Pro-Poor Growth and Governance in South Asia: Decentralization and Participatory Development Edited by Ponna Wignaraja and Susil Sirivardana, 2004, New Delhi: Sage, 459 pages, Rs. 690.

Following much disillusionment with top-down approaches, governments are now rushing to adopt the participatory approach to development. The objective is to incorporate local people who come from different categories, who are the targets of government efforts in development, and primary consumers of local services. Central to the idea is the notion that large and centrally administered bureaucracies are inefficient means of poverty alleviation. This is because of economic corruption, the indifferent attitude of the government officials to giving control to the people, and exclusion of end users in the decision-making process. The solution, it is argued, is to make government more accountable and responsive to local people.

The editors of the book under review have compiled case studies on the complex issue of decentralization and governance. The book presents the ideas of academicians, government officials, and activists working with non-governmental organizations – all closely associated with the South Asian Perspective Network Association, a forum for action research on participatory democracy and development.

A theoretical framework, in the beginning, draws from an array of literature dealing with development management, the role of institutions in redistribution of resources, and integration of traditional knowledge system in service-delivery programs. Ponna Wignaraja shows that decentralization could enhance participation in the form of devolution of power to local institutions that possess meaningful autonomy and the capacity to mobilize and spend resources. The whole process, in an ideal situation, enables the local people to debate,

negotiate, and have control over the decision-making process. If this really happens, then with time, local government can become an educative process where the participants learn about democratic norms and practices.

Srikrishna Upadhyay and Govinda Koirala, in their study on Nepal, argue that it can be easier and more expedient to use a traditional institution of decision-making as a participatory channel rather than creating new ones. The authors illustrate the way participation can better target benefits to the poor through a gradual process of social mobilization and shared understanding of problems.

However, deliberative processes might not be democratic by default, and participation can be tokenistic in character. Madhu Subramanian, in her case study from Kerala, shows how local people can become only an 'add-on' to an essentially top-down process. Local management activity becomes influenced by factors outside the village, where political dynamics and external support guide the decision-making process. On the other hand, the Bangladesh model demonstrates that the state political and administrative system have chosen not to establish a formal link between the macro system at the top and the micro-level actions at the villages. Political interference from higher levels of the hierarchy about the distribution of projects, nevertheless, remains a problem.

Another problem with most local governments in South Asia is financial dependence on the state government. In India, for example, local self-governing is constitutionally guaranteed, but without any revenue generation at the local level, the institutions have to look at the state government for sustenance. Amitabh and Debolina Kundu show how private sector involvement could help municipalities to earn money instead of waiting for the superiors bail them out. The case study focuses on privatization strategies available to

municipalities in urban Gujarat.

Although this is equally applicable to rural areas, there seems to be an administrative difficulty. The local government, the administrative system, and the non-governmental organizations often remain functionally disjointed and regionally uncoordinated. This places more power in the hands of local elites to use the government for their benefit. A successful network between these institutions, as illustrated by Sunil Sirivardana from Sri Lanka, could work towards poverty eradication in a region.

The case studies show that if implemented properly, decentralization can move decision-making closer to the people and improve governance. But the key challenge is to balance the responsibilities and accountability. Decentralization can become an inclusive process under local authorities empowered with discretionary decisions that are relevant to the local people. Accountability can be assured by the process of electing power-holders and by the procedures through which public decision-making processes are held up to public scrutiny and feedback. But to make this happen, there must be a rearrangement of power. The final chapter on lessons for future directions rightly concludes that social mobilization and empowerment as policy tools need to be integrated with decentralization. It is, of course, another question whether this mobilization process can come from outside, or if we should only regard people's own initiatives as proper empowerment.

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