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Abstract

Since the 1950s, a large body of literature has emerged that reviews various dimensions of decentralization. It is comprised of theoretical exercises, comparative studies of selected cases, individual country studies, focused inquiries into particular aspects of the intervention, teaching materials, and government or aid agency design and implementation manuals. This body of writing is now so wide-ranging, diverse, and substantial that it merits consolidation in a state-of-the-art paper. Such an exercise was carried out by the authors for the United Nations and issued as "Administrative Decentralization Strategies for the 1990s and Beyond" (Research Study Prepared for the Governance and Public Administration Branch, Division for Public Administration and Management Development, Department for Development Support and Management Services, United Nations Secretariat, November 1995). A version of this report will be published by Kumarian Press in 1997 as *Administrative Decentralization in Late Developing Countries*.

This Discussion Paper consolidates some of the background research undertaken by the authors while preparing the United Nations study. The methodological issues reviewed will not be published in the Kumarian Press book. Hence, this paper seeks to preserve issues identified during the research process for academics and aid agency professionals.

The paper begins by describing the range and scope of the numerous books, monographs, journal articles, governmental studies, and consulting reports that describe and analyze various forms and types of decentralization. Then it reviews several methodological problems marking this literature that limit its utility to governments and aid agencies seeking to use decentralization strategies to promote development processes. These include careless use of conceptual definitions and terms, misconceptions and unrealistic expectations, unsystematic presentations, an overemphasis on cases of failure, lack of comparability among diverse case studies, neglect of historical patterns that generate complexity, inappropriate linear assumptions, and naive arguments that bureaucracies should be dramatically reduced and power and responsibility for public sector tasks be transferred to local communities, private sector firms, and organizations.

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Methodological Issues in Analysis of Decentralization

Over the past four decades a large body of literature has emerged that reviews various aspects of decentralization interventions and reforms. It is comprised of theoretical exercises, comparative studies of selected cases, individual country studies, focused inquiries into particular aspects of the intervention, international and local training materials, and government or aid agency design and implementation manuals. Most of these studies are produced by academics, either through their own research activities or through grants and consultancies provided by aid agencies. The body of writing on decentralization is now so wide-ranging, diverse, and substantial that it is tempting to conclude that a careful review of its content could generate useful guidelines for designing and implementing decentralization strategies in the 1990s. However, this is not the case. To a large extent this is because of the methodological problems reviewed in this paper.

This Discussion Paper consolidates background analysis undertaken by the authors during the process of preparing a state-of-the-art paper for the United Nations Secretariat, which was issued as "Administrative Decentralization Strategies for the 1990s and Beyond" (Research Study Prepared for the Governance and Public Administration Branch, Division for Public Administration and Management Development, Department for Development Support and Management Services, United Nations Secretariat, November 1995). The analysis in this paper is not included in the commercial publication based on the United Nations study, which will be published for the authors by Kumarian Press in 1997 as *Administrative Decentralization in Late Developing Countries*.

The paper begins by describing the range and focus of the numerous books, monographs, journal articles, governmental studies, and consulting reports that describe and analyze decentralization experiences in late-developing countries. After demonstrating the richness of information on this topic, attention is given to the methodological difficulties involved in comparing such studies and using them to generate reliable propositions that can guide government decision-makers and aid agency professionals. Towards this end the paper reviews analytical problems generated by careless use of conceptual definitions and terms, misconceptions and unrealistic expectations, unsystematic presentations, an over-emphasis on cases of failure, lack of comparability among diverse case studies, neglect of historical patterns that generate complexity, inappropriate linear assumptions, and naive assertions by some that bureaucracies should be dramatically reduced and power and responsibility for public sector tasks be transferred to local communities and private sector organizations.

Range and Focus of Decentralization Literature

To identify, review, and summarize the literature on decentralization one must be committed to the research enterprise. This is because undertaking such research is hampered by a number of methodological problems. These begin with the size and diversity of the literature on the topic, which is comprised of an extremely large number of academic publications, official government documents, commissioned aid agency studies, local and international training materials, and internal government-

tal and aid agency documents related to specific decentralization innovations and experiences. To locate this literature one must be both knowledgeable about the topic and well trained in the use of university, aid agency, and United Nations-based research engines.

Beyond this, the literature is divided among three major languages (English, French, and Spanish), as well as written in the national languages of late-developing countries. Yet few researchers have the skills to go far beyond the language they work in. Rarely, do bibliographies identify source material written in a Third World language, even though such sources can often be quite valuable in the insights they offer.¹

There are additional reasons why this large, diverse, and steadily growing body of literature is difficult to fully access and use. First, as noted shortly, it is generally agreed that there are four *forms* of decentralization: political, administrative, spatial, and market. Because there is a close correlation between these forms of decentralization and standard social science fields, decentralization studies are often coded in the terminology of disciplines. For example, economists and planners tend to focus on "market" and "spatial" forms of decentralization and their publications are compartmentalized into their discipline's sub-fields in ways that make them difficult to find through standard "key word" search methodologies. Second, while academic and professional writing has been extensive in three languages, it is not particularly easy for those writing in English to access Spanish or French publications, reports, and documents. This problem is compounded by a tendency of those writing in French and Spanish to fail or review or drawn upon the

analytical and empirical work of those writing in English. As a result of these two problems cross referencing of materials is infrequent and bibliographic searches in one language often fail to access materials in other languages. Third, a number of decentralization studies that are commissioned by aid agencies, United Nations family organizations, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) never rise sufficiently to the surface to be capable of being located in a standard bibliographic search. This is unfortunate, for some of these studies are more analytically or professionally useful than published academic studies.² However, they can be found, largely though paying close attention to footnotes in published studies. Unfortunately most bibliographic searches in the area of decentralization fail to go this far.

Perhaps because of the size and linguistic diversity of this literature, it is not uncommon to hear aid agency consultants and academics dismiss it as "not solid or useful." This simply is not the case. The literature on decentralization contains some of the best analytical arguments and case studies found in the social sciences, some of which are identified in the footnotes to this paper. There is much in the literature to build on. Dismissing it and starting afresh, as seems common in the mid-1990s, is both lazy and wrong-headed. Rather, the analysis, findings, and lessons of the past four decades must be sought out and mastered by those wishing to understand and promote decentralization strategies into the next century.

¹ For example, books, articles, and papers on decentralization are written in such languages as: Hindi, Chinese, Arabic, Indonesian, and Swahili.

² For example, one of most coherent restatements of the conceptual definitions of the forms and types of decentralization is found in a consulting report prepared for USAID's Office of Housing and Urban Programs: Dennis Rondinelli, *Decentralizing Urban Development Programs: A Framework for Analyzing Policy* (Washington, D.C., USAID, Office of Housing and Urban Programs, 1990).

Sifting Areas of Research Focus

While the number of publications and documents related to decentralization has grown at a steady annual rate, since the late 1940s, there have been three periods during which output on the topic has accelerated. Each period has had a different focus.

The first period occurred in the early 1960s, when the focus was primarily on decentralization as an administrative approach for local-level governance in the post-colonial era.³ During this period the focus was largely on administrative aspects of decentralization, with particular concern with the legal organization of center-field office relationships and the role of local authorities or municipalities within a centrally managed government.

The second period took place in the early 1980s when aid agencies were urging governments to consider decentralization strategies both to better reach the rural and urban poor and to increase their participation in the development process. Examples of the work carried out during this period are found in publications stimulated the United Nations Nagoya Centre for Regional Development,⁴ United Nations organiza-

tions in general,⁵ or in university-based research projects, most notably those funded by USAID under its rural-directed "New Directions" initiative.⁶

Cheema, *Decentralization in Developing Countries: A Review of Recent Experience* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, Staff Working Paper No. 581, 1984); E. P. Wolfers, et al., *Decentralization: Options and Issues: A Manual for Policy Makers* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1982).

⁵ Their most visible work products of this period include: United Nations, *Local Government Reform: Analysis of Experience in Selected Countries* (New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ST/ESA/SER.E/2, 1975); United Nations, *Implementing Decentralization Policies and Programmes* (Nagoya: Centre for Regional Development, 1981); and its special studies, such as Shabbir Cheema's 1983 study *Implementing Decentralization Programmes in Asia*; Food and Agriculture Organization, *Administering Agricultural Development for Small Farmers: Issues in Decentralization and People's Participation* (Rome: FAO, Economic and Social Development Paper No. 20, 1981); International Labour Organization, "World Employment Programme Research Working Papers on Decentralization" (Special Papers Prepared on Decentralized Planning and Participation, Geneva, 1981).

⁶ Examples include the Berkeley-based Decentralization Project: David K. Leonard and Dale R. Marshall, eds., *Institutions of Rural Development for the Poor: Decentralization and Organizational Linkages* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1982); and the Cornell-based Decentralization and Participation Project: Norman T. Uphoff and Milton J. Esman, *Local Organization for Rural Development: Analysis of Asian Experience* (Ithaca: Rural Development Committee, Cornell University, Rural Local Government Publication No. 19, 1974) and their *Local Organizations: Intermediaries in Rural Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); John M. Cohen and Norman T. Uphoff, *Rural Development Participation: Concepts and Measures for Project Design, Implementation and Evaluation* (Ithaca: Center for International Studies, Rural Development Committee, Monograph Series No. 2, 1977); and their *Feasibility and Application of Rural Development Participation: A State of the Art Paper* (Ithaca: Center for Inter-

³ A. A. Maass, ed. *Area and Power: A Theory of Local Government* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959); U. K. Hicks, *Development from Below: Local Government and Finance in Less Developed Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); Samuel Humes and Eileen M. Martin, *Local Government in Developing Countries* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961); H. Maddock, *Democracy, Decentralization, and Development* (Asia Publishing House, 1963); United Nations, *Decentralization for National and Local Development* (New York: Working Group on the Administrative Aspects of Decentralization for National Development, 1962); H. H. Alderfer, *Local Government in Developing Countries* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁴ G. Shabbir Cheema and Dennis A. Rondinelli, eds., *Decentralization and Development: Policy Implementation in Developing Countries* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983); Dennis A. Rondinelli, John R. Nellis, and G. Shabbir

Interest in decentralization strategies declined during the 1980s because aid agency concerns shifted from urban and rural development projects and programs to non-sectoral, specific reforms generally included in structural adjustment programs.⁷ What writing did appear on the topic during the 1980s and early 1990s was largely confined to workshop reports focused on administrative aspects of regional and sectoral planning, notably in regard to infrastructure, health, and education. Among the exceptions to tendency toward neglect of the topic are a few World Bank studies focused on legal, financial, and administrative aspects of decentralization as a potential development strategy⁸ and United Nations studies of the early 1990s that sought to capture the experience of late-developing countries involved in implementing decentralization strategies.⁹

national Studies, Rural Development Committee, Monograph Series No. 3, 1979).

⁷ An exception to this assertion is found in the cooperative agreement between USAID and Associates in Rural Development, Inc., which is titled "Decentralization: Finance and Management Project." It has, however, tended to focus on privatization of services and community control of environmental resources, contributing little direct value to government decision-makers or aid agency professionals seeking to implement strategies of administrative decentralization.

⁸ Silverman, *Public Sector Decentralization*; Rémy Prud'homme, *On the Dangers of Decentralization* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, Transportation, Water, and Urban Development Department, Policy Research Working Paper No. 1252, 1994).

⁹ United Nations, *Seminar on Decentralization in African Countries: Banjul, Gambia 27-31 July 1992* (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Development and African Association for Public Administration and Management, 1993); *Administrative Modernization in Central and Eastern European Countries: A Case Study on Decentralization and Public Administration, Report on an Expert Working Group Meeting in Budapest, Hungary, 1991* (New York: United

A third and currently on-going period emerged in the early 1990s. It focuses primarily on political aspects of decentralization, seeking to understand whether decentralization of any form or type can stimulate the emergence of good governance, constrain sub-national ethnic conflict, promote democratic practices, facilitate the growth of civil societies, and increase the privatization of public sector tasks. Examples of recent work calling for attention to political dimensions of decentralization are generally found in: academic studies focused on sub-national ethnicity and democratization,¹⁰ aid agency inquiries into the promotion of democratization and improved governance,¹¹ and United Nations studies on

Nations, Department of Economic and Social Development, 1992); *Séminaire sur la Décentralisation en Afrique: Tunis, 10-14 Février 1992* (New York: Nations Unies, Département du Développement Économique et Social, 1992); *Descentralización en America Latina: Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, 3-5 Noviembre 1993* (Nueva York: Naciones Unidas, Departamento de Apoyo al Desarrollo y de Servicios de Gestion, 1994); United Nations Development Programme, *Workshop on the Decentralization Process: Bern, Switzerland, 20-23 April 1993* (Report on Workshop, New York, Management Development Programme, 1993). Related to these workshop findings is: UNDP, *Workshop on the Decentralization Process*.

¹⁰ For example: I. William Zartman, ed., *Collapsed States: the Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994); L. Picard and R. Zariski, eds., *Sub-national Politics in the 1980s: Organization, Reorganization and Economic Development* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987).

¹¹ For example: Richard C. Crook and Alf Morten Jerve, eds., *Government and Participation: Institutional Development, Decentralisation and Democracy in the Third World* (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 1991); Richard Crook and James Manor, "Enhancing Participation and Institutional Performance: Democratic Decentralization in South Asia and West Africa" (Paper Prepared for Overseas Development Administration, London, 1994); Harry Blair, "Assessing

such topics as the capacity of decentralization to promote equitable human development.¹²

Limited Coverage of Bibliographies

There is no published bibliography that comes close to capturing the range and focus of the literature on decentralization. The most useful bibliography covering the general literature on decentralization was prepared in 1983 by Britain's Commonwealth Secretariat.¹³ While updated and

Democratic Decentralization" (Paper Prepared for USAID by the Center for Development Information and Evaluation, Washington, D.C., 1995); James Manor, "The Political Economy of Decentralization" (Preliminary Draft Paper Prepared for the Agriculture and National Resources Department, Sector Policy and Water Resources Division, World Bank, 1996); Joel Barkan, et al., *Decentralization and Democratization in Africa* (Ford Foundation Report on Decentralization and Democratization, Grant No. 920-0572, forthcoming 1997); and several papers presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August, 1996); Joel Barkan, "Decentralization, Democratization, Déjà Vu?: Contemporary Lessons From Anglophone Africa"; Harry Blair, "Supporting Democratic Local Governance: Initial Concepts and Some Preliminary Findings"; Jennifer Widner, "State-Building and Community: Understanding Local Governmental Performance in Africa."

¹² For example: Jeni Klugman, *Decentralization: A Survey of Literature from a Human Development Perspective* (New York: United Nations, Human Development Report Office, Occasional Paper No. 13, July 1994).

¹³ Commonwealth Secretariat, *Decentralization for Development: A Select Annotated Bibliography* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1983). Related bibliographies of the time include: L. Beyna, et al., *Managing Decentralization: An Annotated Bibliography* (Syracuse: Maxwell School of Syracuse University, Development Management Research Series No. 1, 1977); D. R. de Burlo, *Local Government and Rural Development in the Third World: An Exploratory Bibliography* (Syracuse: Maxwell School of Syracuse University, Local Revenue Administration Project Bib-

liography Series I, 1980). A review of the publications of the 1980s is found in: Malcolm Wallis, "Local Government and Development: A Guide to the Literature," *Environment and Urbanization*, III, 1 (1991), pp. 121-9.

given a new preface in 1986, it is obviously out of date.¹⁴ To the authors' knowledge no comparable bibliography has been attempted since the Secretariat's effort, though useful up-dating bibliographies can be found in many of the materials footnoted in this paper. For example: a useful, though brief bibliography is found in a 1992 World Bank analysis of administrative and market decentralization strategies.¹⁵

The Secretariat's bibliography is a select one that primarily cites readily available materials in English directly related to decentralization concerns and considered to have analytical, comparative, or empirical value. As such, its list of over 500 studies reflects only a small part of the larger body of literature on decentralization.

The annotated Commonwealth Secretariat bibliography divides the reviewed literature into several topics: (1) the conceptual definition of decentralization, focusing on forms and types and their relationship to principles of centralization; (2) the role of decentralization, with special reference to participation, improved management of programs and projects, and secessionist strategies; (3) the management of decentralization and its relationship to such issues as legal framework, political structure, division of powers, planning, administrative organization, financial management, and implementation; and (4) the monitoring

liography Series I, 1980). A review of the publications of the 1980s is found in: Malcolm Wallis, "Local Government and Development: A Guide to the Literature," *Environment and Urbanization*, III, 1 (1991), pp. 121-9.

¹⁴ Commonwealth Secretariat, rev. ed., *Decentralization for Development: A Select Annotated Bibliography* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1986), with preface by D. Conyers that pinpoints major issues.

¹⁵ Jerry M. Silverman, *Public Sector Decentralization: Economic Policy and Sector Investment Programs* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, African Technical Department, Technical Paper No. 188, 1992).

and evaluation of decentralization reforms and programs. The Secretariat then divided specific studies into two types: (1) regional profiles and (2) country case studies.

The Secretariat's bibliography was the subject of a content analysis by Diana Conyers, which gives a useful picture of the basic patterns marking studies of decentralization.¹⁶ Her tabulation of the 537 items in the bibliography revealed some starting biases in the literature. Briefly, only some 80-90 items were considered by Commonwealth researchers to have a general, comparative, or over-arching character. The remaining studies were all region or country focused. Of these, a disproportionate number focused on a few countries, most notably Nigeria, India, Papua New Guinea, The Philippines, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, and Sudan. The major reason for this is that most research on administrative decentralization is funded by aid agencies and in these countries there has been substantial aid agency and NGO investment. This probably explains why there are far fewer studies of decentralization in Latin American countries. As for Nigeria and India, they have been studied extensively because they are large countries based on principles of federalism and have a number of nationals who are students of comparative public administration.

With little effort, the authors of this paper identified an additional 130 studies, all published after the completion of the bibliography. As with the original work, the additional items were selected for their quality and availability to academics and aid agency professionals. This underlines the fact that the number of studies published since the early 1980s is much greater than 130. Indeed, the authors found the literature grew steadily during the two year

period they prepared their state-of-the-art-paper (1994-96). Nearly every development-related journal publishes several articles each year with the word "decentralization" in the title. So too, every year edited books on a variety of topics appear that include chapters that focus on some dimension of the topic. Finally, United Nations organizations, aid agencies, and NGOs prepare internal documents, some of which are made public in documentation series, that focus on decentralization topics.

Further, a review of the footnotes of many of most emerging studies shows they are based on a growing number of local documents unlikely to be available outside the country of focus. This is well illustrated by the citations in recent articles on Zimbabwe and Ethiopia.¹⁷ Ways need to found to assist researchers to locate and give greater attention to such internal governmental or donor studies and documentation. At present the only way to find these fugitive materials is through personal visits to government or aid agency offices or discussions with other researchers working in the local task environment.

Unlike the Secretariat's study, which included a few cases related to Eastern Europe and the Antipodes, the authors' review of the post-1983 items excluded countries previously classified as members of the First or Second Worlds. So too, they excluded all statistical and planning reports by governments on their local governmental units, materials developed for training sessions at national institutes of public administration, and consulting reports carried out for particular aid agency projects or programs. Needless to say, such documents

¹⁶ Diana Conyers, "Decentralization and Development: a Review of the Literature," *Public Administration and Development*, IV, 2 (1984), pp. 187-97.

¹⁷ Emery M. Roe, "More than the Politics of Decentralization: Local Government Reform, District Development and Public Administration in Zimbabwe," *World Development*, XXIII, 5 (1995), pp. 833-43; John M. Cohen, "Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia," *Northeast African Studies*, II, 2 (New Series) (1995), pp. 157-188.

are numerous and rapidly expanding as greater attention is given by governments and aid agencies to strategies of decentralization.

An updated Secretariat bibliographic profile suggests that the trends identified by Connors have continued. In total, only 59 of the World Bank's 90 low and middle-income countries are the subject of at least one decentralization study available in library or aid agency archives.¹⁸ However, since the 1983 Commonwealth Secretariat's bibliography was researched, most studies undertaken over the past decade have focused on India, Nigeria, China, Bangladesh, South Africa, and Pakistan, in descending order of emphasis. The authors' review reveals that a number of developing countries have no widely available, focused studies on their patterns of decentralization and that a number of countries have not been studied for some time. Some country focused studies do include chapters on decentralization patterns in a few selected countries.¹⁹ Decentralization patterns are also covered in the U. S. Department of State's Area Handbook Series, which covers most late developing countries. Many of the studies in this series, however, are dated. Finally, there are specialized reference books that profile or describe governmental-administrative patterns in all countries.²⁰

¹⁸ Numbers exclude middle-income countries in the Newly Independent States category. World Bank, *World Development Report 1990: Poverty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 1991).

¹⁹ Good examples of edited books on decentralization, ones that combine analytical and country case study chapters, are: Philip Mawhood, ed., *Local Government in the Third World: the Experience of Tropical Africa* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1983); Cheema and Rondinelli, *Decentralization and Development*.

²⁰ For example: Arthur S. Banks, et al., eds., *Political Handbook of the World: 1994-1995* (Binghamton: State University of New York, 1995); Donald C. Rowat, ed., *International Hand-*

However, neither this paper's review nor the Secretariat's bibliography counts such sub-sections, edited chapters, or country-by-country reference profiles. Data on the countries included and the number of studies of them are set forth in Figure 1 (page 8).

This tentative and unsystematic updating of the Secretariat's bibliography suggests that only a handful of regional and over-arching comparative studies have been published for Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Examples of some of these are: James S. Wunsch and Dele Olowu's analysis of the failure of the centralized state in Africa,²¹ Arthur Morris and Stella Lowder's collection of studies on decentralization in Latin America,²² and Hasnat Abdul Hye's collection of articles on local government in Asia.²³

A number of reports and studies related to the various forms and types of decentralization are published every year. These are frequently difficult to access. As a result, it is not easy for specialists to stay abreast of the growing knowledge base. Hence, it is important to repeat the recommendation of the 1983 Commonwealth Secretariat's study that a "clearing-house" or "resource center" be established to keep professionals, academics, and practitioners up-to-date on this topic.²⁴ Clearly, given the current emergence

book on Local Government Reorganization: Contemporary Developments (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980).

²¹ James S. Wunsch and Dele Olowu, *The Failure of the Centralized State: Institutions and Self-Governance in Africa* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

²² Arthur Morris and Stella Lowder, eds., *Decentralization in Latin America: An Evaluation* (New York: Praeger, 1992).

²³ Hasnat Abdul Hye, ed., *Decentralisation, Local Government Institutions, and Resource Mobilization* (Comilla: Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, 1985).

²⁴ Conyers, "Decentralization and Development," p. 194.

NUMBER OF REFERENCES	NAME OF COUNTRY
1-4	Algeria, Barbados, Benin, Burma, Cameroon, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Fiji, Gambia, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Iran, Ivory Coast, Jamaica, Malawi, Morocco, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Taiwan, Trinidad, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda
5-9	Brazil, Colombia, Egypt, Jamaica, Korea, Mexico, Peru, Solomon Islands, South Africa
10-14	Botswana, China, Indonesia, Zimbabwe
15-19	Sri Lanka, Thailand, Zambia
20-29	Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sudan
30-39	Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Tanzania
40+	India, Nigeria

Figure 1: *Distribution of Country Specific Studies*

of interest in political and administrative forms of decentralization, some aid agency needs to fund these kinds of resource services.

Methodological Difficulties Hampering Comparative Analysis

Serious methodological issues confront efforts to carry out studies of decentralization or to summarize the lessons learned from four decades of studies and reports. Specification of these can help alert analysts to the difficulties they face in efforts to compare or consolidate the state of knowledge about the objectives, strategies, intervention guidelines, and predictable outcomes of decentralization strategies. This is the objective of the following sections.

Confusion Over and Careless Use of Conceptual Terms

Progress has been made over the past few decades in defining the concept of "decentralization" and identifying its forms

and types. Nevertheless, it is still difficult for academics and professionals to discuss decentralization strategies because 40 years of reports and studies have freighted the concepts and terms with inconsistent definitions and usages. In particular, the concepts related to the term are used differently by academics and aid agency professionals writing in English, French, Spanish and other languages. Until these concepts are better agreed upon, made comparative across languages, and used consistently and carefully, it will be difficult to make progress in improving the analytical frameworks and design handbooks that facilitate communication among those designing and implementing administrative decentralization strategies.

The importance of and rationale for promoting conceptual clarity and comparative agreement is based on established methodological cannons that are central to achieving effective description, explanation, and prediction. Specialists on the conduct of inquiry in the social sciences have long been concerned with carefully defining the

meaning of concepts.²⁵ Only when this is done will it be possible to make progress in building propositions that can contribute to theory building and have comparative utility to those seeking to use theory to guide action.

The role of language in development studies has recently become a major topic of debate. Drawing on her earlier described review of the literature on decentralization, Conyers argues:

...the language used in development studies...is plagued by ambiguities and inconsistencies, which lead to confusion, misunderstanding, and conflict in discourse.²⁶

Conyers then goes on to address a major methodological problem: the failure of development specialists to define and agree upon the meaning of "decentralization." In this regard, she argues that it will not be possible to carry out meaningful, comparative, and empirical studies on decentralization until there is widespread agreement among international development professionals and academics on the definition of the concept. Hence, she calls for studies to:

...reduce the terminological confusion and misconceptions caused by the often ambiguous and emotive language used to discuss decentralization.²⁷

²⁵ Foremost among these specialists are: R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); A. Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry* (San Francisco: Chandler Press, 1964); Bernard S. Phillips, *Social Research: Strategy and Tactics*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971).

²⁶ Conyers, "Future Directions in Development Studies," p. 594. This paper builds on: R. Apthorpe and B. Schaffer, "Development Policy Discourse" (Paper Presented at Development Studies Association Annual Conference, Brighton, 1983).

²⁷ *Ibid.* This also the conclusion of the USAID-funded Berkeley Decentralisation Project: Martin Landau and Eva Eagle, "On the Concept of

Considerable conceptual elaboration occurred during the early 1980s, largely based on the work of G. Shabbir Cheema, John R. Nellis, and Dennis A. Rondinelli.²⁸ Today there is growing agreement in the English-based literature on the conceptual definitions that emerged from their efforts. Yet, there are still academics and practitioners who are either unaware of or indifferent to the progress that has been made in defining decentralization terms. As a result, even the current literature is marked by careless use of terms. So too, debates about decentralization reforms within governments and at development-related conferences and workshops are frequently clouded by terminological confusion, with parties often talking past each other. This is particularly the case at international workshops or among members of international research and design teams.

The Cheema, Nellis, and Rondinelli approach is based on the classification of decentralization by form and type. Briefly, *forms* of decentralization are classified on the basis of objectives: political, spatial, market, and administrative. Each form is then divided into *types*. The most elaborated approach to types is found in regard to "administrative decentralization," namely: deconcentration, devolution, and delegation.²⁹

Since the focus of this paper is on methodological issues in the analysis of decentralization, it is useful to briefly summarize this increasingly dominant, English-based conceptual approach. Those interested in

Decentralization" (Paper Prepared for Decentralization Project, University of California at Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, 1981), p. 7.

²⁸ Their basic work on conceptual terminology is drawn from the studies cited in Footnote 4.

²⁹ Distinctions between these forms and types of decentralization are well made in: Rondinelli, *Decentralizing Urban Development Programs*, pp. 9-15.

the complexities of this approach, as well as competing conceptual approaches, particularly those of French and Latin American specialists, should review Chapters I and II of the earlier cited forthcoming book by the authors.

Briefly, "political" forms of decentralization are typically used by political scientists interested in democratization and civil societies to identify the transfer of decision-making power to lower-level governmental units or to citizens or their elected representatives. "Spatial" decentralization is a term used by regional planners and geographers involved in formulating policies and programs that aim at reducing excessive urban concentration in a few large cities by promoting regional growth poles that have potential to become centers of manufacturing and agricultural marketing. "Market" forms of decentralization are generally used by economists to analyze and promote action that facilitates the creation of conditions allowing goods and services to be produced and provided by market mechanisms sensitive to the revealed preferences of individuals. This form of decentralization has become more prevalent due to recent trends toward economic liberalization, privatization, and the demise of command economies. Under it, public goods and services are produced and provided by small and large firms, community groups, cooperatives, private voluntary associations, and NGOs. Finally, "administrative" decentralization is the focus of lawyers and public administration professionals seeking to describe or reform hierarchical and functional distribution of powers and functions between central and non-central governmental units.

Much of the literature on decentralization is focused on only one of these four forms of decentralization: *administrative*. Again, briefly, there is growing agreement that this form is characterized by three types. "Deconcentration" is the transfer of authority over specified decision-making,

financial, and management functions by administrative means to different levels under the jurisdictional authority of the central government. This is the least extensive type of administrative decentralization and the most common found in late developing countries. "Devolution" occurs when authority is transferred by central governments to local-level governmental units holding corporate status granted under state legislation. Federal states are by definition devolved, though the extent of legally defined and shared powers devolved by the federal government to lower-level governmental units can be quite limited. Devolution, such as the establishment of chartered municipal authorities is not common in unitary states, largely because many late developing countries are characterized by weak central governments weary of losing political or administrative control to local governmental units. "Delegation" refers to the transfer of government decision-making and administrative authority and/or responsibility for carefully spelled out tasks to institutions and organizations that are either under its indirect control or independent. Most typically, delegation is by the central government to semi-autonomous organizations not wholly controlled by the government but legally accountable to it, such as state owned enterprises and urban or regional development corporations. Increasingly, central and local-level governmental units are delegating tasks, such as refuse collection and road repair, by contract to private firms.

Recently, additional types of administrative decentralization have been suggested: for example, top-down and bottom-up principle agency,³⁰ privatization-deregulation,³¹ and hybrid.³² Descriptions of these

³⁰ Silverman, *Public Sector Decentralization*, pp. 2-3.

³¹ Privatization is described as a type in: Dennis A. Rondinelli, James S. McCullough and Ronald

additional types will not be presented here because most specialists have concluded that principal agency and privatization can be incorporated effectively within the accepted definition of "delegation" and that hybrid is not a type but a description of historical reality in countries that have experimented with different administrative decentralization interventions since independence, with a resulting mixture of types in the delivery of particular public sector tasks, a methodological issue that will be addressed shortly.

As noted earlier, a problem with the conceptual definitions for the types of administrative decentralization just summarized as the growing majority view is that their supporters are largely confined to the those working and writing in English. It is not uncommon to find those working in other languages to be unfamiliar with this progress. For example, the proceedings of a Latin American workshop sponsored by the United Nations illustrate that the concept of "decentralization" was used throughout with no distinction by type, leaving the discussants, as well as the readers of the proceedings, to decide what type of administrative decentralization was being discussed.³³ More grievously, at another United Nations sponsored workshop on the topic in Francophone Africa the following French-based and conflicting definition was given:

Decentralization is defined as the transfer of responsibilities and financial resources from the central government and its bodies to: (1) admin-

istrative units located in the regions (delegation); (2) regional or local authorities (devolution); (3) public semi-autonomous public organisms at the national, regional or even local-level – (uni- or multi-functional deconcentration); and (4) organisms that are not part of the state or public local authorities, that is to say private for profit or not for profit volunteer organizations (privatization).³⁴

This definition and the terms used are at variance with the just described majority view. For example, there is no indication that the definition is focused on administrative decentralization as opposed to other forms of decentralization; what is described as "delegation" appears to be "deconcentration; and the terms "uni- or multi-functional deconcentration" are not found in the English-based literature on types of administrative decentralization. This problem results from the fact that the document is in French, and French specialists have shown themselves not to be particularly aware of the English-based literature. Since they typically do not cite this literature it is difficult to know if they disagree with or reject it. Given the pressures to better design and implement administrative decentralization reforms and programs, how can professionals and academics work on a comparative international basis if such inconsistency is prevails within workshops, seminars, and publications?

In this regard, a number of French specialists use the word "decentralization" to mean "devolution." This was the case in with a discussed paper written in English by a French expert for the World Bank.³⁵

W. Johnson, "Analysing Decentralization Policies in Developing Countries: A Political-Economy Framework," *Development and Change*, XX 4/3 (1989), pp. 72-4.

³² Silverman, *Public Sector Decentralization*, pp. 15-17.

³³ United Nations, *Descentralización en America Latina*.

³⁴ United Nations, *Séminaire sur la décentralisation en Afrique*, p. 4.

³⁵ Prud'homme, *On the Dangers of Decentralization*, ignores the English literature and argues that: "Decentralization is an ambiguous concept, its borders not well defined...decentralization is commonly used to refer to what is described

Clearly, careless translation or acceptance of the French notion that "decentralization equals devolution" undermines the conceptual clarity required to formulate useful analytical frameworks and guidelines.

Finally, a good example of problems caused by terminology is found in the use of the term "municipio" in regard to local-level governance in Latin America. In many Latin countries a municipio can be an urban area, a zone within an urban area, a mixed urban-rural area, or an entirely rural area. Yet, careless specialists writing in English have translated the term as "municipality" and treated this governmental unit from the perspective of British local government. It is possible to attend international workshops where those from Latin America are talking about their experiments in promoting decentralization to municipios (Bolivia, for example) while their counterparts from America or Britain think "urban municipality" and fail to realize that these experiments are taking place on a country-wide basis.

Beyond these problems related to linguistic biases, there is a further problem. A number of academics continue to invent new concepts and definitions and governments or use the terms according to their own predilections. This leads to confusion in the literature and among academics and aid agency professionals.

For example, academics contracted by USAID invented new terms in publications under the "Decentralization: Finance and Management Project." In this regard they identified "polycentric" or "non-central governance" as types of administrative decentralization that should be promoted by countries willing to pursue democratic political decentralization.³⁶ Close inspection

above as devolution. This paper follows that usage."

³⁶ Elinor Ostrom, Larry Schroeder, and Susan Wynne, "Institutional Incentives and Rural Infrastructures" (Draft State-of-the-Art Paper

of these newly proposed types reveals that they are little different from devolution.³⁷ Governments, too, have a tendency to invest new terms. For example, in the 1930s Bolivian officials formulated the term "nuclearization" to ensure that certain cultural responsibilities remained under the control of indigenous Andean populations while literacy and education programs were being implemented by the center.³⁸

Careless use of decentralization concepts also results from a literature that over the past 40 years has used a wide range of terms to describe lower-level hierarchies of governance. For example, it is possible to find within a single study a wide variety of terms describing these units, such as "regional government," "district government," "field administration," "rural government," "urban government," "municipal government," and "local authority government." In the past, the terms used depended on the preferences and objectives of authors. For example, in their 1974 ground-breaking monograph on the effect of decentralization and local organizations on Asian development, Milton J. Esman and Norman Uphoff used the term "local government,"³⁹ even though the term was viewed by many specialists as being confined to classical British local government

Produced for USAID Funded Decentralization: Finance and Management Project, April 1989), pp. 165-68.

³⁷ This is also the conclusion reached by Silverman, *Public Sector Decentralization*, p. 49, fn 1.

³⁸ Peru was the first country to try the nuclei model for education: Andres Cardo, "Peru: the Educational Reform and the Nuclear System," *Prospects*, XI, 2 (1981), pp. 180-191. For another example, see: Carlos E. Olivera, "The Nuclearization Programme in Costa Rica," in *Educational Administration and Multilevel Plan Implementation: Experiences from Developing Countries*, edited by Carlos Malpica and Shapour Rassekh (Paris: IIEP, 1983), pp. 100-18.

³⁹ Uphoff and Esman, *Local Organization for Rural Development*.

authorities or chartered municipalities, as worked out by Lord Rippon in the 19th century.⁴⁰ Alternatively, in a comparative study of a wide range of late developing countries other specialists used the term "decentralized government."⁴¹ Both sets of authors were talking about the same kinds of lower-level governmental units.

In sum, linguistic preferences, invention of new terms, and inconsistent use of established terms creates methodological confusion in any comparative review of decentralization. Perhaps more importantly, it also complicates the presentation of comparative, international analytical frameworks for guiding the design and implementation of administrative decentralization strategies. For this reason, it is important to be conscious and explicit about terms used. Obviously, these problems with conceptual clarity and terminology cannot be solved by fiat. However, it is essential that academics and aid agency professionals involved with decentralization strategies be aware of the methodological and analytical problems generated by conceptual carelessness or inventiveness and seek to use the common definitions of forms and types.

Diversity in the Focus of Studies

One of the major tasks faced during the design of an inquiry into forms of decentralization is what the study will focus on. The literature exhibits great diversity in the resolution of this task. Among the kinds of questions that can be addressed are whether to: (1) compare several countries or examine only a single country; (2) review all or selected local-level governmental units within a given country; (3) select

countries or local-level governmental units according to theoretical principles or on the basis of research access and funding agency demands; (4) use the same researcher, if the study is comparative across a number of countries, for all studies or a single researcher to synthesize studies carried out by a larger group of researchers assigned to different countries; (5) use a rigorous or a flexible research framework for comparative country studies; (6) look at the full range or a single type of administrative decentralization; (7) generalize about or give specific attention to inter-local governmental unit variability; (8) focus on the history of decentralization patterns or only on the current patterns of decentralization; (9) focus on expected outputs of local-level units or broader development outcomes accompanying deconcentrated, devolved, or delegated interventions; (10) emphasize qualitative or quantitative methodologies; (11) seek to establish causal explanations, and, if so, what the key variables will be and how they will be controlled over time; (12) try to insulate analysis from international factors and forces; (13) draw on the standard stock of quantitative data, legislation, regulations, and published studies and reports or carry out original fieldwork; (14) seek to obtain local-level information to test for the extent and variability of the patterns being studied, particularly because data collection on such patterns can take considerable time and have substantial cost implications; and (15) look at counter-factual questions relative to decentralization, particularly in regard to "what might have happened had there been no intervention or had a different type of intervention been attempted."

Each of the comparative and country-specific studies reviewed by the authors as part of their larger study has answered this set of questions in a different way. Significantly, this makes it difficult to use the literature reliably to generate a set of inter-subjective propositions or guidelines rela-

⁴⁰ Philip Mawhood, "Decentralisation and the Third World in the 1980s," *Planning and Administration*, XIV, 1 (1987), pp. 12-13.

⁴¹ Rondinelli, Nellis, and Cheema, *Decentralization in Developing Countries*.

tive to administrative decentralization strategies and interventions.

Comparison of both comparative and targeted studies is further complicated by the fact that administrative, political, spatial, and market forms of decentralization initiatives or reforms are affected by a number of external variables. Different specialists present varying lists of such variables. For example, one recent World Bank study specified: (1) vibrancy of civic associations; (2) exposure of local-level government officials and the citizens they administer or serve to information on public affairs; (3) levels of ethnic, religious, and interregional conflict or compatibility; (4) education of local-level government officials and the inhabitants under their jurisdiction; (5) origin, training, and stability of local government public servants; (6) patterns of demographic and migratory change; (7) levels of development, market integration, and urbanization; (8) patterns of economic control and their relationship to the interaction between local officials, elites, and citizens; (9) extent and pattern of linkages between central and local-level governments; (10) patterns of central-local government control over revenue and budgets; (11) patterns of allocation relative to capital and recurrent functional responsibilities; and (12) logistical and communication linkages and patterns.⁴² This exhaustive and explicit list is an exception to the rule. Further, the variables listed are quite different from those listed in other studies. Indeed, many studies simply do not offer specification of what the key variables are, even in comparative exercises.

⁴² Jennifer A. Widner, "Evaluating the Influence of Socio-Cultural Variables on the Performance of Local Governments" (Paper Prepared for the World Bank on Research Design Issues for Measuring Governmental Effectiveness of Decentralized Subnational Governments, Washington, D.C., May 1994) pp. 11-19.

Whichever explicit or implicit variables an analyst chooses, gathering data on them across a range of countries and local governmental units is likely to be time consuming and costly, particularly if empirical methodologies aimed at generating propositions are used. Again, studies of the forms and types of decentralization vary greatly in regard to the extent to which they gather the information and data required to address these types of comparative variables.

Authenticity and Variability Problems

Substantial obstacles to comparison of studies are also generated by several authenticity factors. It is often difficult for those using published case studies to determine the amount of time and effort researchers have allocated to verifying, in the field, the findings they present. That is, it is difficult to know if the administrative functions decentralized to public, quasi-public, or private units by legislation and supporting regulations correspond with the actual authority and responsibility held by these units. This is particularly the case with many studies that are compiled in capital city offices from legal documents and interviews with central government officials. Clearly, urban-tarmac biases, rainy season problems, and other constraints make it difficult to get to more remote areas to measure the extent and variability of local governance in a given country.⁴³ For this reasons, findings in some studies are unreliable because a nation-wide conclusion is deduced from findings in readily accessible local governmental unit.

Authenticity problems also arise because it is often difficult for researchers to gain the data necessary to evaluate the degree to which financial functions have

⁴³ This problem is well described as spatial, urban and tarmac biases in: Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London: Longman, 1983), pp. 13-18.

been transferred under an administrative decentralization intervention.⁴⁴ Most governmental units, parastatals, firms, and NGOs are secretive about revenue and budgetary matters. So too, many students of administrative decentralization are not trained or interested in local revenue and finance questions. As a result, in most studies one finds that this major indicator of decentralization patterns is either missing or glossed.

Further, many studies do not determine or establish if viable local communities and their citizens are sufficiently empowered to carry out devolved or delegated public sector tasks.⁴⁵ Robert Putnam's recent work in Italy demonstrates the extent of inquiry required to evaluate local government authenticity.⁴⁶ In that study he reviews the vibrancy of civic and other associations, voter turnout in referenda, attitudes of local officials to political equality and compromise, and local citizen feelings about power, justice, and government performance. Few studies of devolvment in the late developing world go this far to verify or test the authenticity of administrative

decentralization reforms and programs. Nor would they have the historical evidence or background data to carry out an inquiry comparable to Putnam's. Yet, the propositions on civic society generated by Putnam has led a number aid agency professionals to use decentralization strategies as a way to promote the "civil associations" Putnam found to be so central to explaining politics and development in Northern Italy.

The difficulties these and other methodological problems raise for comparative analysis were persuasively demonstrated in a 1993 exchange over Dele Olowu and Paul Smoke's efforts to use case studies to comparatively determine what makes for successful, devolved local-level governance in Africa. Olowu and Smoke's methodology identified several factors critical to success: (1) location in an area with an adequate economic base; (2) well-defined responsibilities in a satisfactory legal framework; (3) capacity to mobilize sufficient resources; (4) supportive central government activities; and (5) appropriate management practices, including development of productive internal and external relations and satisfactory responsiveness to constituents.⁴⁷

Subsequently, Ole Therkildsen charged that: (1) these indicators should be supplemented by attention to equity, political pluralism, and resource mobilization; (2) the number of cases were limited and not subject to comparable standards; and (3) inadequate attention was given to methodological questions of validity and causality.⁴⁸ Olowu and Smoke responded that while they recognized these points, it was not possible to carry out scientifically designed

⁴⁴ This problem is discussed at length in: Naomi Caiden and Aaron Wildavsky, *Planning and Budgeting in Poor Countries* (New York: Wiley, 1974); A. Premchand, ed. *Government Financial Management: Issues and Country Studies* (Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, 1990).

⁴⁵ Civil society is the sphere of social interaction between the household and the state which is manifest in norms of community cooperation, structures of voluntary association, and networks of public communication. See, for example: Michael Bratton, "Civil Society and Political Transition in Africa," *Institute for Development Research*, XI, 6 (1994). For a review of the relationship between the state and civil society see: John W. Harbeson, Donald Rothchild, and Naomi Chazan, eds., *Civil Society and the State in Africa in Africa* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994).

⁴⁶ Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁴⁷ Dele Olowu and Paul Smoke, "Determinants of Success in African Local Governments: An Overview," *Public Administration and Development*, XII, 1 (1992), pp. 1-17.

⁴⁸ Ole Therkildsen, "Successful African Local Government: Some Methodological and Conceptual Issues," *Public Administration and Development*, XIII, 5 (1993), pp. 51-5.

comparative studies of devolved authority because: (1) it is difficult to select case studies along scientific lines; (2) it is too costly in terms of data and time to carry out a methodologically satisfactory study of the quality needed to deal with the lack of comparability between and within countries; and (3) it is far more helpful to those addressing administrative decentralization issues to formulate general sets of insights than to develop empirically generated universal laws.⁴⁹ Clearly, as this exchange suggests, it will be a long time before studies of deconcentration, devolution, or delegation solve the range of methodological problems just outlined.

In sum, because of these methodological problems, action-oriented comparative propositions and guidelines based on case studies are difficult to verify. Hence, developing analytical principles and design or implementation guidelines is fraught with risk, for they are twice removed from empirical reality.

Negative Social Science

Many case studies focused on experiences with deconcentration, devolution, or delegation are marked by negative social science. As a result, far more attention is paid to the problems and failures of strategies, reforms, and programs than to potentially positive impacts of such interventions. Negative analysis, the search for what went wrong, affects efforts to learn from case studies and generate useful analytical principles for government and aid agency decision-makers, professionals, and practitioners.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Paul Smoke and Dele Olowu, "Successful African Local Government: Methodological and Conceptual Issues Reconsidered," *Public Administration and Development*, XIII, 5 (1993), pp. 507-14.

⁵⁰ The need for and the scarcity of successful descriptions of developmental interventions is persuasively made in: Samuel Paul, *Management*

On the other hand, the dominant pattern among those writing comparative analytical reviews of administrative decentralization is to accept failure while seeking to offer action-oriented advice for better design and implementation of such reforms and programs. Yet rarely do these overarching manuals acknowledge the effects of the negative character of the case studies from which they are drawing their propositions from.

The problem of negative social science in development studies is well described by Robert Chambers. He argues there are two cultures in Western universities and aid agencies:

...a negative academic culture mainly of social scientists, engaged in unhurried analysis and criticism; and a more positive culture of practitioners, engaged in time-bounded action. Each culture takes a poor view of the other and the gap between them is often wide...Academics are trained to criticize and are rewarded for it. Social scientists in particular are taught to argue and to find fault...A supposedly successful project is a red flag to some academics, a challenge to see whether it can be turned into a failure by finding hidden harmful efforts or errors which officials try to conceal.⁵¹

This observation is significant, because studies based upon the case studies of negative social science done by academics stand in Chamber's "wide gap" as they seek to learn the lessons of comparative experience. Both the methodological problems reviewed above and the negative character of most studies make it very difficult for those seeking to specify analytical frameworks, propositions, and guidelines that can be useful to government officials or aid agency professionals.

Development Programs: The Lessons of Success (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982).

⁵¹ Chambers, *Rural Development*, p. 30.

Those making such translations are, in most cases, academics funded by aid agencies. To be sure, practitioners recognize that the critical attitudes of negative social scientists have made a substantial contribution to the understanding of administrative decentralization. But the academics are committed, indeed employed, to assist the professionals and practitioners in acting promptly and effectively. As a result, they mine the negative experience to generate action-oriented insights. If the assumptions and arguments that administrative, political, spatial or market decentralization can play an important role in assisting central governments to address problems of development and basic human needs are correct, then their act of translation is probably justified. Nevertheless, it is imperative that practitioners drawing upon their positive findings and suggestions recognize that they are distilled from a largely negative literature and may be flawed as a result.

Decentralization Naïveté

John D. Montgomery is arguably the major proponent of the view that central policies and programs can be carried out effectively and sustainably through strategies of administrative or political forms of decentralization. For a number of years he studied how administrative and political forms of decentralization could facilitate the implementation of national programs of reforms. In his classic study of the implementation of land reforms, he demonstrated, perhaps for the first time empirically, that when programs were carried out by centralized processes only they tended to strengthen local bureaucratic power but did little for peasant incomes or political power, that deconcentrated processes showed more local benefits, and that devolved processes had the best prospects for introducing distributive or democratic

results, though not perfectly.⁵² But in providing this evidence in support of administrative or political decentralization, he did not argue for severely limiting the center and transferring government power to local governments, communities, and people.

A major problem plaguing those writing about the rationale and strategy for administrative or political decentralization is summed up in the title of Montgomery's well known article: "The Populist Front in Rural Development: or Shall We Eliminate the Bureaucrats and Get On With the Job?"⁵³ There, he points out that throughout the 1970s a growing number of development specialists challenged the statist view and lost confidence in the capacity of central ministries to effectively and efficiently promote development objectives. At the same time, they became increasingly attracted to strategies that would increase the involvement of local communities and private sector organizations in the performance of government functions at the local level, particularly in regard to the design and implementation of projects.

This trend was clearly recognized by the Berkeley Decentralization Project, which pointed out that a growing number of proponents of devolution and delegation tended to base their advocacy on implicit and explicit assumptions that:

...individuals and small groups know best their own self interests, that com-

⁵² John D. Montgomery, "Allocation Authority in Land Reform Programs," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, XVII, 1 (1972), pp. 62-75; "Land Reform and Popular Participation: Some Possibilities for the Philippines," *Solidarity*, X (Jan./Feb. 1976). Among other applications, he extended this evidence to integrated rural development projects in: "Decentralizing Integrated Rural Development Activities," Cheema and Rondinelli, *Decentralization and Development*.

⁵³ John D. Montgomery, "The Populist Front in Rural Development: Shall We Eliminate the bureaucrats and Get on With the Job?" *Public Administration Review*, XXXIX, 1 (1979), pp. 1-8.

petition between them leads to efficiencies, and that there is some roughly equal initial endowment of capacity.⁵⁴

Worried about this trend, the Berkeley group noted in the early 1980s that such assumptions may be inappropriate if an important goal of government is to establish control over often diverse and deeply conflictual political, economic, and societal interests, and that such competition can appear to central government politicians and decision-makers as wasteful of energy and resources. Indeed, a central finding of the Berkeley group was that effective development and decentralization strategies requires a strong public sector center. "Strong" is not defined in terms of defense force, police, or any other similar notions. Rather, it is defined in terms of the competency of the public sector to carry out allocative functions long identified by Richard A. Musgrave, namely: (1) *stabilization* and maintenance of high levels of employment and output; (2) achievement of a desired *distribution* of wealth and income; and (3) efficient *allocation* of resources.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s arguments for devolution and participation had been consolidated in the concept of "people-centered development."⁵⁶ Since then there has been a growing number of

arguments for severely reducing the role of the centralized state and transferring power through devolution to local governmental units or delegation to local civic associations, private sector firms, and NGOs.

Related to this movement was a shift in attention of some specialists from concerns about better governance to ways to promote local organizations that are protected from centers held to be predatory and unable to eliminate rural and urban poverty. That is, at the same time that specialists were elaborating upon principles of "people-centered development," they shifted their primary focus from addressing traditional public administration concerns about public sector services to formulating strategies for dealing with problems of inequality in rural and urban areas. Here the emphasis was more on developing strategies to address poverty by gaining access to local knowledge and organizations than on formulating guidelines for designing and implementing more effective administrative, political, spatial, or market decentralization reforms and programs.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Stephen Cohen, John Dykman, Erica Schoenberger, and Charles Downs, "A Framework for Policy Analysis" (Paper Prepared for Decentralization Project, University of California at Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, 1981), p. 149.

⁵⁵ Richard A. Musgrave, *The Theory of Public Finance* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959).

⁵⁶ Basic thinking on this development strategy is found in such studies as: David C. Korten and Rudi Klauss, eds., *People Centered Development: Contributions Toward Theory and Planning Frameworks* (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1984); Guy Gran, *Development By People: Citizen Construction of a Just World* (New York: Praeger, 1983).

⁵⁷ This trend is well illustrated in the titles of final reports for two important USAID-funded decentralization studies: Cornell's 1974 *Local Organization for Rural Development* (subsequently published as: Uphoff and Esman, *Local Organization*; and Berkeley's 1982 *Institutions of Rural Development for the Poor*. Leonard and Marshall, *Institutions of Rural Development for the Poor*. The Berkeley project is particularly instructive. Because of a strong emphasis by its director, David K. Leonard, toward assisting the poor, and his view that central and local governments dominate and exploit such people, the resulting study focused primarily on how to insulate the poor from government and to build or strengthen local organizations that could assist them to achieve economic progress and a better way of life. As a result, USAID critics felt that inadequate attention was given to formulating management techniques for administrative decentralization or central-local government linkages precisely because the objective of the study was to protect the poor from government.

One of the best known arguments for transferring development responsibility to the people is found in the writing of David C. Korten.⁵⁸ He asserts that centralized bureaucracies and top-down aid agency efforts have proved largely ineffective at reaching the poor rural and urban majority. In their place, he makes a case for dramatically increasing the role of local people in the development process, primarily through voluntary associations and NGOs. Others go on to argue that only such community-based organizations can deal with difficult resource-based problems. Most notable here is the work of Elinor Ostrom, who asserts local groups in civil society are better at protecting the commons than either the state or the market.⁵⁹

Clearly, there is merit in arguments for local responsibility, provided one does not, as has often been the case with advocates for new development strategies, throw the baby out with the bath water. Those who go beyond Korten and argue that development can only occur through local control do more than make unsubstantiated statements, they do a disservice to poor rural and urban people.⁶⁰ This is because, as

In response to criticism that the resulting work product of the project was not going to assist governments and aid agencies seeking to promote administrative decentralization reforms and programs, the director of the project wrote: "We find it impossible to disaggregate the task of designing decentralized organizations from the task of devising strategies for reaching the rural poor."

⁵⁸ David C. Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda* (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1990).

⁵⁹ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and her *Crafting Institutions for Self-Governing Irrigation Systems* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992).

⁶⁰ Naive analysis is revealed in a statement by an Aid Action staff member, who said: "Unless local people have ownership or control of proj-

ected above, a major lesson of the past four decades is that without central leadership, adequate resources, and effective central and local government administrative coordination and linkages, sustainable development is unlikely. Joel Samoff makes this abundantly clear when he states:

...there is no absolute value in either central direction or local autonomy. Both are important...at different moments. Both must coexist. That understanding provides useful leavening to the populist tone...⁶¹

This view has been supported by a long line of decentralization specialists, ranging from Brian Smith who argues that decentralization is not desirable in itself but depends on the politics, economics, and sociology of particular systems and localities,⁶² and Herbert Werlin, who provides a convincing analytical approach to the necessity of shifting central-local power and authority relationships,⁶³ to David Slater, a Marxist who argues that decentralization only makes sense when it leads to greater social or territorial equality, which is often not the case.⁶⁴

A recent example of "naive decentralization" is found in the writing of Wunsch and Olowu, academics deeply frustrated by the failure of highly centralized African

ects they will not take responsibility...people have local knowledge. Their ideas are always superior to those of experts." John Vidal, "Local Know-How Works Wonders," *Guardian Weekly* (July 17, 1994), p. 25.

⁶¹ Joel Samoff, "Decentralization: The Politics of Intervention," *Development and Change*, XXI, 3 (1990), p. 527.

⁶² Brian C. Smith, *Decentralization: the Territorial Dimension of the State* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985).

⁶³ Herbert H. Werlin, "Elasticity of Control: An Analysis of Decentralization," *Journal of Comparative Administration*, II, 2 (1970), pp. 185-209.

⁶⁴ D. Slater, "Territorial Power and the Peripheral State," *Development and Change*, XX, 3 (1989), pp. 501-31.

states to promote effective, sustainable development and political integration and driven to find a solution to central neglect and under-performance.⁶⁵ In their strongly worded argument for shifting power from the central government to local units of self-governance, they assert:

...the unleashing and encouragement of African peoples' 'self-organizing' capabilities through what we call 'self-governance' is a critical pre-requisite for human development to occur. We will argue that the excessive centralization of institutions of government in Africa since independence has seriously impeded Africans' ability to do this and to engage in the art of self-governance.⁶⁶

Wunsch and Olowu have concluded that the highly centralized, unitary state is not capable of promoting equitable, democratically-based development processes because it is dominated by politicians and public servants who are concerned with ruling rather than serving and with capturing monopoly rents and development benefits. They are insensitive to the diversity of tasks, problems, and opportunities throughout the country, prone to error in policy; incapable of country-wide management, slow to recognize and adjust to mistakes, exploitative of the majority of its citizens; unaccountable to the people, and inhospitable to local initiative, empowerment, and civic pluralism, particularly when linked to ethnicity. Further, Wunsch and Olowu argue that conventional deconcentration and devolution are simply replacing one model of "tutelage" and elite control for another, albeit at a lower-level. For them, effective administrative and political decentralization is "self-governance," which they describe as:

...institutionalized empowerment of the people, and the expansion of their ability to engage in collective choice and action at a variety of scales of human organization... (self-governance permits) citizens to join with one another to take collective action: to tax, contract, hire, fire, borrow, mandate, and face the consequences of these choices. Similarly, it can facilitate many rule-based organizations which allow citizens to act in a mediating position between individuals and the sovereign actions of government.⁶⁷

To be sure, one of the major lessons of the past four decades is that centralized political and administrative structures alone are not sufficient to bring about democratic, equitable, and sustainable development processes. On the other hand, the same holds true for grassroots organizations, which on their own have tended toward failure. To their credit, Wunsch and Olowu recognize that central leadership and resources are important to effective devolution or delegation of public sector responsibility if material and social improvement are to be promoted and political integration attained. But they offer few insights into how to formulate a strategy for simultaneously reforming and otherwise strengthening the power of both the center and local units to effectively make a transition toward the improved administrative strategies of devolution and delegation.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 294, 274.

⁶⁸ Indeed, a review of the limited advice they do give suggests it is too overgeneralized to be helpful. Among the generalizations offered are: "Decentralization to a large variety of local governments regulated by law makes possible the existence of a large number of flexible, diverse organizations ...(that allow) persons, groups and communities to act collectively to pursue their various conceptions of the good...Redundancy, duplication and overlap have been seen as important design strategies to improve organ-

⁶⁵ Wunsch and Olowu, *The Failure of the Centralized State*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Unfortunately, people-centered development initiatives can have negative effects on local communities. This is because devolution or delegation to weak local-level institutions or organizations frequently leads to increased central government penetration. After an extensive review of the literature on using local organizations for rural development, Lenore Ralston and her Berkeley colleagues concluded:

Regardless of the form selected, decentralization in systems with weakly organized local units usually leads to further penetration by the central power, which more often than not results in the extraction of what few local resources remain, including the most able of the local leaders. Despite legislation and administrative orders...decentralization usually favors the central government or the local elite.⁶⁹

So too, care must be taken relative to claims about the superiority of local participation, which has been found to merely create new arrangements for bureaucracies to control local development." For example, a recent village level study carried out in The Gambia, where central efforts to introduce administrative decentralization have been bogged down for a decade and deconcentrated line ministry field agents and district commissioners hardly touch the lives of rural people. Noting that NGOs were rapidly expanding to fill the vacuum created by a weak center, the authors went on to caution:

NGOs can do many good things but they cannot substitute for the state at

izational performance." *Ibid.*, pp. 286-89. How to achieve these and other benefits and objectives cited in this section is not articulated.

⁶⁹ L. Ralston, J. Anderson and E. Colson, *Voluntary Efforts in Decentralized Management: Opportunities and Constraints in Rural Development* (Berkeley: University of California, Institute of International Studies, 1981), p. 113.

the local-level on a national scale. Their claims of a participatory approach should not be regarded as equivalent to being democratic, transparent, and accountable. In consequence, donors need to place a much higher priority on how they can assist local government in the medium and long term (there are no quick fixes in real-world institutional development) in The Gambia, and more generally in Africa.⁷⁰

In sum, academics and professionals drawing on the decentralization literature must be aware of the methodological problems created by people-centered decentralization arguments that lead more from the hope than from evidence. That is, they must attempt to identify the ideological biases of studies they use and to question the empirical evidence in those studies if they are to use them to formulate frameworks and guidelines for promoting strategies of administrative or political decentralization. A failure to do so can lead to recommendations that are unrealistic or worse.

Difficulty Recognizing Historical Variability

There has been a tendency in the literature to describe countries as dominated by a specific type of administrative or political decentralization. For example, Indonesia is deconcentrated and Papua New Guinea is devolved. While deconcentration may well be the predominant pattern in a given country, the literature reveals the fact that: (1) many states have deconcentrated systems, which ensure central presence throughout the country, coexisting with devolved lower-level governmental units over which the central government has some authority

⁷⁰ Daniel Davis, David Hulme and Philip Woodhouse, "Decentralization by Default: Local Governance and the View from the Village in The Gambia," *Public Administration and Development*, XIV, 3 (1994), p. 268.

and power; (2) administrative decentralization reforms need not be government- or territory-wide; and (3) it is possible to use different types of administrative decentralization reforms to address different functional problems within the same government. For example, while Kenya claims to be experimenting in devolution it is clearly a deconcentrated system, even though there are still operating but substantially weakened local authorities that have survived the colonial era.⁷¹ This point about mix and variability is extremely important and cannot be overemphasized. This is particularly the case since administrative decentralization in the 1990s will probably be dominated by an institutional pluralism that is characterized by a mix of administrative strategies.

Silverman recognizes this analytical point when he states:

Most system-wide institutional arrangements are characterized by the coexistence of elements of at least four of these (types of administrative) decentralization, together with other highly centralized functions.⁷²

He identifies this situation as a type of administrative decentralization, which he labels "hybrid." So too, Philip Mawhood describes it as "mixed."⁷³ However, as noted earlier, this is not a type of administrative decentralization. Rather it is an empirical observation that as governments address the questions of who should carry out what public sector roles and tasks and how they should do it, they end up using a range of specific types of administrative decentralization. Over time, some tasks and the func-

tions that support them remain centrally provided, some are deconcentrated or devolved to lower levels of government, some are delegated to a wide range of semi-public and private organizations, and some are recentralized.

This observation suggests that designing and implementing administrative decentralization reforms and programs is far more complicated today than in the 1960s. It is no longer possible to reach simple solutions based on dichotomous or compartmentalized thinking. This is because most countries' center-periphery relationships are characterized by: (1) histories of colonial intervention and rule; (2) shifting post-independence regimes and approaches to political, administrative, spatial, and market decentralization strategies; (3) economic crises and changing development strategies; (4) numerous aid agency experiments and innovations; (5) informal patterns of administrative behavior; (6) diversity in degree of regional isolation, infrastructural linkages, and economic development; and, most importantly, (7) uneven implementation and adoption of previous reforms and programs. Further complicating this is the fact that many regions (e.g. provinces or districts) in late developing countries are more populous and administratively complex than the entire country was at independence.

The methodological significance of these points is underlined by the following observation:

The structure of government in all countries changes constantly, sometimes rapidly and dramatically through administrative reforms and reorganization, sometimes slowly and imperceptibly through the interaction of social, administrative, and political forces.⁷⁴

⁷¹ For example: Joel D. Barkan and Michael Chege, "Decentralising the State: District Focus and Politics of Reallocation in Kenya," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, XXVII, 3 (1989).

⁷² Silverman, *Public Sector Decentralization*, pp. 15-16.

⁷³ Mawhood, "Decentralisation and the Third World," pp. 13-14.

⁷⁴ Rondinelli and Cheema, *Decentralization and Development*, p. 9.

In sum, it is essential to recognize that four decades of experience with administrative and political decentralization have created, in many countries, complex patterns of deconcentration, devolution, and delegation. "Public administration archeology" must be carried out for history has left very complex relations and residues in most late developing countries, many of which are neglected or unrecognized in studies. Care must be taken, therefore, in studying a given country's administrative and decentralization patterns or in designing and implementing further reforms that affect them.

Noting such variability and complexity, some critics argue that it makes no sense to construct a general framework for designing and implementing decentralization reforms and programs.⁷⁵ For them, history, politics, and institutional structures are too idiosyncratic to be analyzed or addressed by such a general model as that which emerged from the work of Cheema, Nellis, Rondinelli, and Silverman.⁷⁶ While it is true that proposed decentralization reforms and programs are implemented in constantly changing task environments that are burdened with history, the fact is that general frameworks can be useful in identifying issues and suggesting strategies. Indeed, such frameworks can be very helpful in sorting out the problems and potentials that mark countries. The problem posed by the idiosyncratic nature of task environments must be recognized. However, it is not sufficient to reject the recent efforts to formulate general frameworks for analyzing,

designing, and implementing decentralization reforms and programs.

Misleading Linear Assumptions

There is a tendency on the part of some specialists to view administrative decentralization as a linear process, inevitably leading to a reduced central government and substantial devolution and delegation to local communities and private firms and organizations. Evidence found in the literature appears to be contrary to this view. Because at independence many political leaders found themselves governing weak states marked by low administrative capacity, internal ethnic and class conflict, and limited financial resources, they tended toward centralization of authority and administrative control over the provision of government goods and services. This has particularly been the case in Africa, though it is also true of a number of Asian and Latin American countries. This is why to some observers it appears that the post-World War II period has been marked by a pendulum moving between administrative centralization and decentralization.⁷⁷ The point here is that despite assertions in some articles on decentralization, the available evidence suggests that there is no linear pattern or inevitable end-state in regard to administrative, political, spatial, or market forms of decentralization.

Assuming Democratization is a Prerequisite to Decentralization

There is also a tendency by some specialists to simplistically argue that democratic elections and responsible local officials and councils are essential for effective decentralization. For example, this argument is

⁷⁵ Conyers notes in "Future Directions in Development Studies," p. 598: "...the decentralization programs introduced in the 1970s and 1980s vary so much that differences between one developing country and another may be as great as differences between developed and developing countries."

⁷⁶ For example, Samoff, "Decentralization," p. 523.

⁷⁷ For example, Mawhood has described Africa's experience with decentralization as characterized by such a pendulum effect. Mawhood, *Local Government in the Third World*.

made in the proceedings of a 1993 UNDP Workshop on decentralization:

Decentralization is a political process, not an administrative option, and simply delegating responsibilities out to out-posted central ministry officials without putting them under the control of locally elected leaders will not result in the desired improvements...The political process is perhaps the most important mechanism for promoting decentralization, in that because of it the demand for socioeconomic development and for reforming and modernizing the state machinery has been stimulated.⁷⁸

From a methodological perspective this statement suffers from careless use of critical terminology and idealistic assumptions about people-centered development, as discussed earlier, and it confuses the relationship between political and administrative *forms* of decentralization. Clearly, the

greater the amount of democratic decentralization that occurs, the wider the range of administrative or political forms of decentralization strategies available to government decision-makers relative to the problem at hand. In particular, the more likely it will be that devolved or delegated strategies can be designed and effectively implemented. On the other hand, in countries that have experienced minimal political decentralization, the more promising administrative decentralization strategies are probably confined to deconcentration. But just because a country is highly centralized does not mean that it is unable to effectively decentralize the provision of collective goods and services through the field administration type of deconcentration. In sum, democratization can facilitate administrative and/or political decentralization strategies, but its absence does not necessarily mean that such strategies cannot be efficient or effective.

⁷⁸ United Nations Development Programme, *Workshop on the Decentralization Process*, pp. 24, 29.

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