organisations and institutions (Alden Wily 2007; Egli, et al 2007; Hesse and Pattison 2013; Shackelton, et al, 2002; Roe et al 2009; Wyckoff-Baird, 1997)³. In most African states decentralisation is seen as very much part of the ‘good governance’ agenda which has been adopted by developing countries, often at the insistence of donors such as the WB and DFID. This is usually delivered through the evolution of traditional authority into fully fledged elected community governments, each empowered to govern people and resources within its discrete domain. Nevertheless, state agencies usually retain an oversight and watchdog function (Alden Wiley, 2007). In some cases traditional chiefs will still play a role as ex-officio council chairs (ibid).

The main assumption underpinning devolved NRM is that greater participation in decision-making is a positive good in itself, and has multiple benefits. Such decentralised arrangements allow more community participation, leading to better representation and to empowerment. Participation and decentralisation have been shown to promote equity and social development through greater retention and sharing of the benefits derived from natural resources at the local level (Ribot, 2004; Tyler 2006). Where conditions are highly variable and unpredictable, such as in the dryland areas of Africa, local institutions, it is argued, in contrast to centralised decision making processes, have the capacity and flexibility to respond to rapidly changing situations (Hesse and Pattison, 2013).

In addition, by bringing government decision making 'closer to the people', decentralisation is widely believed to increase public sector accountability and therefore, effectiveness (Ribot, 2004; SLSA 2003). A further assumption is that if resources are managed at the local level, by communities or local government, they will be looked after better, and more efficiently, resulting in improved opportunities for sustainable livelihoods (Fernandes-Gimenez, 2008; SLSA, 2003; Alden Wily 2007). This increases the likelihood of positive outcomes for the natural environment - the argument that people are less likely to degrade their resource base if they feel a sense of ownership in decision making processes, are bound by the commitments they make under locally agreed by-laws, and see positive returns from the careful use of available natural capital.

Such strategies, however, pose significant questions, particularly in relation to the extent to which devolution has significantly transferred control over NRM decision-making to local users or increased access by the rural poor to natural resources. We start by asking whether sufficient

² Some observers (Griffiths 2008, cited in Roe et al 2009) have already raised concern that REDD interventions may stimulate a return to top down state management of natural resources – to the detriment of local resource dependent communities. Roe et al (2009) observes that debates about REDD are “interlaced with the inherently political contests over access to new financial flows, and the power that access to capital confers to local and central actors in the context of Africa's evolving governance institutions and democratic struggles” (p. 12).

³ By using the term 'decentralisation', we should realise that what governments often mean is *administrative decentralisation*, or *deconcentration* – a transfer of activities within the structure of governance to local outposts without ceding power. NGOs and CSOs, on the other hand, usually call for *devolution* of powers from central to more local authorities, otherwise known as *democratic decentralisation* (Dalal Clayton, 2003; Ribot, 2004). This power may be total or partial, for example the rights and responsibilities for planning processes and management of renewable resources might be transferred to local authorities by central government, but the right to receive and distribute revenue generated from those same resources may be withheld (Wyckoff-Baird, 1997). According to this governance typology, CBNRM effectively requires democratic decentralisation rather than deconcentration because in deconcentration local resource users are not granted authority over resource management decisions and uses (Roe, et al 2009)

attention has been paid to the complexity of stakeholder roles and relationships at the local level?

Stakeholders in natural resource management

The management of natural resources can involve multiple and, often diverse, 'stakeholders', often competing for use and control of the same resources. Agreeing upon rules of resource management and how to enforce compliance poses a challenge to policy makers. 'Participation' has much to offer in theory but can also bring a new set of problems. In practice participation and partnerships in NRM and rural development planning is usually restricted to two kinds of stakeholders: community groups and (governmental or NGO) development project staff. Dalal-Clayton (2003) argues that this has proved insufficient to develop sustainable initiatives as it ignores the claims of other groups or antagonizes them. For instance community groups in an area of natural forest may wish to continue practicing traditional 'shifting cultivation' but outside groups, such as agribusiness or environmental groups, may be opposed – the former because they are competing for land, the latter because they wish the forest to be left untouched. On top of the opposing goals of these local, or primary, stakeholders, local contexts are further complicated by the influence of external forces such as national and international macro-economic policies, international decision making on the environment (the kind of multilateral environmental treaties mentioned earlier), or the impacts of conflict or climate change. Such competing forces and interest groups can often make NRM a 'confusing battlefield' (Dalal-Clayton, et al, 2003). Stakeholder analysis at an early stage in any new programme or initiative may help identify potential conflicts of interest, clarify the roles of, and relations between, stakeholders, and is useful in order to judge the appropriate type of participation by the different parties (Bilgrena and Holme, 2008; Dalal-Clayton, et al, 2003).

Ideally collaborative, or partnership, approaches are promoted as a means of improving the commitment of stakeholders through joint involvement in problem solving as well as improving the overall quality of decision making (Dalal-Clayton, et al 2003). Sharing knowledge and communication between stakeholders can be a starting point (Ashby, J 2003; Hesse and Pattison, 2013). In a recent study of a devolved approach to climate adaptation planning being piloted in Isiolo County, Kenya, Hesse and Pattison (2013) point to the benefits of a 'shared learning process', whereby "a range of stakeholders are brought together on an equal footing to discuss and analyse specific development issues... this has fostered a greater appreciation among government staff for the value of community knowledge and for the rationale for key pastoral management strategies". (ibid, p.3).

Nevertheless, collaborative approaches require attention to, and assessment of, power differences and the relationships between stakeholders. Such arrangements must be cognizant of the power which is built in to a particular partnership and whether it is related to some kind of financial or other dependence (Ribot 2004). Where there is an imbalance in power, believes Dalal-Clayton, et al, (2003), then conflicts of interest, and lack of clarity concerning stakeholders roles will quickly emerge. Ultimately what is likely to prevail is a 'patchwork of local arrangements' and quite often unsustainable 'open access' to natural resources is the end result.⁴ The Tanzania experience shows that while local people regard government forest reserves as 'fair game', they will actively protect land where local tenure and guardianship is recognised (Alden Wily, 2001; Alden Wily, 2007)

There is room for improvement, argues Dalal-Clayton, et al (2003). The various stakeholders may need to renegotiate their roles to accommodate the change from centrally driven planning and domination by government to one of devolved, or community based, NRM.

⁴ An 'open access' resource implies it is open to anyone to use and there are no exclusion clauses. This is likely to be very susceptible to overuse. In contrast, 'Common property' regimes are where resources are commonly held or jointly used by one or more user groups and where rights and responsibilities of access and membership is usually strictly defined, often by customary law (Jones and Carswell, 2004).

Agrawal and Gibson (2004 p 166) propose that if local management of natural resources is to be successful then there needs to be, “a shift away from usual assumption about communities: small size, territorial fixity, homogeneity and shared understandings and identities”. They suggest instead, “a stronger focus on the divergent interests of multiple actors within communities, the interactions through which these interests emerge and different actors interact with each other, and the institutions that influence the outcomes of political processes” (ibid, p166).

Promises and realities of devolved NRM

Research undertaken in Uganda and Zambia by the African Centre for Technology Studies in 2001 challenged the assumptions underlying the devolution of NRM (Cappon and Lind, 2001). The authors assert that what has been perceived by outsiders to be 'negative' changes in local environments may be part of a normal cycle of fluctuations in the ecosystem, rather than as a result of unsustainable practices. They challenge the assumption that such change can be reversed through the creation of new 'participatory' local institutions – such as 'user groups' and local NRM committees. Not only do such ideas overlook the considerable divisions which may exist within a community, but they may actually undermine pre existing institutions and fail to take account of the extent to which local people may already be playing a role in managing natural resources (Cappon and Lind, 2001).

In Uganda decentralisation reforms were found to be more effective where they take account of the differences between people and groups and where they introduce bargaining mechanisms to increase the power of marginal groups to negotiate. In Zambia, the decentralisation process had been institutionalised in response to structural adjustment policies. So called 'traditional institutions', or authorities - which may, in reality, owe much to colonial interventions - were adapted to facilitate the decentralisation of NRM⁵. While reforms upon more sectoral lines have led to limited communication between different ministries and departments, coordination at the local level, through informal institutions and networks has been more successful (Cappon and Lind, 2001).

In both countries the researchers found that the overall approach to NRM is dominated by imposed notions of 'sustainability', 'participation', 'ecology' and 'community'. There is often failure by policy makers and development organisations to realise that, just as local physical environments are varied and heterogeneous, so communities are characterised by division and differentiation⁶. Policies for improving local NRM must be correspondingly diverse (Cappon and Lind, 2001).

Research by the Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa (SLSA, 2003) programme, points to the fact that decentralisation is rarely a singular process but consists of “multiple processes that occur in different spheres of activity, taking on a variety of forms which may push outcomes in different directions”. For example in one area they observed attempts at local government reform creating a new tier of locally elected councils, alongside an array of decentralised committee structures including water catchment, borehole, grazing, woodlot, or wildlife management councils, with varying forms of membership or authority. Very often there is little coordination between such initiatives. Some may complement each other, but frequently, argue the authors, “there is overlap, confusion, ambiguity and high transaction costs for those expected to participate” (SLSA, 2003

⁵ Ballet et al (2007) observe that there may often be tensions between participatory or deliberative and traditional or customary resource management, the former requires a democratic process with equal rights, which the latter does not usually provide because of cultural and power structures. Although not in every case, customary decision processes are often based on a hierarchy of powers.

⁶ For a fuller discussion of the role of 'community' in natural resource management see Agrawal A. and Gibson C (1999)

p79). Case studies in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa were used to illustrate the point that political authorities with downward accountability to electorates co-exist and sometimes conflict with decentralised service delivery (through line ministries, NGOs, or donor projects). ‘Multiple decentralisations’ have also brought conflicts between new local government players and more ‘traditional’ authorities – often further complicated by political party related affiliations (SLSA, 2003). In this politicised setting there are plenty of opportunities for ‘capture’ of processes and resources by local elites, government officials and private interests, with very limited forms of effective accountability (ibid).

In many rural areas of southern Africa, furthermore, people are not organised, just do not have open access to information, and are unable to make demands or claims on the state or may indeed be afraid to speak out: “where multi party politics is based on a fragile democratic foundation, the prospects for such a combination of responsive government and citizen voice are limited” (SLSA, 2003)

Another study (Shackelton and Campbell, 2001, cited in Shackelton, et al, 2002) of devolution and NRM in several Asian and African countries (45 case studies were looked at in Asia and 14 in Southern Africa) reached similar conclusions: that the reality of devolved and community based NRM projects is often far more complex and problematic than the rhetoric would have us believe (Shackelton, et al, 2002). Across the sites investigated, local people did acknowledge a number of direct benefits (although benefits varied greatly from site to site) as a result of the shift in policy to more devolved NRM. These benefits included: greater access to some subsistence and commercial products; greater share of revenues from hunting, tourism concessions, sales of timber and non timber forest products (NTFPs); greater share of incomes from permit and license fees; employment; support for alternative or diversified livelihood activities; and a more productive resource base. Furthermore there were indirect benefits such as improved infrastructure; local organisational development and capacity building, new channels of communication opened with government; and, local political mobilisation (ibid). In Asia, where devolution has been in place longer, local people were demanding more autonomy, bringing about such reform as the *Panchayat*⁷ Extension to Scheduled Areas Act in India and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act in the Philippines (ibid). In some countries, devolution made in-roads to enhancing participation of marginalised groups and women in decision making (ibid).

However considerable negative impacts and trade offs, particularly for poorer households, were also observed. Although access to some subsistence products improved, in some cases access to other important local resources, such as fuelwood or wild foods, continued to be restricted (ibid). Wildlife areas or tree plantations were often established on land used for grazing or cropping by poorer members of the communities (ibid). Financial benefits from devolved management usually fell short of local expectations. In India the Forest Department often claimed more than half of income from timber and NTFP sales from local JFM, even when they played no role in protecting the trees. In Zimbabwe the 50% share of revenues promised often reached communities after inordinate delays (ibid).

In some cases devolution polices damaged or undermined existing organisational capacity, local enterprises and equitable social relations (ibid). In Uttarkhand, India, for example, the authority of *panchayats* was undermined by the introduction of village JFM committees, weakening leadership and public participation. In Orissa, India, forest protection committees run by poor women were taken over by elite men working in cohorts with forest department officials, limiting women's access to essential resources (ibid).

⁷ *Panchayats* are the lowest level (village) of local government in India

'Elite Capture'

In all the sites of the extensive studies by Contreas, et al (2002), and Shackelton and Campbell, (2001, cited in Shackelton, et al, 2002), referred to above, effort was made to transfer some decision making responsibility over NR from central to local level. Different organisational and institutional arrangements were used to achieve this goal - ranging from local government organisations such as District Councils in Africa and *panchayats* in India, and multi stakeholder district structures aligned to specific central government departments, to village natural resource management committees, to self initiated organisations that operated outside the state hierarchy (ibid). These self initiated schemes often were accountable to disadvantaged resource users but were also vulnerable to being co-opted by elites in the absence of supportive policy and legal framework (ibid) – of which more below. Overall, it was found that, despite the rhetoric of devolution, central authorities continued to drive the NRM agenda. Government departments, except perhaps where donors played a strong role, determined the shifts in control and the types of power that were transferred. In most instances they retained key aspects of management, placing tight constraints on decision making and sometimes rendering it meaningless. In only a few cases did local people actually gain ownership rights to land (ibid). At the same time, 'scientific management' and the notion of environmental conservation as a 'public interest' area, or the need to achieve national economic development goals, were all too often still used to justify continued state control over valuable local resources.

A separate two-year study of local government reform processes and their effect on natural resource management at state, district and village levels in three States of India, reached similar conclusions (Ramakrishan, et al, 2002). The study found that decentralisation programmes had opened up space for greater local political mobilisation - despite the fact that centralising political forces continued to “constrain both the political and ecological scope of the decentralization agenda” (Baumann and Farrington, 2003). The same study found that decentralised NRM programmes were mainly valued as a source of wage labour by the rural poor but did not necessarily increase access by the poor to natural resources (ibid). In particular, ownership of land and water resources remain concentrated in a few private hands while more valuable natural resources that could provide a boost to local livelihoods remain under direct state management (Ramakrishnan, et al 2002).

Elsewhere, research on the decentralisation process underway in a number of Sahelian countries - Mali, Burkino Faso, Niger and Senegal, undertaken by IIED in 2006, revealed that although governments have accompanied decentralisation reform with policy changes (notably land tenure reform) and new laws, there was often a reluctance to transfer any real power to local levels, the argument from central governments being that local communities are not yet ready to manage resources effectively (IIED, 2006). The researchers found that supporting local people to understand and participate in the reform process was a major challenge, especially when poverty and illiteracy is high, or involves marginalised groups, such as pastoralists, whose livelihood systems are poorly understood by policy makers at both national and local levels (ibid). There was evidence that “rural councils are often dominated by local elites such as customary leaders, retired politicians, businessmen or returned civil servants, who despite coming from a pastoral background, use their powers to pursue their own short term political and economic agendas, rather than policies and development activities for the common good” (IIED, 2006, p.14). Because of these factors, “social and economic services are often inaccessible to mobile pastoralists, and inappropriate land use planning has led to the loss of pastoral land to agriculture and other uses” (ibid, p.14).

At the same time spaces were opening up for participation. Local groups in Mali for example had established a participatory monitoring and evaluation system to track how local government made decisions with respect to council finances and whether the benefits of NRM were being equitably shared (ibid).

In 2009, IIED published the most comprehensive review to date of the experience of CBNRM projects and programmes throughout Africa over the past two decades. The research revealed a wide diversity of experience. The authors reported that: “conflicts between local groups and other more powerful actors, including both state agencies and private interest groups remain widespread and are often intensifying” (Roe, et al. 2009, p. ix). Furthermore “there are strong political economic incentives for political elites and central bureaucracies to consolidate their control over natural resources... foreign donors and international NGOs spearheading CBNRM efforts are often poorly positioned, in a political sense, to address these challenges” (ibid, p.ix). The authors also found that there were further challenges at the local level when local government institutions are not downwardly accountable to communities. Not unlike the other case studies we have discussed above, tensions still exist in some places between the development of locally accountable governance and traditional authorities (Roe, et al. 2009). Often CBNRM efforts are not accompanied by the kind of long term investment and capacity building required to ensure broader participation and accountability of local leaders to their communities (ibid).

In Mozambique, for example, despite policy reform processes that favored CBNRM, the State has retained control over the most valuable resources (timber, areas of coastline with tourism potential): “The lack of real devolution of authority reflects a combination of many processes witnessed elsewhere including power struggles and elite capture, coupled with the weakness of the justice system in terms of making 'rights' practically defensible” (Nhantumbo and Anstey, 2007, cited in Roe, et al. 2009, p. 61).

Meanwhile in Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia and parts of Uganda, traditional or customary NRM (those that are initiated and maintained without any external supports), such as mobile pastoralism – which, proponents argue is a highly resilient and adaptive form of land use in the drylands - is under threat from large scale land acquisitions for biofuels and other crops, hunting concessions and / or government led sedentarisation policies (Cotula, et al. 2008, cited in Roe et al. 2009).

Accountable Representation

If participation and decentralisation are to lead to better natural resource management, theory suggests it will be through the mechanisms of a greater local voice in the control of significant decision making. Yet people's 'participation' is not enough to bring about sustainable management. There has to be adequate representation in decision making bodies and empowerment to ensure all local communities have bargaining power in negotiations over local resources. Ribot (1999; 2004) argues that *representation* is crucial for it addresses the issue of who has control over resources and benefits. If communities do not have adequate representation, participation is meaningless because they cannot interact meaningfully with other stakeholders.

Community members often lack the time and means to engage in local politics. As candidates for election to local authorities are often members of village elites there is always the danger that women, minority ethnic groups, religious minorities and other marginalised social groups are further excluded (Ribot, 1999; 2004). However this bias may be mitigated in remote areas where the population mainly comprises ethnic groups whose representatives tend to be elected alongside elites (Dalal-Clayton, et al 2003). Nevertheless mobile groups like pastoralists may still face resistance from both local authorities and more settled groups, and are - as we have heard above - often left out of NRM decision making processes (Hesse and Trench, 2000; IIED 2006). Another problem arises when heads of local councils are not elected but are appointed by central government. This limits representation and democratic decentralisation since those appointed are accountable to the central state rather than local constituents in their decisions (Ribot, 1999).

Elections are the most commonly evoked mode of representative, or downward, accountability, although not all elective structures create accountability. In some countries candidate for local elections must be members of a political party registered in the capital. Nevertheless there are other mechanisms that complement local elections, and what can, in theory, enhance representation and empowerment of communities to assert their rights and priorities (Ribot, 1999; Dalal-Clayton, et al, 2003). These may include:

- legal recourse through accessible courts;
- mandatory inclusion on local councils of members from marginal groups;
- third party monitoring by the media, NGOs, or independently elected controllers;
- working through traditional leadership structures
- public reporting requirements
- political pressures and lobbying by associations and associative movements
- civic education information campaigns on roles and obligations of the State
- social movements, threats of social unrest and threats of resistance

We should remember, furthermore, that lack of accountability is not confined to local government authorities. As we have already heard, lack of accountability among village based associations, committees and 'resource user groups' and NGOs may enable the more powerful and politically aware to assert preferential rights over resources (Vernoy and McDougal, 2004). Development initiatives (especially where substantial funding is concerned) can provide opportunities for local despotism leading, in particular, to unfair distribution of benefits and the exacerbation of existing power disparities (Dalal-Clayton, et al 2003).

Ribot (1999), argues strongly that because devolution strengthens those it entrusts, it may be counterproductive to support the devolution of public powers to, for example, hereditary chiefs, non-representative committees, private interest groups, or NGOs. These groups may be well meaning (or not) but they are not necessarily representative of, or accountable to, local citizens. While all such groups can be subject to the accountability mechanisms mentioned above, Ribot argues that they are less appropriate than a representative system of permanent electoral local government with its accompanying accountability measures. Such groups can have appropriate advisory or consultative roles but should not be entrusted with a population's resources or decisions (ibid).

In a similar vein, Hesse and Pattison (2013) make the point that “building a more inclusive and coherent development planning system requires a paradigm change, and cannot be done through the standard 'projectised' approach that channels donor funds through NGOs to local people” (p.4). This approach creates “parallel processes and structures to the detriment of local government capacity – upon which an effective planning system ultimately depends” (ibid).

Creating an ‘enabling environment’ for devolved NRM

Most of the studies reviewed in this paper agree that if CBNRM initiatives at the local level are to be effective then they need to be supported by an ‘enabling institutional environment’. Participatory approaches need institutions at national, regional and local levels, that facilitate rather than dictate the course of rural development and NRM (Dalal-Clayton, 2002). Swift (1995, cited in Wyckoff-Baird, 1997) suggests that the State has a definite role to play in creating the conditions necessary for effective resource management at the local level, by establishing a policy framework conducive to sustainable resource management; by providing the legal framework for resource tenure, by guaranteeing minimum democratic processes in local administration, by capacity building, and by providing economic incentives and technical inputs and support.

The SLSA team (2003) make the point that if decentralisation is to be effective, real powers and real resources need to be handed over by the State to new local administrations otherwise their ability to operate is severely hampered. As is the case in many countries, a cautious or bankrupt government, may resist devolution of powers over budgets and decisions, for fiscal, administrative and political reasons. The end result is that many local government authorities fail to function in any meaningful way and local people will quickly become cynical as a result. As aptly noted by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005, what is needed to sustain natural resources are strong institutions across different scales, with central government providing an appropriate enabling framework for security of tenure and management activities at the local level (MEA, 2005).

Meanwhile NGOs can play an important facilitatory and capacity building role (Roe, et al., 2009; Shackelton, et al 2002). They can help to bridge divergent views between local people and government agencies and manage conflict within or between communities. NGOs generally display greater commitment to empowering communities than state agencies and work better to integrate the development of local people with NRM concerns. NGOs can monitor policy impacts, can promote accountability, transparency and gender equity in the way the environment is managed and can influence outcomes through advocacy for the poorest resource users (Ireland and Tumushabe, 2005; Roe, et al 2009; Shackelton, et al, 2002;). Experience from Botswana and India has shown that CBNRM stakeholder forums, and the formation of resource user umbrella groups and networks, can also provide an effective channel through which people can lobby for collective priorities at the national level (Shackelton, et al, 2002).

In most of the countries reviewed by the studies mentioned in this paper, donors, together with NGOs, were instrumental in driving the agenda towards greater local control. Donors often attach conditions to their funding, forcing governments to review their policies and practices to favor local needs. On the other hand, donors sometimes lack understanding of local conditions and develop programmes not suited to local contexts, with negative consequences for the livelihoods of poor people. In other cases unhealthy dependencies on external funds may be created resulting in the collapse of worthy initiatives when funders withdraw (Shackelton, et al, 2002). Furthermore, donors usually have very little downward accountability to those they claim to be supporting.

As the evidence above has suggested, the standard donor model of centralised support may need to be changed to one in which there is greater flexibility and responsiveness to local needs and a long term commitment (Roe, et al. 2009; Hesse and Pattison, 2013).

Strengthening capacity and political capital at the local level

The many examples given above show that, although devolution of NRM has certainly brought some direct and indirect benefits to the poor, and has opened up space for political negotiation and empowerment for poorer communities, it has not yet significantly increased access by the rural poor to natural resources. The local benefits of programmes for devolved NRM are often captured by those groups and households already better endowed with access to natural and other livelihood 'capitals' (political, social, human and financial). Ultimately, "the decentralisation agenda has not fundamentally challenged the basic distribution of rights and access to natural resources established in the colonial and in the immediate post independence periods", argued Baumann and Farrington (2003).

In which case, an assessment of how patterns of social differentiation (across wealth, gender, age, caste and ethnic divisions) feed into the politics of inclusion and exclusion in decentralisation, would appear to be a crucial step on the way to ensuring that decentralisation efforts do indeed benefit a wide group and particularly the poor and marginalised (SLSA, 2003).

While strong social capital has long been considered a necessary, or valuable precursor to democratic development and the performance of local government (Putnam 1993), greater attention must also be given by donors, NGOs and the State, to the building of capacity and ‘political capital’ at the local level to ensure that devolution strategies are more responsive to local interests. As we have seen from the evidence discussed above, in many cases social capital can have negative externalities – ‘user groups’ and NRM committees are by definition exclusive. Groups at both village and district levels can take advantage of new opportunities and thereby create forms of exclusion that had not previously existed.

Political capital is understood here to mean the ability of people to use power in support of their political and economic positions and so enhance their livelihoods (Baumann and Sinha, 2001), rather than mere legitimacy and credibility of political leadership. According to Baumann (2000) and Carney (2002), the inclusion of political capital as an endogenous asset is critical because ‘rights’ are claims and assets which people “draw on and reinvest in to pursue livelihood options” (Baumann, 2000, p. 21). Because these rights are politically defended, how people access these assets depends on their political capital. The notion of political capital also links policies, institutions or structures, and processes (decentralization for example), to the local level and the understanding the real impact these have on poor peoples livelihoods. Political capital explains where local people are situated in terms of the balance of power in relation to other stakeholders (Baumann, 2000; Baumann and Sinha, 2002).

Political capital is also important because any attempt to transform structures and processes through policies of devolution is likely to be met by resistance from those, at local and national levels, who currently hold power, or have a vested interest in certain resources. Examples of how the poor can create their own ‘countervailing political capital’ remains rare, but includes: pressure for the right to information; the effective use of backward caste status to gain rights; protest movements against corrupt officials and contractors (Baumann and Sinha, 2002). All of these reflect enhanced capacity of the poor to use democratic processes to their advantage (ibid).

As several of the studies reviewed found, where local people were well organised and had alliances with NGOs or other influential groups, they managed to secure greater control and benefits. Where local people were aware of their rights and entitlements they were able to challenge elite control within local resource groups and committees. Local users also fared better where they had strong land tenure rights and where they were able to influence the design and implementation of devolution policies. In this context, to have capacity building include ways of improving representation, accountability and transparency (all aspects of ‘good governance’) would appear to be central. State and NGO interventions may need, therefore, to shift their focus to stakeholder relationships and political processes and away from technical and managerial aspects.

A ‘rights based approach’ (RBA) to development⁸ – increasingly favored by international development NGOs and within the UN – may offer a useful way forward here. A RBA marks a shift from other approaches to development by making peoples ‘entitlements’⁹ a legal claim or a fundamental right. While the role of the state is central here for the realization of claims to food, land, water, or other resources and services, the active engagement of non-state actors through advocacy of informed collective public action is imperative for good governance (Mishra, 2014). A

⁸ A Human Rights Based Approach to Development integrates the norms and principles of the international human rights system into the policies and processes of development. These principles are laid down in international legally binding treaties. They can be summarised as: Explicit mention of rights; Accountability; Empowerment; Participation; Non-discrimination and attention for vulnerable groups (Dochas, 2014). Whereas as ‘Needs Based Approach’ to development focuses on outcomes, a RBA gives equal importance to the outcomes and the process.

⁹ ‘Entitlement’ here in the sense of a persons ‘overall command over things’ (Drèze and Sen 1989, p. 155)

RBA approach looks for the structural roots of problems instead of a focus on the manifestation of a problem and explores the socio-economic and political contexts to initiate policy changes (ibid). In a NRM setting it offers a useful framework to build and extend new versions of environmental and social advocacy that link social justice and environmental management agendas (Shackelton, et al. 2002).

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the key concerns raised in recent research on the topic of devolved, and community based, natural resource management. Based in the foregoing analyses, we can conclude that while decentralisation might improve local management of natural resources, it is not a prerequisite, nor a guarantee of good local management, environmental sustainability, and improvements in local governance.

That devolved natural resource management is a socially just development objective would appear not to be in doubt. It is clear, however, that the rhetoric of ‘decentralisation’, ‘good local governance’ and ‘participation’ will be insufficient to effect real change and pro poor outcomes unless greater attention is paid by policy makers to the complex political contexts in which different stakeholders vie for access and control over natural resources.

Despite these challenges, devolved NRM remains an important development strategy. There is enormous scope for strong local organisational capacity and political capital to enhance outcomes for local people by enabling them to mobilise resources and negotiate better benefits. NGOs, donors, civil society networks, local government and, not least, the State all have a key role in moving devolution policy and practice towards local interests.

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