

Editorial

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This issue of *Development in Practice* marks the journal's expansion from five to six issues a year. With this new issue, the last of each volume, we will focus on a single topic that is at the cutting edge of development thinking and practice, exploring it through a series of innovative features not usually included in the journal's regular issues. The theme of our inaugural issue is the relationship between democracy and decentralisation, with an emphasis on local participation and empowerment. The special features introduced here include an interview with **Rosemary Thorp**, an expert on the political economy of Latin America and currently Oxfam GB Chair of Trustees, two review essays to provide an overview of the research and literature that has emerged in the field, as well as an annotated resources list. The issue also includes four case studies on democratic decentralisation to offer a perspective on how decentralisation projects work in practice.

Since the early 1980s, a profound political and economic transformation has been evident throughout the developing world and the countries of the former Soviet bloc. While in 1980 most of the regimes in those regions were authoritarian and had relatively closed economies characterised by high levels of state intervention, by the late 1990s most of the countries in the former Communist block and Latin America, as well as parts of Africa and Asia, had made a transition to formal liberal democracy and had adopted (however reluctantly) the principles of a market economy (Freedom House 1999). This transition has been accompanied by a further trend that has been just as ubiquitous, if perhaps less noticed (Oxhorn 2004:3): decentralisation, a process involving the transfer of power and responsibilities from the centre to lower levels of authority in an attempt to bring government 'closer to the people'.

However, now that the original enthusiasm associated with these momentous changes has given way to more sober appraisals of the sustainability of these emerging democracies, questions regarding the nature and quality of these regimes have come to the fore (see, for example, Domínguez and Shifter 2003 and Heller 2001). These new democratic systems have been variously described as 'delegative' (O'Donnell 1994) and 'unconsolidated' (Philip 2003), reflecting a growing awareness that 'there is more to successful democracy than the holding of regular elections' (Philip 2003:3).

Thus, while the state has certainly been transformed, one of the central questions that emerges is how responsive and accountable these new democracies are. Have ordinary citizens become more fully invested in the political process and have they been able to acquire a voice in the decisions that most concern them? This is what Patrick Heller (2001:132) identifies as the fundamental challenge of democratic decentralisation.

Interestingly, in a context of economic liberalisation and growing democratisation, decentralisation has been embraced as the new mantra of development among actors across the political spectrum. International development agencies, most notably the World Bank, have

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championed decentralisation as a means of rolling back the size and reach of the state and making government more efficient—decentralisation in this sense neatly falls within the purview of neo-liberal prescriptions for economic restructuring. However, decentralisation has also gained support among donors, policy makers, and political activists alike on the assumption that strengthening local government structures increases accountability and promotes citizen participation (see, for example, Crook and Manor 2000). In fact, as Harry Blair (2000:22) has noted, what distinguishes current decentralisation reforms from earlier efforts is precisely the emphasis on those two concepts.

If nothing else, by redistributing power away from the centre towards lower levels of government, decentralisation opens up political spaces for local societal actors to emerge and demand greater autonomy (Oxhorn 2004). In this sense, however limited, decentralisation reforms may help strengthen civil society and make democracy more responsive and participatory. Witness, for example, the establishment of autonomous municipalities ruled by indigenous law, or *usos y costumbres*, in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, or the implementation of participatory budgeting in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre.

However, it is also important to keep in mind that decentralisation is by no means a linear process, and it should not be assumed that more local forms of government are automatically more democratic. As Thorp discusses in her interview, while the process of democratic decentralisation in Latin America is promising, it still needs to overcome multiple challenges if it is to fulfil its potential. Successful decentralisation hinges on the convergence of many factors—including an engaged political leadership, strong political parties committed to popular participation, and capacity at the local level—whose coincidence often may be difficult to achieve. In the absence of such favourable conditions, political bosses may well turn decentralised policy areas into personalised fiefdoms rather than laboratories of democratic governance. Long ruled by Mexico's once hegemonic Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Oaxaca once again can serve as illustration, but this time of the kinds of excesses perpetrated by an old-guard political elite bent on preserving its traditional sources of power and authority. In the weeks and months leading to the gubernatorial and assembly elections held on 1 August 2004, for example, the government of José Murat so thoroughly succeeded in generating a climate of fear and intimidation that a majority of voters opted to stay at home rather than go to the polls and cast their vote. In the end, the PRI officially won the election for governor by the smallest margin in the state's history, but at the time of writing the opposition was still contesting those results.

The four case studies included in this issue provide practical and geographically diverse perspectives to this discussion. Each explores some of the difficulties involved in implementing successful decentralisation projects and enabling them to realise their full democratising potential. **William McCarten and Vinod Vyasulu** analyse attempts at 'guided decentralisation' in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, an impoverished and highly unequal region where democratic decentralisation would need to flourish 'by defying the odds'. They find that while certain initiatives (such as improving access to school) have achieved remarkable results, other efforts have been much less successful. The remaining three cases examine similar issues at the interface of international development agencies with local political actors and groups. In his article on EU support for grassroots organisations in South Africa, **Lorenzo Fioramonti** finds that most of those organisations remain barely sustainable and that their capacity to influence local policies is limited. **Esther Ofei-Aboagye** analyses three collaborative projects between international development organisations and district assemblies throughout Ghana to promote gender sensitivity and increase the representation of women in local governance. Though it is too early to assess whether such initiatives have succeeded, what is clear is that decentralisation efforts need to be accompanied by adequate resources and appropriate institutional support and capacity building to be able to make a difference. In their study of a decentralised transformative

leadership pilot project sponsored by the UNDP to combat the HIV/AIDS crisis in Nepal, **Janet Sanders** and **Tatwa Timsina** are more optimistic. They find that decentralisation has succeeded in bringing about empowerment at the local level by cultivating new leaders committed to social change.

A final reflection on the perils and opportunities of decentralisation is that unchecked decentralisation can exacerbate regional inequalities rather than reduce them by accentuating regional imbalances. Local governments in areas that are more marginalised may not be able to garner the kinds of resources available to officials in more affluent regions, and, as a result, they may not be able to provide the types of services and opportunities their respective communities may have come to expect. The perceived inability of local governments to meet the needs of their citizens may in turn lead to a growing sense of frustration with the workings of democratic institutions. This development, already evident in many of the incipient democracies established in the 1980s and 1990s, poses a serious challenge to their consolidation (see, for example, UNDP 2004). As **Fidelx Kulipossa** notes in his review essay, this speaks to the need to achieve a careful balance between the local, regional, and national levels of government to protect local autonomy while also promoting a reasonable level of uniformity across regions.

This number is the first in what will be an annual review of important issues in the field of development. We hope that it will provide a useful point of reference and we look forward to your feedback.

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