

# Decentralization: Potentiality and Challenge for Rural Development

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## Abstract

Despite arguments that decentralization creates successful rural development, studies in many countries find that the adoption of decentralization does not always make rural development more effective. While decentralization theoretically offers substantial opportunities for successful rural development, all too often the implementation is hampered by various challenges. This paper deals with this challenging issue, which is to identify the potentialities and challenges brought by decentralization for rural development. Through literature reviews, this paper suggests countries applying decentralization to pay attention on several main factors consisting of formulation of local budget, social capital, local capacity and community participation.

## 1. Introduction

Many countries are now applying decentralization, in any forms, to develop rural areas. By the early 1990s, 84% of the countries having population more than 5 millions had adopted decentralization (Dillinger, 1994). This makes Conyers (1983, p. 97) anecdotically call decentralization as “the latest fashion in development administration”. While decentralization gains vast attention from academicians, development practitioners, international donors and governments, there is no universally single design of decentralization. The design varies across the countries depending upon their political and administrative arrangements.

The increasing popularity of decentralization leads to a misunderstanding where it is deemed automatically to result in successful development. Whereas, there have been increasing evidences that decentralization does not automatically create successful rural development. Jutting et al. (2005) make a review on implementation of decentralization in nine regionally dispersed countries. They find that only in West Bengal and Kerala of India and Bolivia where decentralization has a positive impact on poverty alleviation. The rest is a somewhat positive impact in South Africa, Philippines, Ghana, a mixed impact in Uganda and a negative impact in Guinea and Madhya Pradesh of India. Their review finds lack of evidences that decentralization directly increases efficiency and improves governance for more demand-oriented social service provision.

Although evidences are mixed, Cheema and Rondinelli (2007) argue that the failures are due more to government ineffectiveness in implementation than the weaknesses in the concept of decentralization itself. Formulating a proper design is only the first half of puzzle to make successful decentralization. All too often such good designs are failed because governments pay less attention in the implementation stage. Thus, the other more challenging and important part is to ensure that the design is properly implemented. Parker (1995) once proposes what he calls as a soufflé-theory of decentralization. Like to make a delicious soufflé, successful decentralization needs precise ingredients combining various social, political and institutional factors that are country specific. Parker’s theory implies not only the impossibility to standardize the design of decentralization, but also the art to implement it will vary from country to countries.

This paper aims to explore the link between decentralization and rural development by focusing in implementation stage. To do so, this paper will use an approach of policy stages. A policy generally consists of three stages, which are formulation, implementation and taking benefits. The policy formulation is translated into budgeting decision. The implementation of a policy will be influenced not only by capacity of implementers, but also by socio-political and cultural condition of community. The benefits of development policy can be seen from its impact on poverty alleviation. Guided by these general stages, this paper will step by step identify the advantages and challenges brought by decentralization for rural development.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 will discuss concepts of decentralization and rural development; Section 3 will discuss the relationship between decentralization and rural development; Section 4 will draw a conclusion. Annex 1

of this paper seeks to figure out all previous discussions into a framework.

## 2. Conceptual terrain

### 2.1 Concept of decentralization

The term of decentralization has been extensively used in literatures, through which its meaning evolves from time to time. Most literatures principally refer to the definition and typology of decentralization developed by Rondinelli and Cheema. Their earlier concept was developed in 1980s when decentralization was defined as “transfer of planning, decision making, or administrative authority from the central government to its field organizations, local administrative units, semi-autonomous and parastatal organizations, local government or non governmental organization” (Rondinelli & Cheema, 1983, p. 18). They categorizes decentralization into three forms, which are:

1. Deconcentration, which is a distribution of tasks from central ministries to their field offices. Although the field offices are located far away from the headquarter, they are formally the institution of central government. In deconcentration, the central ministries retain decision making while the field offices are only implementer agents;
2. Delegation, which is a transfer of tasks from central government to organizations, public enterprises or specific chambers outside of government bureaucracy;
3. Devolution, which is a transfer of decision making from central to local government. In devolution, local government is autonomous and not a part of central bureaucracy

The earlier concept of decentralization basically emphasizes more on transfer of task within government bureaucracy. This is because it comes from a period and circumstance where the government is the only institution formulating and implementing public policy. Along with the spread of democratization, however, the government becomes un-exclusive in public policy. There are many other actors like civil societies, community and market who should be involved in public decision making. Thus, in recent times, Cheema and Rondinelli (2007) identify that the typology of decentralization has been evolved into:

1. Political decentralization, which includes establishment of procedures to improve people participation in local political process. Devolution of power to local government is equal to political decentralization;
2. Administrative decentralization, which includes deconcentration of central bureaucracy and delegation of government tasks;
3. Fiscal decentralization, which includes transfer of revenue sharing and expenditure discretion to local government;
4. Market or economic decentralization, which includes liberalization, deregulation and privatization.

In literatures, clear categorization of decentralization rarely takes place since there is clearly an overlap in its typology. Decentralization is always a combination of various types ranging from deconcentration to devolution. In any countries, decentralization at least consists of an arrangement in politic, fiscal or administration. In order to have a comprehensive understanding on decentralization, multi disciplinary approaches are needed to analyze it.

### 2.2 Concept of rural development

Rural areas can be defined from perspectives of ecology, economy, or political administration (Hoggart, 1990; Wiggins & Proctor, 2001). Ecologically, landscape of rural areas dominantly consists of field, pasture, forest, river or mountain where settlement is scattered with minimum physical infrastructure. Economically, most rural people work in farming, livestock, forestry and fishing, somehow implying to a high incidence of poverty. While rural areas are relatively easier to be recognized from ecological and economic perspectives, it is ambiguously defined from political administrative perspective. The definition of rural administration in many countries does not refer to the ecological character. The effort to make clear distinction between rural and urban becomes more complex because economic transformation has created peri-urban areas where characters of rural and urban are mixed.

Rural development is broadly defined as overall development programs conducted in the rural areas. Ellis and Biggs (2001) note that until the 1970s, rural development was mainly regarded as agricultural development aiming to increase crop production. With the focus on increasing agricultural production, rural development was delivered mostly through Green Revolution (Fernando, 2008). Further, the emergence of a more diversified rural livelihood leads to the change in the concept of rural development. Currently, there are at least three main elements found in literatures aiming to elaborate the concept of rural development. Firstly, most literatures agree that rural development is multi-sectoral programs covering not only agriculture, but also infrastructure, micro finance, environment, human resources and so on. Secondly, objective of rural development is an improvement of quality of life of villagers, which ranges from income, housing, education, health and access to other public

services. Thirdly, although rural development targets to rural community as a whole, most literatures agree that it should give a priority to the poorest group (Ellis & Biggs, 2001; Fernando, 2008; Singh, 1999; World Bank, 1975).

Alleviating poverty is the final objective of rural development. Literatures broadly defines poverty as lack of basic necessities to maintain sufficient standard of living (Haughton & Khandker, 2009). In most countries, poverty measurement is conducted through establishment of poverty line, which is a minimum level of income needed by a person to obtain minimum calorie intake and other services to live properly. World Bank set a poverty line at US\$ 2 per day for moderate poverty and US\$ 1 per day for extreme poverty. Many countries have set their respective poverty line.

Poverty is a multidimensional issue (Haughton & Khandker, 2009; Ravallion, 1996). Therefore, a simplified measure based on income alone may not comprehensively describe the nature of poverty. Many literatures have proposed methods to measure the multidimensionality of poverty, yet according to Ravallion (1996), most of them face both methodological and conceptual challenges. Henry, Sharma, Lapenu, and Zeller (2001) argue that a relative poverty condition can be identified from consumed food, dwelling condition, asset ownership, education and expenditure. Although this method is still not able to measure the multidimensionality of poverty, it provides a relatively easier way to identify the poor in a community.

### **3. Linkage between decentralization and rural development**

#### **3.1 Potentiality of decentralization to rural development**

##### **3.1.1 Fiscal decentralization and pro poor budget**

Those advocating fiscal decentralization argue that it will provide local government more discretion to formulate local expenditure. This will, in turn, provide space to promote participatory budgeting system. By assuming that local government knows local problems better than the central government does, decentralization is expected to result in a better allocation of development funding (Braun & Groat, 2009; Ebdon & Franklin, 2006).

The first local government applying participatory budgeting is Porto Alegre in Brazil, a city with about 1.5 million people but one third of population live in areas lacking of clean water, sanitation, school and medical facilities. For a long time, Porto Alegre invested less amount of budget in public spending. In 1986, however, a reform was initiated through a policy to involve community, guaranteeing mainly representations from the poor, in expenditure decision making. Supporting this reform was the willingness of local government to share budgetary information publicly and the political commitment of the elected majors to give priorities upon the poor's proposals. As a result, the overall process empowered the poor to be more active citizens and decreased the domination of bureaucracy in budgetary decision making (Bhatnagar, Rathore, Torres, & Kanungo, 2003).

In case of Porto Alegre, participatory budgeting system substantially improved spending for public services. The representatives from relatively poorer areas could push local government to prioritize their needs so that they could obtain access to facilities that the other areas already had. Thus, it also led to a more equal development across the regions. Bhatnagar et al. (2003) note that from 1986 to 1996, clean water coverage was increased from 75% to 98% of households, the number of schools was quadrupled and spending for health and education were increased from 13% to 40% of total budget.

The success of Porto Alegre has inspired many governments to apply participatory budgeting system. Although in the earlier times participatory budgeting was applied only in cities of Latin America, now it is applied also in many rural local governments in the world.

##### **3.1.2 Political decentralization and local participation**

Community participation is essential for successful rural development. Uphoff, Esman, and Krishna (1998), who review about thirty rural development programs assisted by international donors in various countries, find that participation of local people is the main factor contributing to the success of government programs, either in infrastructure development, microfinance, capacity development, agriculture extension, or education and health improvement. Community involvement contributes to the program success through increasing resource mobilization, providing mechanism of check and balance and improving the match between development outputs and the need of rural people.

Decentralization, especially through devolution to local government, is expected to provide a maximum feasible space for participation. This is because local government is closer to the people than the central government, thus devolution minimizes the costs of time and distance to interact with the government. Thus, as Cheema and Rondinelli (2007) argue, decentralization does not only provide more space for people to participate in local leader selection, but also in the broader local development context.

Review by Blair (2000) in six countries of Bolivia, Honduras, India, Mali, Philippines and Ukraine finds that although decentralization system still has limitations in promoting participation, at least it provides opportunity for the minorities and marginalized groups to enter local politics. This is because political decentralization provides a mechanism to elect local

representations and leaders. When minorities are allocated some seats in local parliament, they can work for the interest of their groups. Blair also finds that increased representation provides benefits in itself. Local election process guaranteeing the rights of people to elect their leaders can at least be a crude instrument to make government more accountable.

### **3.1.3 Administrative decentralization and institutional approach in poverty alleviation**

Administrative decentralization occurs when central government transfers public sector tasks to local government or institutions outside bureaucracy. Administrative decentralization is expected to increase government accountability since it enables people to monitor their local officers (Braun & Groat, 2009). Further, administrative decentralization also aims to reduce monopoly of central government in public service provisions. Cohen and Peterson (1997) argue that by increasing the number and diversity of institutions providing services, not only accountability will be increased, but service delivery will be better managed and tailored to local needs.

Administrative decentralization, especially by involving local community institutions in executing government programs, offers opportunity to apply institutional approaches in poverty alleviation (Braun & Groat, 2009; Cohen & Peterson, 1997). Local informal institutions, which are usually neglected when poverty alleviation programs are solely delivered by central bureaucracy, can be involved in administrative decentralization. These institutions generally have stronger roots within community and can organize the poor better than government. They should be empowered through the provision of financial and technical assistance thereby enabling them to bring enhanced service delivery to the community.

Various development programs have been implemented in many countries by emphasizing on roles of local institutions. Program of rural community forest in Nepal is one example of success story of institutional approach in local resource management. In this country, the government delegates tasks to conserve forest to local community institutions. Local community, which knows better the situation of forest and is heavily dependent on it as a livelihood source, is able to utilize the forest in sustainable way. As Chetri, Joshi, and Maharjan (2007) and Joshi and Maharjan (2007) find, local institutions in rural Nepal can successfully manage forest resources, somehow making forest conservation go hand in hand with rural poverty alleviation.

## **3.2 Challenges for decentralization**

### **3.2.1 Inadequate revenue and culture of budget secrecy**

Decentralization requires strong fiscal capacity of local government. Indeed, central government usually transfers some amount of money needed to implement the delegated tasks. Yet, besides receiving fiscal transfer from central government, local government is supposed to have its own capacity to generate local revenues.

Literatures suggest several options to generate local revenue like establishing locally managed enterprise, extracting natural resources and collecting local taxes (Lewis, 2003; Livingston & Charlton, 2001). Yet, local government is profoundly known to have low capacity to manage business. The easiest options to generate revenue usually lie between continuous extraction of natural resources and progressive increase in local taxes. As a consequence, fiscal decentralization may create environmental degradation due to over extraction of natural resources or increase in cost for economic activities. Such cases that effort to generate local revenue can be contra-productive for development have been found in Indonesia during the initial years of application of decentralization. Casson and Obidzinski (2002) find that deforestation in many localities are increased after decentralization, while Lewis (2003) finds that the number and types of local taxes are increased and hampering investment and local economic growth.

Decentralization may create fiscal imbalances, and participatory budgeting is sometimes failed to improve public spending as well as fiscal imbalances. For example, Sutiyo and Maharjan (2012b), through their study in Purbalingga district of Indonesia, find that after about ten years of decentralization in the country, the district is still heavily dependent on revenue transfer from central government. Local revenue constitutes only about 10% of total budget, mostly from local taxes. Further, rural people are still not satisfied with the spending allocation since only less than 10% of their proposals were accepted by the district government. The portion of expenditure for agriculture, infrastructure, health, education is only about 29% of total budget. Most of local budget is spent for salary and other operational cost to serve bureaucracy. Their study finds that low willingness of the district government to share information and low political commitment to prioritize community proposals have hindered the effectiveness of public participation.

Comparing the case of Purbalingga District in Indonesia (Sutiyo & Maharjan, 2012b) and Porto Alegre (Bhatnagar et al., 2003), it is found that transparency and political commitment are very influential. To be successful, participatory budgeting requires the willingness of local authorities to share the budgetary information and to put community voices in high priority (Bhatnagar et al., 2003). Local authorities should share budgetary information openly through an easily understood language so that the poor know what is feasible to be proposed. In principle, participatory budgeting requires a shift from the culture of secrecy in budgeting to open information.

The implementation of participatory budgeting is still facing significant challenges because studies find that budgeting process in many developing countries is not community friendly (Andrews & Shah, 2005). Information gaps and secrecy of document are still major obstacles to make a contestable budgeting plan (Andrews & Shah, 2005; PRIA Global Partnership, 2010; Wampler, 2008).

### 3.2.2 Insufficient social capital

Certain local social conditions are needed for the success of decentralization. A supportive local condition is reflected from social capital, which is generally defined as features of social organization that facilitate community cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1993). In his study on twenty local governments in Italy, Putnam finds high variations of local economic growth between the north regions and the south one. Development programs were generally more successful and economic growth was higher in the north Italy than in the south one. One factor contributing to the success of north Italy in community development is robustness of social organization. Community activeness in social organizations in north Italy has made relation between community and government closer, which in turn improves governance. A close relationship between community and government in the north regions has made local governments more creative to make policy initiatives and effective in implementing them. This is contrary with south Italy where institutional membership is less active.

Study by Putnam (1993) has established a general understanding that social capital will influence very much on the success of decentralization. Putnam (1993) illustrates that relation between social capital and economic development is bowling alone. Strong social capital is needed for successful community development, and vice versa, successful community development fosters social capital. A robust social capital will produce a dense civil society, which is a necessary condition for modern democracy and well functioning political institution (Fukuyama, 1999).

To be successful, it is argued that decentralization should be rooted in a functioning local and participatory self governance institutions (Hadiz, 2010). Yet, the main challenge of implementation of decentralization in many developing countries is that social capital cannot be created immediately, rather, it is a product of long time interaction entrenched in the history of community. In this regard, it is worth to see the sociological nature of rural community. According to Uphoff (2004), rural community is not a cohesive and harmonious social entity but disaggregated by various clans and familial segmentation. In many traditional rural areas, power at local level is more concentrated and more elitist than in central level (Rondinelli & Cheema, 1983). Concentrations of the power will inevitably be translated into a political influence in local decision making, and the benefits of decentralization may be captured by small groups of elites within rural community.

### 3.2.3 Low capacity of local institutions

To be successful in promoting institutional approach in poverty alleviation, decentralized programs should be executed by institutions having enough capacity. Yet, there are many concerns that local institutions may have not enough capacity. UNDP (2002), in the report on capacity development programs conducted across the world, concludes that successful and sustainable capacity development still cannot be achieved, and despite training of thousands people, lack of skills and weak institutions are still the major problem.

In addition, Johnson (2001) states local capacity perhaps has been eroded due to a long application of top down development. He also raises a concern that poverty in rural areas may debilitate the ability of local people to participate in decentralization. Low education level of rural people may hamper their ability to understand government policy. Cost of travel, work hours and backlash to engage in local political process may discourage the poor to participate. If the poor do not participate in decision making, they will probably not get the benefits from decentralization.

In addition, although capacity exists, Bebbington (1999) argues that the likelihood that it can be realized to achieve good performance depends on capacity of other actors and social structure that determine pattern of relationship among actors. Therefore, one should not assume that good capacity will always result in good performance. The possibility of success in tackling rural problems depends not only on capacity of each rural institution as a separated group, but also on their ability to work together in a synergetic way. As an example, Sutiyo and Maharjan (2012a), through their study in some rural areas in Indonesia, find that although local capacity exists, some cultural factor hampers the utilization of capacity to execute decentralization. Village head, culturally the highest patron in Indonesian rural areas, is still too dominant and delimitating the other institutions to perform their tasks.

## 4. Conclusion

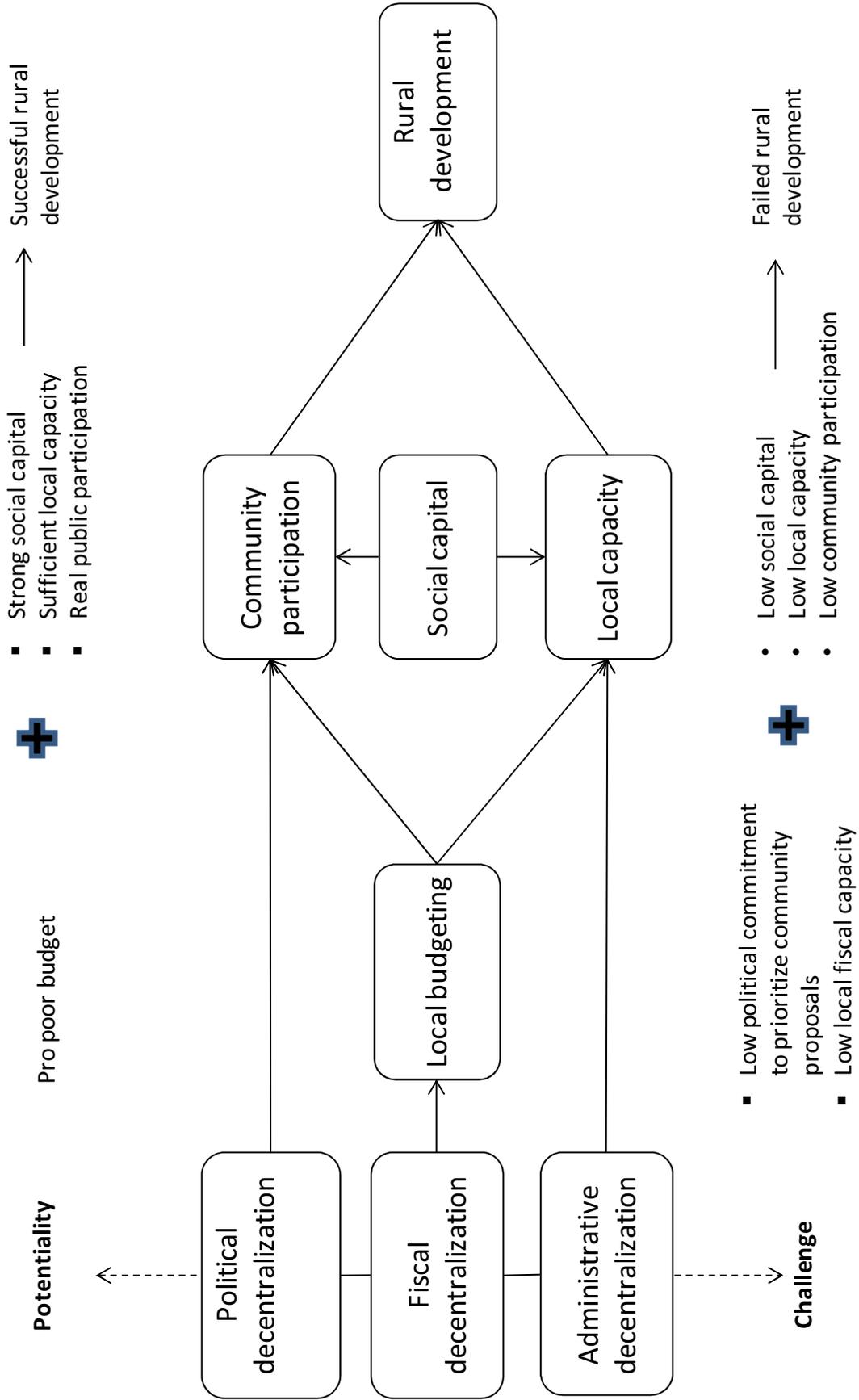
Decentralization is like a double edge sword for rural development. It has several potentialities to create successful

development, and at the same time, each potentiality has a counter argument of risk that may hamper the development programs. Conceptually, this study argues that only if local budget is spent to address the needs of rural people, social capital is strong, the rural poor actively participate and local institutions have enough capacity, then decentralization will result in successful rural development. Otherwise, if local budgeting just becomes a formality, social capital does not exist, the rural poor cannot participate and local institutions have not enough capacity, then decentralization will be failed. It is recommended that the application of decentralized system should be followed by political commitment of local authorities to seek and prioritize community voices, institutional arrangement that promotes people participation, procedures guaranteeing the rights of marginal groups in local political process, empowerment of rural people and capacity development for local institutions.

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Appendix 1. Conceptual framework between decentralization and rural development