

PARADOX OF FISHERIES GOVERNANCE: RECONCILING THE DECENTRALIZATION EXPERIENCE VS. COMMUNITY-BASED MANAGEMENT

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The failure of decentralization reforms

There is a paradox in the governance of small-scale fisheries. On the one hand, a large literature questions the success of decentralization reforms of the 1990s in fisheries and other resource areas such as forestry. On the other hand, various forms of community-based management and co-management have been operating successfully in many parts of the world. Decentralization reforms were undertaken to achieve participatory development and greater administrative efficiency as part of a global neo-liberal agenda, with benefits supposedly also for democratization, empowerment, poverty reduction, and resource sustainability. Case study literature shows that these objectives have rarely been met. A number of forces conspire to frustrate decentralization goals. Decentralization reforms have often been undermined by central governments themselves -- no agency likes to give up power. Central governments use two main strategies to undermine the ability of local governments to make meaningful decisions: limiting the kinds of powers that are transferred, and choosing local institutions that serve and answer to central interests (Ribot et al. 2006). As well, local elites have shown a remarkable ingenuity in using decentralization reforms to further their own interests. Well organized, locally influential people tend to take advantage of the power vacuum while decentralization is in progress and consolidate their controls over resources. This works against equity and poverty reduction goals, and specifically against the well-being of the extreme poor and marginalized groups who tend to under-represented in local decision-making bodies (Béné & Neiland 2006). Further, the phenomenon of 'off-loading' has been common; local jurisdictions do not often receive the resources commensurate with their responsibilities (Pomeroy & Berkes 1997).

Making sense of what works in decentralized management

A large literature (mainly in the field of commons) exists on community-based, local-level management of small-scale fisheries that work. Some of these cases refer to traditional fishing communities that have maintained *de facto* control over their resources. Others refer to community-based management through laws that devolve management powers to local fishing communities, as in Japan, or through laws that provide for co-management arrangements, as in Chile. In some cases, indigenous fishing communities retain local control or have co-management powers through indigenous land and resource claim agreements, as in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. And in yet other cases, such as lobster fisheries in parts of the east coast of the United States and Canada, communities seem to be controlling resources and making local rules despite the dominant jurisdiction of the state agencies to do so.

Co-management involving a sharing of management rights and responsibilities between fishers and the state has become increasingly common throughout the world (Berkes 2009). The

literature on commons and co-management provides insights on how to proceed from decentralization and the devolution of power, through experience and adaptive learning, toward participatory development and joint resource management.

Early representations of co-management focused on a two-link relationship between the government and local resource users. Over the years, the understanding of co-management has progressively moved from such simple interactions to one that regards multiple linkages and social relationships, in the form of networks, as the essence of co-management (Carlsson & Berkes 2005). The more detailed case studies of co-management show a wide array of actors and relationships, and illustrate the ways in which these relationships evolve and deal successively with a series of problems over the years (Armitage et al. 2007). Much of this problem-solving occurs through informal learning networks and communities of practice. Various studies have identified the importance of leadership roles and key individuals in these networks. Consistent with commons theory, successful decentralization has been linked to secure resource tenure and/or traditional rights, and revenue and/or taxation powers of the local institutions to manage resources. Commons literature focuses on institutions and the question of who has control over resources, rather than the processes of decentralization *per se* (Ostrom 1990).

Moving towards effective community-based resource management and co-management

Rather than focusing on indicators and success factors, I attempt to identify some of the major processes in moving from decentralization and devolution to community-based management and co-management. I use a framework or conceptual model adapted from Prabhu et al. (2007) and several other sources. Without trying to account for every possible variable, the model is a useful way of summarizing some of the pre-conditions of devolution; deliberation for visioning; the importance of building social capital, trust and institutions; skills acquisition and capacity-building through networks and partnerships; and the significance of an action-reflection-action process leading to social learning. For skeptics, there is a body of literature showing that such adaptive co-management (co-management with a social learning component) is not simply a theoretical possibility but something that works in a number of resource management situations in both developed and developing nations (Armitage et al. 2007).

What are the obstacles that prevent decentralized resource governance from reaching full potential? Any impediment to the various processes mentioned above is such an obstacle. Prominent among these are the various actions of central governments and local elites to undermine decentralization reforms. Two additional factors deserve special comment. One impediment is the lack of appreciation of a multi-level (from local to international), polycentric (with spheres of overlapping management responsibility), partnership approach to governance. Even though a great deal of attention has been directed since about 2000 to the notion that governance involves a number of institutional levels and action at any one level alone is not likely to work (e.g., Berkes 2007), this has not yet become mainstream thinking. A second impediment is that professional education and practice in resource and environmental governance areas lag behind interdisciplinary progress and theory development. Feasibility of adaptive co-management is reflected in some recent fisheries volumes (e.g., Cochrane & Garcia 2009) but not (yet) in mainstream environmental management education and practice.

Conclusions

To move towards effective community-based resource management and co-management, three points may be offered. First, effective devolution and making co-management work takes time, and focus must shift from a static concept of management to a dynamic concept of governance shaped by interactions, feedback learning and adaptation over time. Partnerships and social learning help respond adaptively to change, and allow social-ecological systems to be resilient in the face of uncertainties in a globalized world. Second, sharing of governance responsibilities and ability to learn from experience is a concern for all resource and environmental management institutions, and more to the point, for multi-level institutions. Governance involves the interaction, not only of many actors, but also of a number of decision-making levels; there is no one 'correct' level. Third, user participation and devolution of management powers tend to be associated with societies with democratic traditions and strong civil society. Long traditions of top-down rule are likely to lead to top-down decentralization processes as well, and to the failure of devolution. Democratic institutions develop slowly but can be nurtured and facilitated through local and multi-level capacity-building, and the development of institutions and social capital.

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