Local Democracy, Democratic Decentralisation and Rural Development: Theories, Challenges and Options for Policy[1]

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Summary

This article considers the challenge of encouraging democratic decentralisation in poor and primarily rural areas of the developing world. Its general point of departure is the assertion that the institutionalisation of democratic institutions and systems of accountability entails particular challenges for poor rural areas, in which political agency and access to information are frequently limited by traditional and modern-bureaucratic systems of hierarchy and control. Drawing upon comparative and case study material, it shows that whereas democratic decentralisation has improved levels of public participation and, in some cases, government accountability, its ability to address rural inequality and poverty has been relatively modest. Reflecting upon a series of ambitious cases of decentralisation, it then identifies the ways in which governments and non-state actors can *lay the foundations* for more robust forms of equitable and democratic development.

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I. Introduction

This article considers the challenge of encouraging democratic decentralisation in poor and primarily rural areas of the developing world. Its general point of departure is the assertion that the institutionalisation of democratic institutions and systems of accountability entails particular challenges for poor rural areas, in which political agency and access to information are frequently limited by traditional and modern-bureaucratic systems of hierarchy and control.

Reflecting upon the arguments put forth in this volume, the article starts with a number of general assumptions about the nature of rural poverty, and the challenge of encouraging sustainable development in poor and predominantly rural areas. First, it assumes that relative to urban and primarily metropolitan areas, rural areas are often poorly endowed in terms of roads, telecommunications and other forms of state-provided endowments (Lipton, 1979; Wiggins, this volume). Second, rural areas tend to be physically, politically and economically isolated from the areas in which commodities obtain most of their value and where political decisions – governing policy and development planning – are typically made (Lipton, 1979; Wiggins, this volume). Third, and partly for these reasons, rural areas tend to be characterised by high levels of poverty (Wiggins; Start, this volume). Finally, the livelihoods that poor people pursue in rural areas are often disproportionately dependent on natural resources (particularly ones with weak or non-existent property rights).

Drawing upon comparative and case study material, the article provides evidence to suggest that whereas democratic decentralisation has improved levels of public participation and, in some cases, government accountability, its ability to address rural inequality and poverty has been relatively modest. Reflecting on a number of ambitious examples of decentralisation, it then explores the conditions under which governments and non-state actors have been able to overcome these seemingly insurmountable constraints.

The article is structured as follows. The following section develops a framework for understanding democratic decentralisation, and briefly reviews arguments in favour of shifting political and administrative power from traditional lines of command and control to

the local level. Section III then explores the relationship between democracy and economic growth, concluding that democracies are no more likely than authoritarian regimes to promote policies that favour the poor. Section IV explores the relationship between democratic decentralisation and rural poverty reduction. Section V then examines the ways in which states and non-state actors can lay the foundation for more robust forms of equitable and democratic development. Section VI concludes the article.

II. The Theoretical Terrain

Assertions in favour of decentralisation are often founded upon a wider critique of central state planning, which holds that large and centrally-administered bureaucracies represent an inefficient and potentially destructive means of allocating resources (and generating wealth) within society (Economist, 2001; Lal, 2000; World Bank, 2000). Three assertions are used to substantiate this claim.

One argues that central state agencies lack the "time and place knowledge" (Hayek, cited in Ostrom *et al.*, 1993: 51) to implement policies and programmes that reflect people's "real" needs and preferences. A second holds that states (based on principles of command and control) are qualitatively different from markets (based on competition and exchange) and voluntary organisations (based on some measure of altruistic motivation) (on this, see Robinson *et al.*, 2000). Viewed in this way, states lack the flexibility and reach to provide certain types of goods and services, particularly ones with large information requirements. A third and related view argues that unchecked authority and inadequate incentives (reflected in salaries, rules of promotion and so on) encourage "rent seeking behaviour" among government officials (Ostrom *et al.*, 1993).

Underlying the case for democratic decentralisation is an assertion that a more decentralised state apparatus will be more exposed and therefore more responsive to local needs and aspirations (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001). This, it is argued, will produce systems of governance that are more effective and accountable to local people (Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998; Manor, 1999; Rondinelli *et al.*, 1989).

Conceptually, an important distinction is made between:

- **deconcentration,** in which local bodies are asked (or, more appropriately, instructed) to assume responsibilities that have traditionally been carried out by central line agencies; and
- **devolution**, in which local bodies are granted the political and financial authority to undertake these duties (Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998: 6-7; Rondinelli *et al.*, 1989).

Of course, ***democratic*** **decentralisation** implies more than the downward delegation of authority. Crucially, it entails a system of governance in which citizens possess the right to hold local public officials to account through the use of elections, collective action and other democratic means (see below). Blair (2000: 21) captures the essence of this important idea:

> (Democratic decentralisation) can be defined as meaningful authority devolved to local units of governance that are accessible and accountable to the local citizenry, who enjoy full political rights and liberty. It thus differs from the vast majority of earlier efforts at decentralization in developing areas, which go back to the 1950s, and which were largely initiatives in public administration without any serious democratic component.

A defining feature of any democratic system is that decision-makers are under the "effective popular control" (Mayo, 1960: 60) of the people they are meant to govern. How this is accomplished, of course, constitutes a major dilemma for theorists and proponents of democratic development. Nevertheless, a number of defining features can be observed. Mayo (1960: 61-69) identifies four:

- Popular control of policy makers, both by regular elections and by the pressure of social interest groups;
- The institutionalisation of all adult citizens in voting (i.e. one person, one vote);
- Political freedom in the eyes of the state; and
- Policy decisions made on the basis of majority rule.[3]

[3] These of course imply a system of **indirect representation**, whereby candidates engage in competitive elections for public office.

Beyond these very basic principles, democracy also implies a wide range of rules, norms and customs through which citizens can exercise "effective popular control" over public officials. Included here would be an independent judiciary, a free press, systems of transparency, and freedom of association and speech (Luckham *et al.*, 2000; Putzel, 1997b).

As Blair (2000: 27) has argued, periodic elections provide an important means of ensuring government responsiveness and accountability on broad social issues. At the same time, he observes, "elections are crude instruments of popular control, since they occur at widely spaced intervals . . . and address only the broadest issues," (Blair, 2000: 27). Reflecting on the findings of a USAID study of democratic decentralisation, Blair (2000: 27) identifies seven mechanisms "that have proven at least potentially viable" in Bolivia, Honduras, India (Karnataka), Mali, Ukraine and the Philippines:

- Free and fair local elections;
- Strong and competitive political parties;
- Strong civil society organisations;
- A vigorous and accessible electronic media;
- Public meetings;
- Formal grievance procedures; and
- Opinion surveys.

Such findings highlight the difference between **democratic institutions**, such as regular elections and an independent judiciary, and what Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor (2000) have called "**democratic politics**," in which marginal groups are able to maintain a basic level of independence from the myriad social intrusions that underlie non-democratic regimes. A critical point they make is that democratic institutions frequently embody an elite bias, along lines of class, gender, religion and other social groupings, and it is the process of democratic politics – contestation, self-determination and struggle – that leads to the "deepening of democracy."

This important idea we shall return to in Section V. For the time being, let us consider further the relationship between democracy (writ large) and poverty reduction.

III. **Democracy and poverty reduction**

Dreze and Sen (1989) have shown that democracies provide an important means of responding to catastrophic and highly visible events, such as famine. This, they contend, illustrates the ways in which competitive politics and freedom of expression can push governments into action during times of extreme hardship and need. However, the relationship between democracy and poverty reduction is somewhat less clear.

The collection of studies that preceded the World Bank's *World Development Report 2000/1* (summarised in Moore and Putzel, 1999: 8-9)[4] illustrates this enigma:

> All concluded that there was no consistent connection between pro-poorness and democracy. While the very worst performers tend not to be democracies – democracy does provide some kind of safety net – there are non-democracies among the best performers, (Moore and Putzel, 1999: 8).

How do we account for these findings?

One possibility is that strong economic performance and sound economic policy require a system of governance that favours planning and coherence over the demands of democratic representation. Whereas active state intervention appears to have contributed to the substantial rates of growth we find in countries like Taiwan and South Korea, for instance, the relationship between democracy and economic growth appears somewhat less clear. Indeed, Wade's conclusions about economic growth in Northeast Asia (Wade, 1990) appear to suggest the opposite: i.e. that high growth rates and macro-economic stability required a regime that was decidedly authoritarian in nature (cf. Moore and Putzel, 1999).

Findings from Asia, as well as other parts of the developing world (Luckham *et al.*, 2000), highlight an underlying tension between the autonomy that governments require to plan and

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[4] The key references here are Varshney (1999), Niles (1999), Moore *et al.* (1999).

implement coherent policy and the participatory spirit of representative democracy. Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor (2000: 36) capture the essence of this idea:

> The dilemma for democracies of ever-more inclusive and participatory politics is that a multiplication of demands on the state can undermine the policy effectiveness, as is typically the case in populist regimes. Inequality and poverty can prompt a wave of demands for immediate benefits that endanger sound economic policy since high short-term gains for the poor are hard to finance properly.

A second and related hypothesis is that democracies have an **in-built bias** that discriminates against "pro-poor policies." Here there is an assertion that office holders in democracies have strong disincentives to introduce legislation that would contradict the interests of dominant groups in society (Luckham *et al.*, 2000). Joan Nelson (cited in Luckham et al., 2000: 33-4) offers four explanations for why this would be the case:

- Re-distributive policies (such as land reform and progressive taxation) entail a zero sum character whereby gains for the poor often come at the expense of elite groups in society;
- "The poor" constitute a large group, whose interests and needs are difficult to address;
- Comprehensive poverty programmes may entail extensive institutional change;
- Truly universal poverty programmes offer few opportunities for patronage (see below).

These assertions are consistent with Moore and Putzel's findings (1999: 8-9) that,

> . . . some of the best performers in poverty reduction over the past half century have been the (former) socialist states, that were undemocratic by conventional criteria but highly focussed on improving mass welfare for reasons of ideology and politics.

Finally, there is the argument that market capitalism (and economic growth that occurs under these conditions) embodies a strong class bias, which tends to undermine the interests of democratic governance. Economic growth in the North and Southeast Asian economies, for instance, has been explained at least partly in terms of the ways in which national governments have organised and suppressed industrial labour (Deyo, 1987; Pasuk and Baker, 1996).[5]

In short, the correlation between democracy and poverty reduction is rather tenuous. What, then, of the relationship between democratic decentralisation and rural poverty reduction?

IV. Democratic decentralisation and rural poverty reduction

Issues of democratic decentralisation and rural development raise a number of questions about the ways in which states intervene in rural society, and how this affects economic opportunity. Although there is of course great variation among cultures, countries and regions, we can identify a number of roles that governments typically play in poor and predominantly rural areas:

1. One is the provision of **public goods**, such as universal education and healthcare.
2. A second is the provision of **divisible goods**, such as irrigation, agricultural extension and credit.
3. A third is the **determination and enforcement of laws** regulating key economic inputs, such as land, labour and capital.
4. A fourth and critical element is the **recognition and protection of rights** allowing for organisation, association and entitlement in the eyes of the state.

All of these, it is worth emphasising, are problematic in the sense that they require systems of administration which ensure that public resources are being delivered efficiently and effectively (Johnson and Start, 2001). Indeed, it is the misallocation or "corruption" of these

[5] Here it worth distinguishing between democracy as a system that pushes, cajoles and influences the ways in which states intervene in society and democracy as a system that enables, encourages and maintains a particular form of market capitalism (Macpherson, 1973).

services that often justifies the strongest calls for public sector reform (e.g. the World Bank, 2000; the Economist, 2001).

Studies of decentralisation have shown that devolution can enhance rural livelihoods in a number of ways. First, the establishment and empowerment of local resource user groups can improve the ways in which local people manage and use natural resources, thereby improving the resource base on which poor people are often disproportionately dependent (Baland and Platteau, 1996; IFAD, 2001; Ostrom, 1990). Implicit here is an assumption that local (and primarily rural) communities possess the knowledge, information and incentive to manage and conserve the resources on which they and their families depend (cf. Agrawal and Gibson, 1999: 633; Baland and Platteau, 1996: Chapter 10).

Second, and related to this, collaboration between public agencies and local resource users can produce "synergistic" outcomes (Evans, 1996a; 1996b; Ostrom, 1996), in which citizens and civil servants cooperate to provide goods that would be unobtainable were they acting alone. Classic examples of this would include joint forest management (IFAD, 2001), fisheries co-management (Pomeroy and Berkes, 1997) and participatory watershed management (Farrington et al., 2000).

Third, and most central to this article, the democratisation and empowerment of local administrative bodies can enhance participation in decision-making fora, particularly among groups that have been traditionally marginalised by local political processes (Blair, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Crook and Manor, 1998). Studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America have shown that the introduction of elections, systems of transparency and rights of expression and association can empower poor people, enhancing their ability to participate in local decision making and (crucially) encouraging them to hold public officials to account (Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Dreze and Sen, 1996; Manor, 1999; Rondinelli *et al.*, 1989).

As Blair (2000: 25) points out, "increased representation offers significant benefits in itself." For one, he argues, participation in local, democratically elected bodies can lead to improvements in self-identity and worth, which can help to break down customs of

inequality and discrimination. Second, membership on local administrative bodies can provide important skills (e.g. bookkeeping, leadership, etc.) that can be transferred to other walks of life.

Regulations stipulating the inclusion of such groups (for instance the reservation system in India's *panchayats*) can help to ensure poor and marginalised groups have a voice in local bodies (Crook and Manor, 1998). Among the most successful cases (e.g. West Bengal, Colombia, the Philippines), systems of local democratic governance have also been shown to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of public officials (Blair, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Crook and Manor, 1998; Manor, 1999).

Underlying these "more successful" models[6] are political systems in which central state agencies have been willing and able to relinquish and/or create new powers governing legislation, administration and taxation at the local level (Crook and Manor, 1998; Manor, 1999; Tendler, 1997). Manor (1999), for instance, has shown that decentralisation can improve government effectiveness and accountability when:

- Elected bodies at local levels have adequate funds;
- They enjoy substantive autonomy; and
- Lines of accountability exist between elected representatives and citizens, and between non-elected bureaucrats and elected representatives.

Administratively, models of this nature imply a system in which democratically-elected officials are granted the authority to tax and spend local resources in the name of administration and development (Crook and Manor, 1998; Manor, 1999; Rondinelli *et al.*, 1989). In theory, the payment of taxes and the threat of the vote strengthen the relationship (and thus the accountability) between representatives and voters. Beyond these arrangements, accountability can be further enhanced when citizens organise to influence the ways in which public officials intervene on their behalf (Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998).

However, a recurring theme that emerges from a sizeable body of literature is the relatively weak correlation that exists between democratic decentralisation and poverty reduction (e.g. Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Golooba-Mutebi, 2000; Manor, 1999; Moore and Putzel, 1999; Rahman, 2001). Despite great strides at devolving power to local, democratically elected bodies, decentralisation in Colombia, Brazil and West Bengal appears to have achieved little in the way of reducing poverty or improving regional disparities (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001: 37-39). Manor's conclusions (1999: 106-108) about experiences in Bolivia, India and Bangladesh are equally pessimistic.

In one respect, this reflects the difficulty of establishing a clear and rigorous link between changes in governance and improvements in wellbeing (Rahman, 2001). In another, it suggests a more sober conclusion about the ways in which democratic decentralisation affects the quality and availability of local economic opportunity. As Crook and Sverrisson (2001: 52) observe:

> The notion that there is a predictable or general link between decentralisation of government and the development of more 'pro-poor' policies or poverty-alleviating outcomes clearly lacks any convincing evidence. Those who advocate decentralisation on these grounds, at least, should be more cautious, which is not to say that there are not other important benefits, particularly in the field of participation and empowerment.

Such findings raise a number of concerns about the viability of encouraging rural poverty reduction through democratic decentralisation. Primarily, they suggest that even the most successful forms of democratic decentralisation have been unable to overcome economic and political disparities, both within and among regions. This, in turn, highlights the problem of raising public revenue in rural areas, in which economic surplus (and therefore taxable revenue) is typically poor. As Manor (1999: 111) has argued, the central dilemma here is not necessarily the lack of taxable surplus (although this too is a problem), but the political and administrative costs of collecting public resources, the reluctance among many central

[6] Note that success here is defined principally in terms of participation and responsiveness of public officials. How these processes affect poverty and well being we explore below.

governments to grant the authority that activities of this nature would require and the (somewhat ubiquitous) reluctance among residents to in fact pay their taxes.[7]

Second, they imply an underlying tension between rural inequality and local democracy. An important concern here is that poverty will have a debilitating effect on the ability to engage in formal political processes. A direct illustration of this is the relationship between basic literacy and political action. As Dreze and Sen (1996) have forcefully argued, one's ability to obtain and understand information about laws, policies and the rights to which one is entitled is often highly dependent on the ability to read. This, in turn, highlights the means by which poor people are represented in democratic institutions (e.g. through political parties, bloc voting, lobbying and so on) and the extent to which they have the "political tools" (e.g. money, power, information, literacy) to influence the democratic process. When voters are ill informed about party platforms, government policies and the rights that these may provide, their ability to influence the democratic process can be limited. Likewise, when politicians and parties campaign on the basis of (relatively) short-term pay-offs, as opposed to programmatic policies, the relationship between compromises of this nature and democratic accountability can be very thin indeed (Moore and Putzel, 1999).

Third and related to this is the dilemma of encouraging poor people to assume the costs of engaging in direct political action. As Moore and Putzel (1999: 10) have argued, agrarian institutions may be structured in a way that prevents poor people from engaging in direct political action. Moreover, the costs of political action (e.g. costs of travel, communication and/or potential backlash) may deter them from pursuing or sustaining coherent political movements. Finally, multiple and potentially contradictory loyalties may undermine political solidarity around class-based identities, such as "small farmers, landless, wage workers, tenants, recipients of food subsidies, squatters" and the like (Moore and Putzel, 1999: 10).

Finally, there is the problem of local elite capture. As numerous studies (e.g. Blair, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Dreze and Sen, 1996; Manor, 1999; Moore and Putzel, 1999:

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[7] Assuming that governments are serious about devolving power to local bodies, policies of this nature can also be deeply threatening to local and national elites (Moore and Putzel, 1999). Even when central governments allow the creation of autonomous local authorities, they can still exercise substantial control by stipulating performance targets, reporting mechanisms and the like (Manor, 1999: 60-1; Moore and Putzel, 1999: 20-1).

15) have pointed out, one of the dangers of decentralisation is that it may simply empower local elites and, worse, perpetuate existing poverty and inequality. Whether the introduction of democratic principles – on its own – would overcome the historical and cultural factors that perpetuate political inequality is somewhat doubtful (Luckham et al., 2000; Moore and Putzel, 1999). This, in turn, highlights the challenge of encouraging democracy in rural areas in which large numbers of people are dependent upon small numbers of local, powerful elites.

Where the spoils of government intervention are particularly good, one can predict with reasonable confidence that the costs of ensuring equitable distribution and of discouraging local corruption will be high. This is notoriously true of rural infrastructure projects, such as road building (Rao, 2000) or irrigation (Wade, 1985), in which markets for primary inputs, labour and public regulation (Wade, 1985) are strong. Here the corruption of local administrative bodies will depend on a number of factors:

- The ease of procuring spoils from the programme;
- The ability to avoid detection and/or sanction; and
- The amount of money involved.

All of this highlights the crucial relationship between "democratic deepening" (Luckham *et al.*, 2000; Putzel, 1997b) and effective local governance.

V. Ways forward

This section reviews evidence of cases in which democratic decentralisation has led to improvements in local accountability and pro-poor policy.

Balancing autonomy and accountability

One theme that emerges from this review is the need to strike a balance between state autonomy, on the one hand, and a measure of what Granovetter (1992) has called "social embeddedness" on the other. Evans (1995) – who, it should be stressed, was not strictly interested in *rural* governance – considers this theme when he explores the issue of state autonomy and industrial policy in Brazil. His principal assertion is that effective state

intervention required a "concrete set of social ties that binds the state to society and provides institutionalized channels for the continual negotiation and renegotiation of goals and policies," (Evans, 1995: 12). At the same time, he asserts, government officials required sufficient institutional autonomy to withstand the influence of powerful actors and interests.

Tendler's study of community healthcare in northeastern Brazil reaches similar conclusions (Tendler, 1997; Tendler and Freedheim, 1994). Extended interaction between government health workers and client communities, it is argued, improved the quality of healthcare delivery in rural areas. This was due to a number of factors:

- Government officials spent extended periods of time with beneficiaries;
- This, in turn, created a situation in which officials were affected by ("embedded in") the opinions and sanctions of community members;
- Good performance carried high prestige, both within the community and within the civil service;
- Central government was instrumental in supporting these initiatives.

Such findings raise important questions about the strategies that poor people – and social organisations that act on their behalf – can use to influence public policy. They also suggest that the central state may have a larger role to play in local development than more idealistic theories of democratic decentralisation would lead us to believe (cf. Manor, 1999; Moore and Putzel, 1999: 15; Tendler and Freedheim, 1994; Tendler, 1997).

External actors

A second theme that emerges in the literature on democratic decentralisation (and on democracy in general) is the powerful way in which *external actors* can empower poor and marginal groups in society. NGOs, for instance, have been shown to empower the poor in a number of ways (Bratton, 1990; Clark, 1991; White and Runge, 1995). First, they can connect poor and marginal people with a wider circle of allies, with whom they can mount a more effective political lobby. Second, and related to this, they can absorb some of the costs of engaging in political action (e.g. transportation, communication and so forth). Third, and somewhat less tangibly, they can encourage what Samuel Popkin (1979: 243) has described

as "new conceptions of identity and self-worth." This they can do by encouraging poor people to engage in collective action (White and Runge, 1995) or by transmitting information about constitutional rights, potential allies and other political opportunities.

Another vital source of external support can come from "higher-level" echelons within government. This can work in a number of ways. First, central or higher level agents within the state can provide an important "counter elite" (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001: 52) to groups that would resist efforts to make local bodies more democratic (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Moore and Putzel, 1999; Tendler, 1997). Second, and crucially, they can structure incentives in a way that allows local participation and public accountability to take root. Such incentives would conceivably include career trajectories, "earmarked funding" (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001: 51) and status within society (Tendler, 1997).

"Democratic deepening"

A third theme that emerges from this analysis is the need to move beyond the realm of "procedural democracy," and to encourage what Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor (2000) have called substantive or "deep" democracy. As the preceding suggests, elections constitute an imperfect yet vital component of any democratic system. However, their ability to encourage effective responsive governance is highly dependent upon three important variables:

1. the degree to which parties and politicians campaign on substantive policy issues, as opposed to populism or, worse, clientelism and vote buying (Blair, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Moore and Putzel, 1999);
2. the quality of information voters have at their disposal (Blair, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Dreze and Sen, 1996; Moore and Putzel, 1999); and
3. the strength of civil society organisations (Blair, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Dreze and Sen, 1996; Luckham *et al.*, 2000; Moore and Putzel, 1999)

Manor (1999: 74-76) makes the case that political parties have an important role to play in local democratic systems. Central to this is the idea that multi-party democracies help to organise "opposing forces" (1999: 75) into clearly recognisable groups, stimulating public criticism and debate. That having been said, the ability to articulate interests and stimulate

debate depends in no small way on the internal dynamics and debates that exist *within* political parties.

The experience in West Bengal suggests that political parties (in this case the Communist Party) can address rural poverty when they develop and pursue a programme that is ideologically committed to the goal of social redistribution (Kohli, 1987; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001). However, the historical events that led to the communist movement in West Bengal have prompted some scholars (e.g. Crook and Sverrisson, 2001) to question the viability of replicating the experience in other political settings. Moreover, it is worth emphasising that the achievement of this political programme was not entirely democratic in character (Kohli, 1987), reiterating the tension that often exists between coherent policy and popular democracy.

Just as elections do not a democracy make, the same can be said of party politics and democratisation. Common among theories of democratisation is the notion that the development of democratic politics is inextricably linked to the appearance of a strong and vibrant "civil society" (e.g. Harriss, 2000; Luckham *et al.*, 2000; Macpherson, 1973; Mayo, 1960; Moore, 1966; Moore and Putzel, 1999; Putnam, 1993). Perhaps the most recent and influential manifestation of this is Robert Putnam's assertion (1993) that societies with high levels of "social capital" (defined in terms of norms of reciprocity and networks of engagement) will organise to demand better government.[8] Along slightly different lines, Moore (1966) argues that it was the appearance of a strong and autonomous bourgeoisie that explains the rise of western democracy.

Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor (2000: 16-18) identify three general trajectories of democratisation:

1. The **western liberal democratic path**, whereby "established liberal democracies arose out of particular historical bargains struck between ruling classes in Western Europe and

[8] Underlying this proposition is the notion that "civic engagement" – participation in a wide range of political and non-political organisations – correlates strongly with effective and responsive government.

North America and their taxpayers and citizens over the course of more than two centuries," (Luckham et al., 2000: 17);

2. The **transitions from authoritarianism** that occurred during the 1980s and early 90s. Central to this process was the popular "delegitimisation" (Luckham et al., 2000: 17) of authoritarian regimes in various parts of Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America;
3. The **failed democratisation** of areas in which violent conflict has been endemic and where international actors have attempted to "build peace" through the introduction of democratic institutions.

A general theme that pervades these very different experiences is the notion that the development of democracy can be a very slow process (cf. Blair, 2000; Putnam, 1993), and that the introduction of democratic institutions will not necessarily lead to democratic politics (Luckham *et al*., 2000). For scholars and practitioners of development, an obvious challenge here is one of encouraging or *laying the foundations for* democratic development in the short- to medium-term.

In very practical terms, one effective way of encouraging democratic politics is to improve the distribution of information relating to government performance. Beyond the more popular calls for transparency and good governance (World Bank, 2001), activities of this nature would entail the development of networks and media that are not exclusively dependent upon the achievement of basic literacy. One obvious example is the electronic media. As Blair (2000: 29) points out,

> Local news, talk shows, and question-and-answer programs are all excellent ways to spread political news widely . . . radio, especially the AM band, is cheap to operate, does not require line-of-sight transmission like TV, and has great audience potential.[9]

Another potential source of empowerment is interactive communication technology. Here the development of accessible and inexpensive forms of telecommunication (e.g. landline telephones, satellite networks, fiber optic systems) can facilitate the transmission of politically and economically relevant information (Johnson, 2001).

[9] This of course assumes that media content is democratically relevant and (relatively) free of political bias (Putzel, 1997a).

The development of a strong and vibrant civil society is also inextricably linked to the political opportunities the state makes available, and the ways in which poor and marginal groups in society exploit these opportunities (Luckham et al., 2000; Moore and Putzel, 1999). This, in turn, highlights the ways in which identities based on class, caste, religion, ethnicity, gender and other social markers affect social mobilisation and political voice (Luckham et al., 2000; Harriss, 2000; Moore and Putzel, 1999). It also poses the question of whether and to what extent political struggles among and between these and other social groupings lead to stronger forms of civil society and, by extension, more equitable forms of governance (Luckham et al., 2000; Harriss, 2000).

VI. Discussion

A principal aim of this article was to explore the extent to which efforts at empowering and democratising local political bodies have produced real and sustainable gains for the rural poor. The above findings paint a somewhat ambiguous picture of the lengths to which models of democratic decentralisation can go in relieving endemic rural poverty.

In one respect, they emphasise the positive ways in which the democratisation and empowerment of local government has affected local participation, public accountability and democratic voice. In another, they suggest that the correlation between democratic decentralisation and improvements in rural inequality and regional disparity has been relatively weak.

Such findings illustrate the limitations of using models of democratic decentralisation to alleviate poverty in rural areas. As Moore and Putzel (1999) have argued, governments are unlikely to pursue substantive redistributive programmes unless ruling elites are ideologically and politically committed to the goal of poverty reduction (cf. Luckham et al., 2000). This, in turn, raises questions about the ways in which poverty, and therefore the need for poverty reduction, is articulated within society (Moore and Putzel, 1999: 37-8).

It also raises fundamental questions about **the type of development** governments, donors and other agents of development decide to pursue. Whether governments support or

squeeze the rural economy (for instance providing cheap wage goods for urban labour) is very much a political question, whose determination depends in no small way on the debates that occur within government, as well as the means by which powerful interests within society (e.g. farmers' groups, urban labour, exporters, etc.) influence public policy.

Finally, the findings presented in this article suggest the need for a more systematic look at the ways in which democratic decentralisation affects pro-poor policy and poverty reduction in rural areas. One important area of research would aim to understand the ways in which changing patterns of production, accumulation and exchange within the rural economy (e.g. Start; Wiggins, this volume) affect local systems of democratic governance. If, for instance, rural livelihoods are indeed becoming increasingly multi-spatial (Start; Wiggins, this volume) one may need to question the viability of introducing electoral systems based on local territorially defined citizenship.

A second area of concern touches upon the tension between increasingly participatory systems of governance and the needs of effective and coherent policy. The findings presented in this article suggest that central states (and central planning in particular) have an important role to play at ensuring the development and implementation of substantive pro-poor policies. This, however, may be at odds with the interests of democratic decentralisation. As Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor (2000: 38) have argued, "a certain degree of '**re-centralisation**' may be needed to ensure that the needs of the poor are not neglected." For scholars and practitioners of development, the related challenge here is to determine the policies and programmes that are most suitably managed and administered through local democratically elected bodies.

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