1 Decentralisation Meets Local Complexity: Conceptual Entry Points, Field-level Findings and Insights Gained

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Abstract

This article summarises and discusses eight case studies from Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, Pakistan, India and Nepal that focus on the everyday realities of decentralisation. It recalls the mainstream arguments favouring decentralisation as a basic human right (i.e. to be able to participate in decision-making) and in a more utilitarian sense (i.e. decentralisation for development). The eight case studies support aspects of the mainstream; however, they also present new insights. To position these insights, the article deconstructs mainstream decentralisation discourses as based on a functionalist ontology, often leading to rather managerial and mechanistic approaches. To contrast such a functionalist position, three critical social science perspectives are introduced: the neo-Marxist view of the hegemonic state (including the notion of subalterns), Scott's simplifying state techniques, and Midgal's state-in-society approach. A reading of the case studies in this context highlights that decentralisation programmes often follow standardised procedures that encounter social, political, economic and ecological local complexities. Dimensions of these complexities are: already ongoing contestations among social groups; conflicting expectations upon, and interpretations of, the meaning of decentralisation; and strategic handling of decentralisation as a resource – highlighting the importance of agency. The article concludes with the proposition that decentralisation is not primarily a managerial challenge (i.e. to introduce improved governance mechanisms), but is inherently political, influenced by interests and agency, and thus contingent. The challenge for researchers and practitioners is to support adequate social processes that allow decentralisation to give local complexities more room, without fuelling local competition over the scarce resources offered by decentralisation.

Keywords: Decentralisation; local complexity; social movements; participation; agency and contingency; natural resource management.

1.1   The issue

> *Since the last decade of the twentieth century, many countries have pursued new mechanisms to promote more direct citizen engagement in the processes of governance, ranging from the creation of new decentralised institutions, to a wide variety of participatory and consultative processes in national and global policy deliberations.* (Gaventa 2002)

Indeed, decentralisation has become an important field of debate for both development practitioners and development researchers. The above quote highlights several core notions constituting this particular field of engagement with development, e.g. 'citizens', 'mechanisms', 'governance', 'participatory and consultative processes', 'policy deliberations' and last but not least 'countries' (or states for that matter).

The notion of 'decentralisation' generally refers to a shift in government from rather centralised, state-controlled regimes to more decentred arrangements based on local forms of governance.[3] The most common differentiations of the various types of decentralisation include (Manor 2000) *deconcentration or administrative decentralisation* ("the dispersal of agents of higher levels of government into lower-level arenas"), *fiscal decentralisation* ("the downward transfer of decision-making powers over funds to lower levels") and *devolution* or *democratic decentralisation* ("the downward transfer of resources and powers [and often, tasks] to lower-level authorities which are in some way democratic"). In practice, different combinations of these three types of decentralisation are often found. In recent years it is especially the idea of 'devolution' that has gained momentum. Local (and locally elected) authorities have been enabled to represent local citizens' needs and concerns, and to demand services from higher levels of administration. Devolution is also seen as an important mechanism for making the management of natural resources more sustainable. By handing over responsibilities regarding access control and use rights (at times based on the legal recognition of existing 'customary' rights) in territorial planning and management to local governments, decentralisation aims at finding a better balance between exploitation and conservation of natural resources (Andersson 2003; Larson 2003; Larson and Ribot 2004).

As in many other spheres of the debate about development, the positions on the importance, relevance and effectiveness of decentralisation differ

widely. On the one hand, decentralisation is portrayed as a core ingredient to overcome poverty. Most prominent in this respect is the World Bank, which already some time ago perceived decentralisation as an important complementarity to (economic) globalisation: "Localisation is praised for raising levels of participation and involvement, and providing people with a greater ability to shape the context of their own lives. By leading to decentralised government where more decisions happen at sub national levels, closer to the voters, localisation can result in more responsive and efficient local governance" (World Bank 2000, p iii).[4]

On the other hand, the World Bank is aware of potential difficulties too: "However, when poorly designed, decentralisation can result in overburdened local governments without the resources or the capacity to fulfil their basic responsibilities of providing local infrastructure and services. It can also threaten macroeconomic stability, if local governments, borrowing heavily and spending unwisely, need to be bailed out by the national government" (World Bank 2000, p iii). Others, though, criticise decentralisation more radically. They perceive decentralisation as a new -'ism' or dogma of the international development regime which serves as a clever manoeuvre to reduce the role of the state, externalise social and ecological costs or facilitate the implementation of an extractive 'economy of enclave' in Southern countries for the exploitation of natural resources such as oil, gas, minerals, timber or water (Orozco et al 2006).

This often polarised debate reminds us of the famous dichotomy sketched by Robert Chambers long ago, when he characterised development discourses as entangled between "two cultures" (Chambers 1983, pp 29f.), the *negative academics* and the *positive practitioners*. With this edited volume, we aim to go beyond dichotomisation, by presenting a differentiated reading of the intentions as well as the actual experiences of endeavours that are described as decentralisation. This volume brings together empirical insights from actual practices of decentralisation in South Asia (Pakistan, India, Nepal) and Latin America (Mexico, Bolivia, Argentina) to substantiate, challenge and raise new questions regarding approaches and positions in debates on decentralisation.[5] These case studies not only help us to illustrate the many forms decentralisation can take, but they also invite us to engage in critical reflection on what 'decentralisation' – as a societal practice – is meant to be and how it is experienced by various stakeholders. This reflection necessitates a careful discussion of the core notions that constitute decentralisation and the normative expectations related to it.

Our critical discussion on decentralisation, however, does not prevent us from taking the efforts by practitioners of development (the "operational personnel", SDC 2007a, p 2) seriously and examining them with academic interest. In section 1.2, we therefore recall the main arguments used in favour of decentralisation, as well as the challenges mentioned by practitioners. In section 1.3, we provide brief summaries of the eight case studies that are brought together in this volume. These case studies show, in a variety of ways, the various forms decentralisation can take, as well as the complexities decentralisation encounters.

Inspired by the findings of the case studies, section 1.4 embarks on a critical reflection on the core notions and concepts that constitute the mainstream discourse of decentralisation, using the methodology of deconstruction. This refers to an attempt to understand and critically review the notions, concepts and beliefs (ontology) that underpin ongoing mainstream discussions on decentralisation – 'beliefs' because core notions that underpin these discussions are often taken for granted. A central assumption is the notion of 'the state', and linked to that 'citizens', with 'governance' as the activity that connects the two. Closely interwoven with the notions of 'state' and 'citizens' are fundamental questions about their respective roles in defining 'development', and the inherent relationship between human actors and their 'natural environment'. The focus on decentralisation at the local level also calls for attention. Although it is clear that the local level is at the core of the debate, it is also true that the bulk of decentralisation models currently in place are rather top-down initiatives taken by the international development community together with (central) governments. The critical reflection in section 1.4 also interlinks the specific notion of decentralisation with recent scholarly findings on state–people–society relations.

Finally, section 1.5 brings together what we consider the main insights emerging from the case studies presented in this volume, based on a set of new questions that attempt to position the mainstream discourse and practice of decentralisation in a broader understanding of societal processes, and to reconstruct its meanings in a broader political context. As a normative point of departure for this discussion, we refer back to the key notion that underlies the argument for decentralisation, i.e. that all people are to have the capabilities for a good, meaningful and secure life (cf. e.g. Sen 1999). These capabilities include the right to participate in decision-making processes that concern the lives and livelihoods of people. The leading question, then, is not whether decentralisation is good or bad, but under which conditions it contributes to or even hinders the realisation of such fundamental rights.

1.2   Mainstream views on decentralisation

The idea to involve common people in decision-making processes that relate their lives to the construction and shaping of the public sphere through administration or 'governance' is not new; it has precedents in colonial as well as early postcolonial times (for South Asia see e.g. Corbridge et al 2005, for Latin America see Wachtel 1977 and Korovkin 2001).[6]

Within dominant development discourses, however, 'people's participation' received a new impetus from the 1980s onwards. 'Projects' being a central arrangement to practise development, 'participatory' endeavours started to boom worldwide within regionally and temporally confined project designs. Major fields of application were (integrated) rural development projects and specifically projects related to natural resource use. Under the notion of CBNRM (community-based natural resource management), attempts were made to organise local people around CBOs (community-based organisations), i.e. groups striving for community-based arrangements of accessing, controlling and sharing benefits from 'commons' such as forests, pastures or water (e.g. Poffenberger and McGean 1996). Many of these schemes were related to the interest in the local governance of common goods and services that re-emerged with the growing popularity of New Institutional Economics (e.g. Ostrom 1990; Anderies et al 2003).

By the second half of the 1990s, there was a gradual shift from project-level interventions towards a broadening of participatory processes as part of state-level initiatives (partly through 'scaling-up'), to include political decision-making at large. As Ribot (2002, p 5) remarks (see also Brown et al 2002; Gaventa 2002, p 3): "Democratic decentralisation reforms present the opportunity to move from a project-based approach toward legally institutionalised popular participation. [This constitutes] a shift from externally orchestrated direct forms of democratic inclusion to representative forms of democracy under elected local authorities."

This coincided with wider debates within development circles on the effectiveness of the state. The growing disenchantment with development, due to the non-achievement of development goals, was causally related to weaknesses of the state – the inefficiency of 'service delivery', at times corruption and social unrest, and the related crisis of state legitimacy in the eyes of its 'citizens'. A growing (Washington) consensus emerged that there was a need to restructure the (central) state from being a key player in development

to becoming a provider of 'enabling conditions'. *Good governance* became a key notion, in which "citizens can have a more active role" (Gaventa 2002, p 3), and which should "increase legitimacy [of the state] in view of its citizens" (SDC 2008, p 1). We will critically re-visit all these notions below.

There are many definitions of good governance. Many, though, include the demand for decentralisation, linking the latter with other demands for state reform such as democratisation, participatory development, accountability of public servants, professionalism (Corbridge 2008, p 116), as well as transparency, non-discrimination and efficiency (SDC 2007a). Good governance, however, continues to be based on the broad consensus among development circles that "the state plays a key role in determining the rules of the game, enforcing those rules, and in making its resources available to the entire population" (SDC 2007a, p 4).

The need for interventions towards decentralisation – as a component of good governance – is generally justified on two grounds, (i) because being an active and fully recognised citizen is a basic human right, and (ii) as a precondition for development. The rights-based approach "implies the idea of responsible citizens with rights and obligations as well as the idea of a state with obligations regarding respect, protection, and the realisation of its citizens' rights" (SDC 2007a, p 8). In a more utilitarian sense, decentralisation is expected to foster development more successfully than it was the case when the central state was in control. Manor (2000) puts this idea into a nutshell:

> *Decentralisation enhances the uptake on and thus the impact of health, education and environmental programmes. It does so partly by making it possible to adapt such programmes to local conditions and preferences. It also provides a framework that facilitates 'scaling up' – that is, replicating developmental successes from one local arena in many others. It has only limited utility in alleviating poverty (in many but not all contexts), and in promoting economic growth and mobilising local financial resources. But by opening the policy and political processes to ordinary people, it can do much to enhance their well being and to make their livelihoods and development more sustainable.*

Other arguments in favour of decentralisation include (e.g. SDC 2001; Ribot 2002; SDC 2008) proximity to local needs (needs-based utilisation of public resources); linking with local knowledge, institutions and organisations; increased opportunities for accountability; improved service delivery; etc. Decentralisation figures prominently in the development programmes of many national governments and in the agendas of bi- and multilateral donors. An array of measures are taken in this regard, e.g. providing legal frameworks for decentralisation (including the clarification of responsibilities at different politico-administrative levels), building political structures, providing knowledge or supporting sectorial project implementation through decentralised structures.

'Decentralisation' having been a laboratory of developmental experiments (in situ) for a number of years now, an important debate has emerged on questions of 'best practices', and thus on factors that ensure the success of well-intended interventions towards decentralisation. As this 'capitalisation of experience' is a major contemporary concern of many donors, we will give some space to the arguments produced in this context. We indeed feel that they bring together many of the points experienced by development practitioners, and thus form important components of the ongoing mainstream discourse. Any critical analysis such as the one we attempt in this volume needs to engage with these arguments.

We refer to the study by Ribot (2002), which is based on an analysis of decentralisation-related projects from around the globe. This capitalisation of insights leads Ribot to postulate nine "principles for effective decentralisation" (2002, pp 3f.):

1) **Work with local democratic institutions:** "Governments, donors, and NGOs can foster local accountability by (1) choosing to work with and build on elected local governments where they exist [instead of working through project-based groups], (2) insisting on and encouraging their creation elsewhere, (3) encouraging electoral processes that admit independent candidates (since most do not), and (4) applying multiple accountability measures to *all* institutions making public decisions."

2) **Transfer of sufficient and appropriate powers:** This includes executive (decision-making and implementation), legislative (rule-making) and judiciary (dispute-resolution) powers. These powers need to be clearly defined, and guidelines "are needed to assure an effective separation and balance of executive, legislative, and judiciary powers in the local arena".

3) **Transfer of powers as secure rights:** "To encourage local institutions and people to invest in new arrangements (...), governments should use secure means to transfer powers to local authorities. Secure transfers can create the space for local people to engage their representatives as citizens."

4) **Support equity and justice:** For effective decentralisation, central governments remain important "for redressing inequities and preventing elite capture of public decision-making processes. Central government also must establish the enabling legal environment for organizing, representation, rights, and recourse so that local people can demand government responsibility, equity, and justice for themselves." Central governments should also ensure "pro-poor, pro-minority action".

5) **Establishing minimum environmental standards:** This point refers to decentralisation related to natural resource use. A key argument produced by central authorities resisting decentralisation is the fear of resource overexploitation by local people. This concern has to be taken seriously, as there "is no reason to expect that local authorities will not convert natural wealth into financial wealth, especially where cash is in short supply and is viewed as more valuable than standing forests" (Ribot 2002, p 9). Central governments have to establish parameters within which management by local authorities can take place.[7]

6) **Establish fair and accessible adjudication:** The re-definition of the 'rules of the game' calls for parallel developments in the field of rule enforcement: "Governments should establish accessible independent courts, channels of appeal outside of the government agencies involved (...), and local dispute resolution mechanisms."

7) **Support local civic education:** Re-defined rules and enforcement mechanisms need to be known: "Governments, donors, and NGOs can inform people of their rights, write laws in clear and accessible language, and translate legal texts into local languages to encourage popular engagement and local government responsibility. (...) Educating local authorities of their rights and responsibilities can also foster responsible local governance."

8) Give decentralisation time: All too often, experiments of decentralisation are not allowed to continue until they may be assessed based on their actual performance – changing the rules of the game takes time.

9) Develop indicators for monitoring & evaluating decentralisation and its outcomes: Decentralisation processes need to be accompanied by research in order to provide evidence-based feedback on enabling and hindering factors.

These nine points listed by Ribot are supported by many other capitalising endeavours (e.g. Bergh 2004). Read differently, these propositions also carry potential risks. In case the above conditions of success are not met, decentralisation is prone to failure. Indeed, many studies emerging from mainstream development circles point out such failures. Issues raised include lack of efficiency, corruption, elite capture or weak local capacity (Bergh 2004, pp 781f.), lack of political will at the centre (SDC 2001, p 10), risk of fiscal equalisation inasmuch as poorer regions might lose out, lack of long-term commitment of donors and their aid harmonisation (SDC 2007b, p 18), etc. At times, hints are also given as to the role of power: "Decentralisation projects have in most cases political implications for they change the current power structure and can encounter explicit or hidden resistance from these political forces who fear the loss of their power through decentralisation" (SDC 2001, p 4). The need for decentralisation, however, is not questioned. Usually, failures are not seen as a consequence of the whole concept and its underpinnings as such, but rather as implementation difficulties: "[Earlier] decentralisation failed mainly because it did not decentralise enough. It was not sufficiently participatory and it lacked accountability towards local civil society" (SDC 2007b, p 3; see also Ribot 2002, p 7).

A broader reading of decentralisation as a domain of good governance further highlights the preconditions under which good governance really has a chance to function. In this regard, Grindle (2007) showed that although good governance seems to be a fairly concrete issue, in reality it refers to changing virtually all aspects of the public sector and that "the adoption of the good governance paradigm implies a very wide range of institutional preconditions for economic and political development and for poverty to be significantly reduced" (Grindle 2007, p 553).

Following this review of mainstream discussions related to the opportunities and potential pitfalls of decentralisation, we now move on to the insights

gained through the eight case studies presented in this edited volume. These studies are briefly summarised below in order to launch a discussion as to how far they confirm (or reject) some of the points regarding opportunities and risks detailed above, and how far they direct our attention to new issues and questions that need to be taken into account.

1.3 Eight case studies

In this section, the eight case studies (Figure 1) are summarised, while their findings are presented in detail in the following chapters of this volume. We start with Latin America.

Cherryl André de la Porte, Luis Manuel Martínez R. and **Peter R.W. Gerritsen** ask whether decentralisation helped to secure more sustainable management of drinking water in an urban area of a municipality in **Mexico**. Through broad decentralisation regulations adopted in 1983, Mexican municipalities were entrusted with looking after drinking water and sanitation, while the respective funding remained under the control of higher administrative levels. Municipalities collected water users' fees, but these had to be sent to the state level, then returning to the municipalities' general coffer rather than the water sector from where they stemmed. Besides, deci-

Fig. 1
Locations of the eight case studies.

sion-making regarding water services was part of the municipalities' general local governance procedures, and was usually controlled by the political party in power. In the authors' case study locality (the municipality of El Grullo), however, things developed differently. Here, the municipality was able (after such demands had been voiced by concerned citizens' circles) to create a separate body to take care of drinking water and sanitation, the Water and Sanitation Board, which is entitled to directly use the collected fees without sending them to the general coffer. This Board initiated a horizontal institutional network encompassing adjacent municipalities, in order to coordinate water-related works. However, as fees are low, the Board's financial viability is threatened, resulting in poor operation and maintenance of the infrastructure. The researchers argue that a broader involvement of the water users and other important stakeholders would help the Board to devise a more sustainable financing strategy, but that this is not done partly because of populist measures taken by politicians at higher levels. The authors, though, see signs of the basis of decision-making processes being broadened in the related subject area of watershed management, so crucial for securing water supplies. Here, non-state actors, in this case primarily a local university, started to act as mediators to bring together a range of stakeholders that should have a say in watershed-related policy processes (including El Grullo's Water and Sanitation Board). Though tangible outcomes are yet to be produced, the process of stakeholder involvement attracted wide attention throughout Mexico and even received a special national award. Interestingly, though local governance bodies are still reluctant to engage in broadly based and more participatory decision-making – as the case study illustrates – such decision-making is supported by recent legislation passed by the central state. The 2004 Law on National Waters explicitly mentions the need for social participation, thus leading to an (unintended) alliance between central state and (local) civil society. In conclusion, the capacity of both the municipality and civil society to develop new institutions is attributed by the researchers to "local political will, largely supported by citizens".

Cecilia Cross and **Ada Freytes Frey** zoom further into the everyday practice of "decentralisation in the making" (Cross and Freytes Frey 2009). In **Argentina**'s capital city of Buenos Aires, waste management is the task of a public enterprise called CEAMSE (Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado), which was created in 1977 as a centralised authority by the then military regime. CEAMSE was to replace the large informal economy of waste collection and treatment which provided a large number of poor families with a subsistence livelihood. However, sup-

ported by local and foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs), these *cartoneras* (people collecting waste from streets) and *quemeros* (people collecting waste and burning it in special plants) resisted, and even grew in number, often leading to conflicts with the authorities. In recent years, the wave of the decentralisation discourse has reached Argentina as well. In late 2004, the provincial government of Buenos Aires announced a new policy called *Sin Desperdicio* ('without wasting') with the aim of decentralising the waste economy. A cornerstone of the programme was the establishment of plants where waste could be treated, classified and prepared for further recycling and marketing. These plants were to be run by social organisations themselves (they were therefore called 'social plants'), technically super-vised and advised by CEAMSE. Cross and Freytes Frey had the opportunity to accompany the planning process for one such plant as this new policy was being put into practice. Through this action research, they gained in-depth knowledge on the actors involved, their specific interests, the logic that struc-tured their approaches towards, and activities within, the planning process.

In their dense description, the authors illustrate first of all the variety of actors involved, ranging from the provincial government to the municipali-ties, CEAMSE, a whole array of NGOs and social movements, as well as 'actors in the making', i.e. groups that are gradually being shaped as they are involved in the ongoing negotiations (Cross and Freytes Frey 2009). Each of these social entities has rather different expectations regarding the out-come of the negotiations. For example, the provincial government hopes to resolve the conflicts between the authorities and the (informal) *cartoneras* and *quemeros*, while some politicians within this government try to gain political benefit (for example by scheduling important decisions to coincide with electoral processes). The 'social movements', on the other hand, are characterised by a low degree of formalisation, which hinders their capaci-ties for participation in the negotiation processes. In addition, some of the leaders feel under pressure to produce positive outcomes in order to improve their legitimacy vis-à-vis their 'clientele'. In addition, "poor people join social movements in order to satisfy their basic needs" (Cross and Freytes Frey 2009). In conclusion, Cross and Freytes Frey argue that "incorporating new actors implies the multiplication of logics and interaction levels". This means that outcomes are not only influenced by the multitude of stakes in play, but also by these interaction levels and often by specific procedures as well. In their case study, negotiation is characterised by multitudes, non-coordination and ad-hocism – a reality in which less organised groups are 'caught in crossfire' as they are not equipped with the necessary bargaining skills, and often lacking the time to handle new situations.

Others, though, are skilled indeed to take the opportunities offered by decentralisation. **Fernando Antezana** and **Manuel de la Fuente** take us to such a context in **Bolivia**. They highlight the fact that decentralisation offers opportunities and thus resembles a resource to be accessed. The authors describe, on the one hand, the measures taken by the state to allow for greater decentralisation and analyse, on the other hand, 'local complexities' – complexities that encouraged some groups to access decentralised bodies as an important strategic means. As regards greater decentralisation: For a very long time, the state of Bolivia has been controlled by elites consisting of whites and mestizos (descendants of the colonial settlers) who kept the indigenous population (being the majority) at bay. As social unrest increased in the 1990s, the government introduced the Popular Participation Law in 1994, including precise stipulations for new mechanisms of citizen–state interaction and thereby differing from legislation in other Latin American countries. This law allows for the direct election of municipal authorities, allocates around 20% of the state budget to these authorities for developmental purposes, and permits the collection of municipalities' own taxes. As a consequence, the municipalities now not only included the urban centres, but were extended to include the rural hinterlands as well. Finally, local groups got the opportunity to register as 'grassroots territorial organisations', thus gaining access to developmental schemes (they can propose and implement such schemes); but even more important was the fact that local people were given the responsibility to organise – according to their own customs – so-called 'Municipal Oversight Committees', which have to check and formally approve the development plans submitted by the elected municipal authorities. The 1999 Law of Municipalities strengthened these groups by making participatory planning compulsory. The authors argue that the government in power expected this law to pacify the growing civil unrest while hoping to broaden the ruling party's influence at the grassroots level.

However, things turned out very differently. To illustrate this process, Antezana and de la Fuente recall Bolivian history as being characterised by 'racism' – the minority of whites and mestizos dominated the majority, which was formed by a very heterogeneous array of indigenous groupings. Domination was exercised not only politically but also economically, with influential families taking over communal lands or private-sector enterprises being favoured to extract natural resources. Indigenous awareness, though, started to grow as a result of various factors (e.g. legislation for land reforms, a growing number of NGOs, etc.), leading to the creation of a range of local movements (see also Bottazzi 2009). In addition, international dis-

courses came to favour not only decentralisation, but the rights of 'indigenous people' as well. In the first municipal elections in 1995 (following the introduction of the Popular Participation Law in 1994), indigenous groups did not gain much influence. This, however, changed when they won several municipalities in the 1999 elections and emerged as the major political force in the municipal elections of 2004, which paved the way for their leader Evo Morales to become Bolivia's first indigenous president in 2005.

How was this possible? On the basis of an analysis of ten municipalities in rural areas of the Bolivian highlands, Antezana and de la Fuente propose two key explanations: (i) the capacity of indigenous groups to strengthen their organisations and put them on a broad basis, and (ii) their strategic use of the 1994 Law of Municipalities. The authors argue that, in contrast to traditional political parties, which are controlled by a few influential leaders, opinion-building, internal organisation and control of indigenous groups are more democratic in that they are being influenced by traditional patterns of social interaction that is based on deliberation until consensus is achieved. Accordingly, the groups are able to mobilise a huge following that not only goes to vote, but is also willing to take extra-legal measures to press for demands (such as road blocking, etc.). Perceiving the 1994 law as an opportunity, indigenous groups strategically direct their participation in municipal elections to take local or regional power constellations into account. While they enter into alliances with some other groups in some places, they do not do so in others. And above all, they started to nominate their own candidates, giving further confidence to the indigenous population. Though indigenous groups have gained enormous political influence in a rather short period of time, the authors are still sceptical regarding developmental outcomes. They point out that the effectiveness of municipalities in delivering results has not increased, but that conflicts concerning the allocation of public funds are emerging among the heterogeneous indigenous groups – questions that would justify further detailed analysis.

In conclusion, Antezana and de la Fuente argue that although the main goal of the 1994 laws regarding municipalities and popular participation had been to integrate the traditional autonomous forms of organisation into the public administration and thereby to put it under stronger state control, things eventually seemed to turn out in the opposite way: Instead of the gap between neo-liberal state and indigenous organisations being closed, the latter – strengthened by strategically integrating the local governments as a new powerful and even 'official' platform for fostering resistance against

policies imposed by the central state – democratically took over power at the central and, in part, regional levels. In this way, decentralisation unintentionally made a significant contribution to bringing to power the social and popular movements which now are engaged in radically re-shaping the relationships between state, citizen and indigenous community, clearly going beyond classical state–citizen dichotomies. As a matter of fact, the recent events in Bolivia seem to prove that the authors are right.

Patrick Bottazzi digs even deeper into the **Bolivian** experience, highlighting not only local complexities, but also the heterogeneous nature of the state decentralisation efforts. Examining the Amazon lowlands of Bolivia, he details the relationships between (at least) three initiatives for increasing the scope for local participation: (i) the granting of considerable rights to indigenous forms of governance, (ii) efforts to bring about participatory approaches in nature protection, and (iii) the system of municipalities (as analysed by Antezana and de la Fuente; see above). Increasing awareness of the rights of indigenous people and support by various forms of foreign organisations (church missionaries, NGOs, etc.) led to the emergence of formalised indigenous groups (here of the Tsimane'). Taking up issues such as access to land or the presence of timber companies, they started calling and agitating for more and substantial control over their territories. Based on a complex interwoven process of events including similar demands in other localities, the Bolivian state agreed to the creation of the status of *Tierra Comunitaria de Origen* (Communal Land of Origin). This status was granted to the Tsimane' in 1990. In a separate development within environmental discourses, the protection of forests, too, gave rise to more local control. With reference to international developments, large extents of forests were declared as 'Man and Biosphere Reserves' (MAB) under this global scheme of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), including forests that were inhabited by Tsimane' as well as many other indigenous groups. However, in spite of the area having been declared protected, settlers from the Andes arrived, leading to uneasiness and resistance from the local people. To mitigate tensions, the state invented the category of 'National Park and Indigenous Territory'. However, the task of managing the MAB was given to an international NGO. As tensions emerged between settlers and indigenous people on one side, and international agencies on the other, the state provided local organisations with further powers. These bodies and functions, though, were poorly coordinated with the political forms of control of the *Tierra Comunitaria de Origen*.

To complicate things further, the formal process of state decentralisation through municipalities enters the scene. As already explained by Antezana and de la Fuente (cf. above), municipalities were now to include their hinterland, and thus all the rural terrain, as well. Again, new forms of governance organisations were introduced, thereby reproducing – at least initially – the traditional power structures. Interestingly, municipalities obtained control over the category of 'public forests', and were requested to establish participatory management committees – separate from other institutional arrangements that were introduced in largely the same geographical space. All this led to "the establishment of different management mechanisms (...) parallel to political decentralisation" (Bottazzi 2009).

In his article, Bottazzi details all the organisations at the local, regional, national and international levels that were in one way or another involved in these processes of "proliferation of political decision-making", leading to "institutional inflation" through a process he calls 'institutional segregation' (Bottazzi 2009). However, this institutional inflation was not able to overcome the power asymmetries inherently present in the 'institutional segregation', thus leading to complex problems of legitimacy (e.g. which arrangements should be adopted, which ones should be privileged, etc.). Although indigenous institutions were created and recognised, underlying differences regarding skills or resources available prevented municipal structures from solving the problems of native indigenous people being excluded; as an unintended consequence, practices and spaces for illegal utilisation of forests multiplied.

The article ends with a discussion of the tension between the legitimate call of indigenous groups for more self-control and the implicit risk of 'proliferation of decision-making', which leads to competition among social groups over resources. Thus, Bottazzi argues for more coherence in political organisation, favouring the municipal system – as it is linked to the formal norms of the overarching state, and is not linked, in principle, to the risks of 'ethnic segmentation' (we will see a similar argument emerging in the Kerala study below).

With the study by **Bishnu Raj Upreti**, we remain with nature protection, but now move to South Asia. He analyses the discourse and practice of participatory nature conservation in **Nepal**, by closely analysing the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR) in the country's Eastern Terai. Upreti shows that present difficulties in implementing participatory nature conservation can

not be understood without paying close attention to historical developments. He recalls the 1972 National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act, which was based on Western models of that time emphasising strict nature protection. The Koshi Tappu reserve was established in 1976, leading to the shifting (actually the displacement) of indigenous groups from the newly declared park area. These groups came under additional pressure due to the in-migration of many families from Nepal's hill region under a state-sponsored internal colonisation scheme. Competition arose specifically with regard to access to land and water, and the indigenous population's attempts to reclaim lost grounds within the park were severely punished by the authorities. In essence, Upreti describes this situation (referring to the analytical concept of legal pluralism) as a conflict between customary rights of resource access and newly introduced state regulations.

It was only with the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 1990 and the strengthening of local governments (in Nepal called Village Development Committees, VDCs) that participatory discourses started to influence thinking about nature protection as well. One expression of this shift in attitude was the introduction, around 1994, of legislation to permit the creation of buffer zones around parks that were to be managed through participatory procedures. From the perspective of state officials, this new approach was to highlight the need for alternative livelihood options for indigenous groups, thus reducing their dependence on the park area. For this purpose, people were organised into community or user groups. The indigenous people's expectations regarding the programme, however, were to reassert at least to some extent their customary rights for grazing, fishing, collection of grasses, or even using parts of the park for cultural rites such as funerals. As a matter of fact, conflicts continued especially concerning these resource uses, and Upreti cites a number of incidents where park authorities drastically refused people's (illegal) practising of claims (e.g. killing buffaloes that grazed inside the park). Such incidents led to a worsening of state–people relations, and many indigenous people (who gradually started organising themselves as a result of the spreading discourse of indigenousness) came to look towards the Maoist insurgence for a vision of a better future.

In conclusion, Upreti proposes that the move towards more participatory and decentralised procedures in nature conservation is a highly welcome one. However, its implementation did not take up the core concerns of indigenous groups that suffered most from the establishment of the park. Although the formation of community groups under the buffer zone programme is an

important step, "such initiatives shift or dilute the fundamental causes of tension by diverting people's concerns (e.g. organising groups for kitchen gardening instead of mobilising them to assert their indigenous and customary rights)" (Upreti 2009).

Similar discrepancies are observed by **Babar Shahbaz** and **Tanvir Ali** in their analysis of decentralisation in **Pakistan**'s forestry sector, e.g. the discrepancy between official declarations at the policy level and the experience of actual 'decentralised' forest management on the ground. To start with, Shahbaz and Ali share the policy-makers' realisation that "decentralisation is unavoidable" (Shahbaz and Ali 2009). Until recently, forest management by the state was still characterised by colonial rules, regulations and top-down attitudes. As a matter of fact, the country's forest laws had changed little since they were first written by the colonial powers. As to the forests in the North-West Frontier Province (it is here where a major part of Pakistan's forestland is located), the state has proprietary rights to most of them that severely limit local use rights as the state's focus is on forest protection and the punishment of 'misuse'. The very high deforestation rate is evidence enough to show that the colonial, top-down attitude of the Forest Department has completely failed, and that indeed "decentralisation is unavoidable". The question, then, is how decentralisation is approached. Shahbaz and Ali show that initially, some experiments with participation were undertaken in the context of donor-supported rural development programmes. However, it was with the massive Forest Sector Project (FSP) launched in 1996 that these isolated measures were to be formalised and mainstreamed through a complete reorganisation of the Forest Department. The driving force behind the FSP was the Asian Development Bank (ADB), calling for reforms through (i) changes in the legal framework (i.e. to promulgate new, participation-oriented policy, laws and related regulations), (ii) the reorganisation of the Forest Department and (iii) the introduction of the Joint Forest Management approach as a tool to interlink the demands of local people and the state with regard to forests. Subsequently, Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) were introduced in pilot areas, to be expanded to the whole province later on. In their study, Shahbaz and Ali carefully analyse the ground reality of creating and operating JFMCs. JFMCs – sometimes called Village Development Committees (VDCs) – were intended both to address local people's livelihood concerns and to introduce more sustainable forest use practices. The democratically elected VDCs were thus to prepare Village Development Plans, proposing appropriate measures to improve economic conditions and forest use. In reality, though, hardly any concrete development

measures materialised. Moreover, Women's Organisations (intended to represent the interests of women, who, under the prevailing social norms, are not allowed to join male VDCs) may indeed exist, but they exist on paper only.

Searching for explanations, the authors propose several interlinked core issues. The first has to do with the basic reading and interpretation of the FSP. While those villagers who took part in the programme emphasised its developmental component – this being of central importance for them – the Forest Department staff accorded priority to forest protection. Second, VDCs did not represent economically weaker sections but were controlled by the more influential local elite – Shahbaz and Ali remind us of the very heterogeneous and socially stratified nature of Pakistani villages. Third, the analysis showed that it is not the villagers that are responsible for the high deforestation rate, but a network of timber traders, some forest officials and local leaders – the 'Timber Mafia' – that benefits from the very high prices paid for timber in Pakistan. Many local people suspect the forest officials of being linked to the 'Timber Mafia', while now having to advocate JFM. Thus, Shahbaz and Ali identify the lack of trust as a core issue blocking participatory forest management. This is further aggravated by the fact that the state's forest laws – including the new ones emerging from the FSP – do not consider at all customary rules and procedures governing access to forests. In the light of the deep mistrust between forest officials and local forest users, and because they are backed up by a strong local tribal decision-making process (*jirga*), customary laws continue to structure local practices, though declared illegal by the state. In conclusion, the authors reiterate that decentralisation is an interesting avenue, but that the rather mechanical application of the global concept of JFM will not work without considering local complexities: "The difficulty is that one has to deal with both formal legal instruments and informal rules (customary practices, etc.), where unequal power relations and social conflicts are quite common" (Shahbaz and Ali 2009).

Within South Asia, we move from the North-West frontier to the North-East frontier: to the district of Karbi Anglong in the state of **Assam**, India. **Sanjay Barbora** asks the challenging question why demands for greater autonomy continue to be raised in a context where a considerable degree of decentralisation has already been implemented. The North-East of India is populated by a huge spectrum of ethnic groups, and Barbora recalls that already in the first years after independence in 1947, the Indian state introduced specific institutional provisions for indigenous ethnic groups, by creating 'Autonomous Councils' with a considerable degree of judicial, legislative and execu-

tive powers. This includes control over parts of forests, and thus crucial land resources. Under these provisions, Karbi Anglong became an Autonomous District Council in 1951. In 1986, though, a non-violent movement emerged that demanded further control and the creation of an autonomous *Karbi* state. This movement split in the early 1990s. One section favoured a non-violent struggle for a non-ethnic, broadly based concept of self-governance. The other section, however, took up arms and organised around strictly ethnic claims in order to "struggle to occupy the traditional lands of the *Karbi* and restore rule by traditional indigenous leaders" (Barbora 2009). Key targets of their armed attacks were settlers that migrated to the area from other regions of India and, increasingly, other local ethnic groups or tribes – all of them considered as encroachers upon the *Karbi* 'homeland'. This led to the formation of competing tribal militias as well as interventions by the Indian army that have brought about widespread bloodshed, destruction of property, as well as more anger and new violence.

In his attempt to understand this tragedy, Sanjay Barbora focuses on the importance of land and of control over land. His analysis shows at least three layers of often competing regimes of granting access to forests (and thus land) by granting settlement permits. The Executive Committee of the Autonomous District Council gives preference to scheduled tribes[8] from the area, as well as from adjacent regions. However, Barbora observes that political favouritism is widespread. In the more hilly regions, traditional Village Chiefs continue to play a crucial role in allocating land for settlement. They favour land distribution to their ethnic (sub)groups to the detriment of 'others': other tribes, immigrant settlers, etc. Even at this level, Barbora observes favouritism in providing tenure rights. Last but not least, the Indian state continues to exercise considerable control over the (decentralised) Autonomous District Councils: "These provisions [of autonomy] bestow enormous legal powers on the council, but it does not necessarily mean that the council is able to exercise all these powers" (Barbora 2009). The Governor of the state of Assam has considerable control over the Council, and the executive affairs of the Council are implemented by regular state bureaucrats. In summary, we find a highly contested social arena in which access to land seems central, with this access being contested on the basis of ideologies of ethnicity, homelands and inherited rights.

But Sanjay Barbora goes a step further in his reading of the highly conflictive and militarised reality of India's North-East. He suggests that the inability of the modern Indian nation-state to secure people's access to land and to

prevent the escalation of violence and suffering has led to an outright disenchantment with the idea of citizenship: people do not perceive themselves as being equal members (citizens) in accordance with the idea of the democratic nation-state. As a consequence – so Barbora's argument goes – they perceive the provision of the Autonomous Council as political or 'constitutional engineering' to grasp control over natural resources and specifically land. As a response, societal orientation and ties are looked for in the ethnic, communal sphere – what Barbora calls "peoplehood".

Competing notions of local representation held by state and non-state groups are also the subject of the study by **R. Ramakumar** and **K.N. Nair**. They address decentralisation as experienced in the Indian state of **Kerala**. Though they have existed in different shapes for a long time, local bodies have never had real decision-making powers and adequate resources to stimulate decentralised development processes. It was only when a left-wing coalition government came into power in 1996 that such provisions were granted. On the one hand, local bodies (*panchayats*) were to be elected, and they were to be allocated 35–40% of the state's developmental budget, the major part of it untied, meaning that local bodies were allowed to decide on their own developmental priorities. In order to equip the *panchayats* with skills and capacities for local-level development planning, a huge People's Plan Campaign was launched. Ramakumar and Nair specifically address the relationship between these elected local bodies (being part and parcel of the modern state system of Kerala) and non-state groups that are involved in local development. As a matter of fact, Kerala has long been home to a large number of non-governmental organisations and social reform movements, many of which played a crucial role in the social and economic history of the state.

Based on case studies in the hilly regions of Kerala, the authors look at the effectiveness of interventions for the provision of drinking water and related to watersheds. Prior to the People's Plan Campaign, such interventions were an important field of NGO activities. Most NGOs in Kerala were established in response to religious or caste concerns, and continue to have strong affiliations with the respective social groups. In the case study locality of Upputhara, prominent NGOs are related to the Catholic church as well as to specific castes. Prior to decentralisation, they played an important role in carrying out drinking water schemes or even implementing programmes of the Indian central government and the state of Kerala at the village level. Decentralisation caused the implementation of such schemes to shift to the

elected local bodies. Based on their empirical evidence, Ramakumar and Nair argue that scheme implementation has become more transparent. As a matter of fact, decentralisation "'disturbed' the social environment in which religious and caste organisations functioned" (Ramakumar and Nair 2009). While scheme beneficiaries were previously selected by a small group of NGO-related persons, and while benefits were accessible to more or less the NGO's constituency, selection processes became more broadly based, thus more democratic, and benefits became accessible to a wider range of people.

Thus the central argument of this study is: "Democratic planning and governance in large societies marked by social and cultural diversity is too complex and big a task to be left only to social movements or non-governmental groups. In fact, increased democratisation demands a constructive role from civil society actors in bringing people closer to democratically elected bodies" (Ramakumar and Nair 2009). In this reading, decentralisation is not perceived as a tool of "constitutional engineering" (see Barbora 2009), but as a struggle to make the state responsible and accountable – thus to 'deepen democracy' (Ramakumar and Nair 2009).

To further substantiate this argument in favour of the central role of a democratically controlled state, the authors refer to another example of caste-based social movements. Within the caste system that dominated Kerala society till the early 20th century, the untouchable Ezhava caste was at the very margin, having restricted access to public spaces or even Hindu temples. A social movement emerged (and was gradually formalised to become an important non-state actor) from within this caste that struggled for Ezhava rights, achieving considerable success in the course of time. However, as certain sections of Ezhavas started to benefit from increased economic opportunities, the caste-based organisation turned into an institution of this new elite, subsequently concentrating on the particular interests of this elite and sidelining or even working against the interests of the majority of Ezhavas that remain poor. Ramakumar and Nair argue with Harriss (2001) that development can take place only within the arena of "contestational politics and of the conflicts of ideas and interests that are an essential part of democracy", and that decentralisation can be a core instrument in this.

1.4   Contextualising case study insights within critical debates

The eight vivid descriptions above indeed show efforts at expanding the basis of decision-making by involving specific sets of stakeholders, in connection with specific topics and to achieve related social goals as well as elements of (sustainable) management of nature. All examples are inspired by the recent global interest in 'decentralisation', translated into respective regional, socio-political and ecological contexts.

The case studies also touch upon some of the points raised in mainstream debates on decentralisation (as summarised in Ribot's nine points). They highlight, among others, the importance of fiscal decentralisation and the differences in implementation. They show the modalities in sharing responsibilities between the state and 'citizens' with regard to selected topics, and the processes of negotiating these arrangements. Beyond this, they bring to our attention many challenges that are being faced in the various case study localities. Some of these challenges, too, relate to mainstream debates, such as elite capture of weak local capacities.

However, many of the details given in the case studies go beyond what we described in section 1.2. Central among an array of new insights is the tension between 'the state' and 'the local', as well as, related to this, the heterogeneity and complexity of 'the local'. As a matter of fact, we have so far used notions such as *state*, *citizens*, *governance*, *participation* and *nature* in a rather general way, understood as pre-given and 'quasi-objective' categories through which both development discourse and practice are elaborated and organised. To recall the initial quote by Gaventa (2002), this refers mainly to "new mechanisms to promote more direct citizen engagement in the processes of governance, ranging from the creation of new decentralised institutions, to a wide variety of participatory and consultative processes (...)." Thus, mainstream debates on decentralisation, including critical thoughts about implementation difficulties, centre on the further refinement of *mechanisms* to improve citizens' engagement, and *governance* processes, and on further strengthening *decentralised institutions*. Many recent documents by government agencies or donors treat the subject in this rather managerial and technocratic language based on categories that are taken for granted.

The case studies, however, highlight the 'non-mechanistic' side of decentralisation: struggles over competences between *state* and local groups, among

citizens, and over the meaning of *participation*. Can we learn more from this everyday reality of decentralisation and the intended as well as unintended consequences of related interventions, when we pause for a moment and reflect on the language of decentralisation – and thus the assumed 'realities' – so much taken for granted?

For this reflection, though, we need to equip ourselves first with adequate analytical and theoretical concepts that go beyond the mainstream, in order to deal with themes that critically question mainstream underpinnings of the decentralisation discourse. In a first step, therefore, we show that the mainstream perception of decentralisation is embedded in a *structural-functionalist conceptualisation* of society. In a second step, we then discuss four theoretical propositions that go beyond this functionalist ontology, i.e. (i) *resistance*, (ii) *simplifying state techniques*, (iii) *state-in-society* and, related to this, (iv) *society–nature relationships*. Having equipped ourselves with conceptual notions and thoughts from these recent theoretical debates, we will then re-visit the case studies' insights into the interface between decentralisation and local complexities.

1.4.1   Structural-functional assumptions of state–citizen relations

We first concentrate on the very core of the decentralisation argument that concerns the *state* and its relations to *citizens*, or society in general. After all, decentralisation can not be thought of as independent of the state: It refers to a change of the relationship between a (central) state and its related groups making up 'society' – the central state should delegate more powers to the local level and thus to citizens; local-level authorities then have the function of advancing citizens' concerns. In this core notion, the state is perceived of as having clear functions *towards* society, such as safeguarding the territory of the nation, providing security to its citizens, ensuring welfare, providing development, etc. The state is understood as a system that looks after society. Its core is formed by the *executive*, i.e. state agencies, departments and the officials staffing them. Society at large is providing the guidelines and mandate to the state through the *legislature*, and an independent *judiciary* ensures the legality of actions taken by state representatives. As a matter of fact, the present emphasis on good governance is exactly meant to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of these structures of the state system that are perceived as not yet in a position to properly fulfil their functions. The present state in the South needs to be further 'developed' – developed towards the ideal of the modern, liberal-democratic nation-state.

We call this a model based on a *functionalist ontology*. The model of the modern, democratic nation-state is 'a given fact' in mainstream debates. Good governance initiatives all over the globe take this model as their normative orientation and thus as a global universal. This universalising of the modern state requires our close attention, as decentralisation is part and parcel of this globalised discourse.

Central to this model is the conceptual separation of the state administration (the executive) from society at large. The state's organisations and staff are expected to 'function' as neutral officials in the service of society, i.e. the people (see the notion of 'public servants'). They are expected to "behave impersonally", not affected by their social background such as family or ethnic relations (Corbridge 2008, p 107). This characterisation of the modern state as an agency that looks after its people, and for this purpose is detached from society, has been described in the early 20th century by the German sociologist Max Weber as the *modern state bureaucracy* (Weber 2006). In order to fulfil its functions vis-à-vis society within a national territory, the state administration has developed – according to Weber – from a feudal structure of patron–client relations and personal favouritism to an independent, neutral bureaucratic machinery: "The fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compared with other organisations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point by the strictly bureaucratic administration (...)" (Weber 2006, p 57).

The rationale behind this bureaucracy is the maxim to treat all members of the modern nation-state on equal terms: "The more complicated and specialised modern culture becomes, the more its *external supporting apparatus* demands the personally detached and strictly objective expert (...)" (Weber 2006, p 58, emphasis ours). This expert, or government official, is the cornerstone of the bureaucracy: "(...) office holding is not considered ownership of a source of income, to be exploited for rents or emoluments in exchange for the rendering of certain services, as was normally the case during the Middle Ages (...). Rather, entrance into an office (...) is considered an acceptance of a specific duty of fealty to the purpose of the office in return for the grant of a secure existence. (...) It is decisive for the modern loyalty to an office that, in the pure type, it does not establish a relationship to a *person* (...), but rather is devoted to *impersonal* and *functional* purposes" (Weber 2006, p 50, emphasis in original).

The state that represents a detached agency entrusted with core functions towards society – these underpinnings of the Weberian (ideal-type) description of the modern nation-state have emerged from an analysis of European history but we can find them without much change in the postcolonial South as well. Due to colonialism and later the discourse of Modernisation Theory (which is actually rooted, among others, in Weber's contrasting of tradition and modernity; see also Parsons' *pattern variables*), the new states were to be moulded exactly in line with this model – to become the famous developmental states. To recall Weber: "Other factors operating in the direction of bureaucratisation are the manifold tasks of social welfare policies which are either saddled upon the modern state by interest groups or which the state usurps for reasons of power or for ideological motives" (Weber 2006, p 56).

Good governance neatly interlinks with the notion of the developmental state based on the Weberian ideal-type. The (postcolonial, or Southern) state is perceived as not yet in a position to fulfil its duties vis-à-vis its citizens as expected. Therefore, further improvements in the functioning of government administration are required. Such technical procedures within the bureaucracy in need of adjustments include several of the points characterising good governance (see section 1.2), e.g. democratisation, accountability of public servants, professionalism, non-discrimination or efficiency. Many of these points can be read as making the bureaucracy work better. This is to be achieved by administrative-managerial adjustments, or "constitutional engineering" (Barbora 2009).

These are some aspects that underpin the notion of the state and its relations to society, aspects that should suffice to indicate that the notion of the modern state is not an objectively given universal reality, but is a *constructed image*, a model developed based on a certain reading of history, and thus having a history and a certain meaning. The core notion of decentralisation is embedded within this constructed meaning as well. As a matter of fact, it is exactly the *questioning of these* (*ideological*) *underpinnings* that can provide further insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the theory and practice of decentralisation. To further strengthen our analytical scrutiny required for an in-depth reading of the case study insights, we thus introduce four lines of discussions that provide alternative conceptualisations of state–society relations: (i) *resistance*, (ii) *simplifying state techniques*, (iii) *state-in-society* and, related to this, (iv) *society–nature relationships*.

1.4.2   Resisting hegemonic notions of the state

While a Weberian liberal view presents the state as entrusted with the task to ensure the welfare of its citizens, it is especially from the neo-Marxist perspective that the state is perceived as an exploiting force – controlled by, and an instrument of, the elite, or bourgeoisie, or 'capitalism' for that matter. Class being the central category of Marxist thought, the state can not be thought of independently of class. Mechanisms through which the state (controlled by elites) extends control and extracts a surplus can include aiming for an income through tariffs and licences, etc. Thus, decentralisation is by default suspicious as it continues to be closely linked to the exploitative state. In this reading, the interests of the marginalised and oppressed people have to be mobilised in order to challenge the bourgeois state's attempts, for example through 'social movements'. A similar reading emerged in South Asia, especially India, in the school of *Subaltern Studies* (Guha 1982). This school perceives the postcolonial, modern nation-state as an alien, external institution which has been superimposed on traditional Indian society through the process of colonialism. The modern Indian state continues to represent these colonial principles rooted in Western ideals and framed by notions central to Western thought: "Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and soon all bear the burden of European thought and history (...). These concepts entail an unavoidable – and in a sense inescapable – universal and secular vision of the human" (Chakrabarty 2000, quoted in Spencer 2007, p 68).

Alongside this alien state there has been, since colonial times, the "vernacular" India (Chatterjee 2001) with its own "politics of people" (Spencer 2007, p 43): "This was an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from the elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter. It was traditional only in so far as its roots could be traced back to pre-colonial times but it was by no means archaic in the sense of being outmoded. Far from being destroyed or rendered virtually ineffective, as was elite politics of the traditional type by the intrusion of colonialism, it continued to operate vigorously in spite of the latter, adjusting itself to the conditions prevailing under the Raj and in many respects developing entirely new strains in both form and content" (Guha 1982, quoted in Spencer 2007, p 43). And: "(...) the coercive apparatus of the colonial state penetrated Indian society very deeply indeed, but the ideological apparatus failed to reach much below the higher levels of the Indian elite" (Spencer 2007, p 44).

Differentiating between alien state (and civil society linked to it) and vernacular local politics has become popular beyond India as a result of Chatterjee's distinction of *civil society* (the Indian elites that perceive themselves as 'citizens' of the modern state, and accordingly are part and parcel of the Western ideal) and *political society* (as an expression of associations from within the local, vernacular social sphere; Chatterjee 2001).

Through these conceptualisations of social movements or subaltern political society, decentralisation is perceived sceptically, and local people's struggle to have a greater say in decision-making processes therefore focuses on the vernacular, which may be referred to as searching for an "autochthonous narrative" (Slater 2002, p 257). Owing to the need for resistance through political society (a notion more prominent in South Asia) or social movements (a notion more prominent in Latin America), the dichotomy of state and society has evolved into a 'trichotomy' in which the state, citizens and 'indigenous nations or communities' are defining themselves as belonging to a 'nation' within the postcolonial nation-state. In this way, they call for a 'pluri-national state' that is supposed to be able to integrate this new – and hybrid – concept of actors based on the classical notions of 'citizen' and of being a 'member of an ethnic community' (García-Linera 2007).

1.4.3   Simplifying state techniques

Decentralisation can also be thought of as a specific set of administrative procedures applied by the state in order to govern society. The developmental state, being entrusted with the gigantic task of development, had to work through a huge array of technical schemes and interventions in order to achieve the structural transformation postulated as the core of modernisation. Decentralisation, then, might be thought of as in line with such governmental schemes and developmental techniques. James Scott (1998) analysed a range of development-oriented interventions by modern developmental states, to propose the idea of *state simplification*: Though well intended, state interventions tended to be schematic. In order to be able to implement huge schemes, they were based on assumptions that reduced the complexity of reality into simplified categories that were easier to handle by the administrative systems of the bureaucracy: "In each case, officials took exceptionally complex, illegible, and local social practices, such as land tenure customs (...), and created a standard grid whereby it could be centrally recorded and monitored. (...) The social simplifications then introduced not only permitted a more finely tuned system of taxation and conscription,

but also greatly enhanced state capacity" (Scott 1998, pp 2f.). Slater (2002, p 257) links up with Scott's argument and argues that the new "technological logic of rule" called 'good governance' follows a Western-style arrangement for democratic rule (Slater 2002, p 257).

Again, Scott reiterates the distance of state and (local) society, and focuses on the very different outlook of both entities as to what development should achieve. In Scott's reading, state schemes are "at odds with the way that ordinary people wanted and needed to run their lives – on the basis, in part, of diversity and the security that comes from not putting all one's eggs in one basket" (Corbridge 2008, p 110).

Based on Scott's proposition, decentralisation might indeed be compared with other (simplifying) schemes the state started and employed to foster development – schemes that also encounter complex social realities. In a first reading, this sounds contradictory, as decentralisation is a *discourse* on participation, allowing more voices to be heard, giving space to more local development paths. However, in many *practices*, decentralisation programmes follow rather blueprint procedures, and are extended bureaucratically and schematically over the entire territory of a state, leaving no room for local adaptation (below we will refer to appropriate case study insights from Pakistan or Nepal).

1.4.4   The everyday 'state-in-society'

Both non-functionalist positions introduced above – the state as captured by capitalist bourgeoisie (or Western-inspired elites), and Scott's understanding of the developmental state with its simplifying state schemes – continue to portray 'the state' in a rather monolithic way, separate from society and to be resisted.

However, recent studies have started challenging this dichotomy, questioning the "accentuation of the dominant and a romanticisation of the resistant" (Slater 2002, p 255). A core point in these emerging debates is – to put it simply – that the state is made up of people as well, and not of robots (see Weber's notion of the "impersonal and functional"), that people are having *agency* and thus the "ability 'to make a change', i.e. to be able 'to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs'" (Giddens 1984, p 14).

In other words: even state officials are humans that are embedded in social relations and have to struggle for their everyday livelihood needs, and that are thus (besides being members of the state bureaucracy) part and parcel of society at large. Thus, the analysis shifts away from a Weberian ideal-type understanding of the detached, neutral behaviour of officials, to an analysis of the actual doing, living and practising by officials. Such actual practices are "often far removed from official mythologies of the state. Few state agencies achieve the separation of the public from the private that Weber called for. This might happen to some degree in the 'commanding heights' of the state, where policies are drawn up, but it is less evident as policies are moved down through the 'agency's central offices' to the 'dispersed field offices' and finally to the 'trenches'. Particularly in the trenches, men and women who are tax collectors, police officers, teachers, and healthcare workers are required to balance the pressures placed upon them by supervisors (the principles) with those brought to bear by powerful figures in political society" (Midgal 2001, quoted in Corbridge 2008, p 113). With this shift in conceptualisation, a very different reading emerges, one that does not position the state outside society, but closely interwoven with it, what Midgal calls a "state-in-society-approach" (Midgal 2001, quoted in Corbridge 2008, p 113).

New state policies – such as decentralisation – are framed at the higher levels of administration. However, their implementation is effected by a wide range of state officials at various levels (central *and* de-centred) – officials that are interwoven with, and exposed to, members of society through complex webs of social relations. The actual everyday practising of decentralisation thus happens in mundane *social arenas* in which the intentions of the higher echelons are translated, interpreted, reshaped and implemented: "(...) the ways in which technologies of rule are made flesh will depend on the manner in which they are interpreted and put into play by lower-level government workers, elected representatives and others. (...) We also need to see why and how they are seized upon, understood, reworked and possibly contested by differently placed people within the population of 'the poor' (...)" (Corbridge et al 2005, p 7; for Asia see Geiser and Steimann 2004, for South America Rist et al 2005).

Contestation – the notion raised by Corbridge et al. (2005) above – is a core category that we need to briefly discuss in order to further sharpen our critical understanding of decentralisation as a social practice. In a 'state-in-society' approach, there may still be conflicts between 'the state' on the one hand, and 'society' on the other. However:

– The state is not perceived as a monolithic entity, but as consisting of various agencies, groups, hierarchies, factions, people.

– Similarly, society is not a consistent system or stratified into classes or other forms of homogeneous categories (as notions such as community or social movement at times suggest), but comprises multitudes of groups, specific alliances that may change from issue to issue, and people – all of whom may have their different ways of being involved or interwoven with components of 'the state' – which leads to a social patchwork where the drawing of a sharp line between state and society becomes almost impossible.

All these various entities do have interests and try to advocate their interests – and thus behave *politically*. Between the various entities, conflicts can emerge, and thus contestations. Contestations, i.e. everyday politics becomes an "ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organise social life in conditions that are always potentially subject to conflict (...)" (Slater 2002, p 257; see also Li 1999).

Hence, decentralisation may be supported by some state officials while not by others; setting up local authorities may be welcomed by certain 'local people' and not by others. And decentralisation may add another dimension of conflict to already ongoing contestations. Decentralisation can thus be understood as a *social interface* which is "(...) a critical point of intersection between different life worlds, social fields or levels of social organisation, where social discontinuities based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledges and power are most likely to be located" (Long 2001, p 243).

1.4.5   Individual–society–nature relations

Analytical entry points such as resistance, simplified state schemes or 'state-in-society' focus on the social world. However, when taking into account the objects and subjects of resistance, procedural simplifications, or complex life worlds, the underlying notions of what a human being is in terms of his or her cultural identity or as a citizen, become important as well. And these are also part of a complex, contested and historically evolving process that includes the natural world. Ontological beliefs of what a human being is, and the ways in which that human being integrates into society, are often *linked to the human being's relationships with nature* and natural resources as well (Zimmerer and Basset 2001).

Considering the underpinnings of decentralisation in such a broader picture allows building a bridge to the popular notion of *sustainability*, which, in principle, represents one specific definition of society–nature relations, by calling for the needs of present generations to be met without compromising the needs of future generations (Commission on Environment and Development 1987). In practice, sustainability is often linked to the ecological sphere, and this reading is more likely to be promoted and articulated by NGOs, researchers or policy-makers than by local farmers or forest resource users. However, as the studies in this volume also indicate, this does not mean that local resource users are not interested in maintaining the ecological basis. As a main difference from the state or NGOs, they *practically* aim to achieve this objective in *conjunction with others*, i.e. by assuring not only the ecological, but also the socio-cultural and political foundations in which their life worlds and livelihoods are rooted. Therefore, sustainability-oriented changes in the management of natural resources through decentralisation should also be read as very basic alterations in, and challenges to, the routinised, 'cultural' relations between individuals, society and nature.

These very basic aspects of the construction of normative understandings of individual–society–nature relations form an implicit part of the context in which decentralisation takes place. Under certain conditions, they can become very important in the arenas in which decentralisation is carved out – especially through the manifestation of, and recourse to, the notion of *ethnicity* (which closely represents individual–society–nature relations). 'Ethnicity' can indeed play an important role in the definition of potentials and limitations of the decentralisation process. Here, ethnicity not only stands for a socio-demographic category, it also implies the denomination of people who have culturally formed notions of what humans are, where they come from, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to nature and natural resources at their disposal (see Barbora 2009, Bottazzi 2009). The recognition of customary rights related to land, resources and institutions – which actually express culturally defined human–nature relationships – and the related contestations can play a critical role in mobilising local people in favour of or against decentralisation (see e.g. Shahbaz and Ali 2009).

1.5 The complexities of decentralisation

Pausing for a moment and reflecting on the language – and thus the assumed 'realities' – so much taken for granted in the discourse on decentralisation can indeed provide food for thought on the everyday reality and the intended as well as unintended consequences of this globalised paradigm. The deconstruction of taken-for-granted ontological notions helps to take a fresh and more comprehensive look at some of the features of decentralisation, how it is practised and experienced, and at its consequences.

To repeat: the insights gained by practitioners of development into the opportunities and risks of decentralisation – as summarised in Ribot's points – are crucial, and are also highlighted in some of the case studies presented in this volume. Still, understanding most of the ongoing interventions from a *functionalist* perspective of state–society relations does not allow to go beyond the surface and to grasp underlying dimensions that indeed often impinge on how concrete decentralisation projects operate. As a matter of fact, all the eight case studies presented here go beyond such a functionalist reading, and therefore manage to touch upon crucial issues that emerge by reading realities of decentralisation through theoretical concepts such as those introduced above.

To start with the obvious: the **citizens**, local people, the voters – those who are to receive, through decentralisation, a greater voice in shaping their future – are indeed a very heterogeneous category. We often find a highly stratified, complex, often competing local social reality (e.g. settlers and indigenous people in Bolivia, diverse groups in Assam, or forest owners and non-owners in Pakistan). These groups can not be encompassed with a notion such as 'community' – indeed, they may be 'communities of place', but not necessarily 'communities of interests'. And their expectations of, and stakes in, decentralisation differ. State decentralisation (and specifically devolution) is to empower the local level, but as 'the locals' are socially heterogeneous, decentralisation becomes inherently contested.

Heterogeneity, though, is not a privilege of the local. The notion of **the state**, too, requires closer analysis – along the vertical line, for example. Indeed, higher-level authorities are often inclined to allow for more flexibility or resource distribution in decentralisation (e.g. the water authorities in Mexico or the Viceministry of Biodiversity, Environment and Forest Resources in Bolivia). Coming closer to local levels, or the "trenches" (see Corbridge

2008 above), intentions of the "commanding heights of the state" (Corbridge 2008) get translated into more profane actions (e.g. linking planning issues with political elections in Buenos Aires, or shooting the cattle of people displaced by national parks in Nepal). But heterogeneity exists along the horizontal line as well. Efforts at organising decentralised governance structures can be undertaken by different sections of the bureaucracy, and can at times lead to overlapping structures at the local level (e.g. the multiplicity of structures in the Bolivian lowlands).

We then move on to re-visit the **relationship between state and people**. Decentralisation is based on the assumption that citizens 'exist' – but in how-far can we take for granted that people consider themselves as being functionally related to the state and thus perceive themselves as being citizens? Or, under which conditions are they ready to do so? Though well intended, many people in Assam, for example, experience decentralisation as a threat, and look for other forms of identity (e.g. Barbora's notion of "peoplehood"; see also the insights from Pakistan).

A further dimension emerges from Scott's thoughts: indeed, decentralisation schemes at times follow **standardised** or **simplified** (Scott's term) **procedures**, with the same rules and regulations extended throughout the state's national territory (e.g. water management in Mexico, decentralisation through municipalities in Bolivia, or joint forest management in Pakistan). Though these procedures may fit local circumstances in some cases, they may encounter very different social (and at times ecological) realities in many others. As a consequence, they offer no room to local complexities (e.g. buffer zones in Nepal).

Standardised procedures, however, do not lead to standardised applications. Several of the studies presented in this volume impressively illustrate the dimension of **agency**. In an agency-based conceptualisation of social realities, both governmental and non-governmental schemes emerge as **resources to be used**. Access to a forest management committee (in Pakistan, or in Bolivia's lowlands) opens opportunities for income; being linked to a specific church gives access to drinking water supplies (e.g. in Kerala); or being a member of a certain ethnic group defines patterns of access to forest and public financial resources as shown in the case of Bolivia.

Agency, though, is not a commodity equally distributed, but is socially contingent. Capabilities to access decentralisation schemes are influenced

(though not determined) by social status, ethnic affiliation, political liaisons or simply by geographical distance. The opportunities offered by decentralisation, thus, are not the same for all (see the studies from Pakistan, Assam and Bolivia).

We also showed that socially constructed notions of state citizenship and unequal distribution of agency are often linked to **actor-specific notions of society–nature relationships**. Therefore part of the complexity of local arenas is due to the fact that the process of negotiating socially, economically and culturally defined interests also implies to negotiate and make more compatible the ways in which societies wish to be related to their natural foundations, expressed in what they perceive as 'nature'. This becomes especially important when 'customary rights' are being recognised as in the case of the lowlands in Bolivia or Nepal, or when they are ignored as in the case of Pakistan.

1.6 The dilemmas and challenges of decentralisation

The contributions to this volume illustrate in various ways the complexities of decentralisation – complexities that become visible when reading ground realities through contemporary social science discourses. They show how well-intended and generally taken-for-granted efforts at providing equal opportunities to improve livelihoods through decentralisation, after meeting local complexities, result in the emergence of often unintended dynamics – different from the initial policy intentions. The analyses presented here are helping us to see that understanding such unintended effects only in terms of not having 'decentralised enough', or as procedural problems, might be a trap. What our reflections sustain is that the unintended effects are often expressions of encounters with complex, heterogeneous and conflictual local socio-political realities. A key challenge for research is to unravel these complexities and to highlight the variety of encounters decentralisation ventures can have with everyday realities. The eight studies presented here indeed illustrate the richness of insights that a differentiated analysis produces.

At this stage, though, researchers are often asked by practitioners to suggest ways of how negative consequences of decentralisation can be mitigated, and how opportunities could be strengthened in order to – to recall Chambers (introduced at the beginning of this paper) – cross the bridge between

critique and practice. Here, the insights presented by the researchers in this volume indicate a conflictuous terrain.

In a first reading, a core suggestion may emerge that calls upon decentralisation endeavours to better account for (local) complexity – for example to modify the often standardised procedures in such a way that they allow for flexibility, incorporation of local peculiarities and even constructive feedback loops between policy-making and local experience.

However, there is another side to this coin, well illustrated in several of the papers (e.g. Bolivia, Assam or Kerala): Heterogeneity also favours competition for the often scarce resources and opportunities available locally, and access to these is reorganised through decentralisation. This competition can lead to the proactive and strategic construction of differences between and among local social entities. As a result, there are processes of 'othering'; they can take modest forms (e.g. lowlands of Bolivia) or they can escalate and even lead to bloodshed and misery as the case of Assam dramatically shows.

Such radical cases can initiate a rethinking of assumptions, positions and normative outlooks. As the examples of Kerala and the Bolivian lowlands (and to some extent Pakistan, Mexico and Argentina) illustrate and argue, there is – in principle – an important and crucial role for the state. As already noticed by Ribot in his point No. 4: "For effective decentralisation, central governments remain important 'for redressing inequities and preventing elite capture of public decision-making processes. Central government also must establish the enabling legal environment for organising, representation, rights, and recourse so that local people can demand government responsibility, equity, and justice for themselves.' Central governments should also ensure 'pro-poor, pro-minority action'" (Ribot 2002, p 3). Similarly, as mentioned above, Slater (2002, p 255) urged to avoid the "accentuation of the dominant and a romanticisation of the resistant": though criticised for being simplified, often inefficient and bureaucratic, politically motivated and often insensitive approaches towards local complexities, it is – again in principle – *the state that is meant to 'balance local complexities', to avoid processes of 'othering', and to secure equal access to natural and socio-economic resources*. As the Kerala paper argues along this line, "it is only within the arena of 'contestational politics and of the conflicts of ideas and interests that are an essential part of democracy' [in the context of the nation-state], that development can take place – and decentralisation can be a core instrument in this" (see also the conclusions of Bottazzi [2009]).

The dilemma, then, is between an understanding of decentralisation that supports this envisioned role of a deeply democratic state on the one hand, and the fears of decentralisation being "constitutional engineering", the "almost naïve faith in the ability of constitutional arrangements to resolve complex (and contentious) issues centred on identity" on the other hand (Barbora 2009 on Assam). This also relates to the paradox we encountered when discussing Scott (see above), in that decentralisation may aim to overcome simplified views of 'the local' held by central governments living at a great distance from local heterogeneity, but in practice the ways in which central governments design and implement decentralisation often follow blueprints themselves which are too simplistic to effectively respond to local heterogeneity.

Thus, there is no simple answer as to 'how to do things right'. What our insights highlight is that decentralisation is, by its very basic intentions, a highly political venture – and thus contingent by definition. What has become evident from our studies is that decentralisation is much more than the introduction of "new mechanisms" (see Gaventa 2002); as a matter of fact, it can trigger the establishment of new social arenas in which the different actors involved do not behave according to pre-conceived (functionalist) roles. As the cases of Bolivia, Assam or Nepal show, these arenas lead to a *re-construction of very basic notions* such as citizenship, even the meaning of the state, and of the interactions between local actors, policy-makers, NGOs or social movements.

Endnotes

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[3] The levels at which decentralisation takes place, vary from case to case, e.g. from federal state to
states or provinces, or further "down" to villages, municipalities, etc.

[4] In this context, 'localisation' refers to the process of decentralisation as well.

[5] Case studies were conducted within the international research partnership programme National
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Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)..

[6] For South America see the complaints and suggestions presented by the indigenous Chronicler
Guaman Poma de Ayla (1615), who, during the first decades of colonisation, wrote a book
entitled "First Chronicle and Good Governance". The manuscript contains a well-documented
protest against the violence and ignorance of the colonisers. It suggests that Europeans, instead of
aggressing against indigenous people, should build a regime of 'good governance' on the basis of
existing indigenous institutions.

[7] Steimann (2004) argues that such standards can be used by central authorities to maintain control.
The question of sharing natural resource management responsibilities between local stakehold-
ers and state authorities has become a field of intensive debates. This concerns, on the one hand,
the modalities of these arrangements and, on the other hand, the evaluation of their potentials and
constraints (Andersson 2003; Larson 2003; Galvin and Haller 2008).

[8] The notion of 'scheduled tribes' refers to indigenous peoples in India, whose specific status is
acknowledged by national legislation.

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