

Panel 20: Contours of local governance in South Asia: Legitimacy and Empowerment

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Abstract: Due to the lack of vital state structures (e.g. Afghanistan, Nepal) and/or the devolution of power from the centre to the local level (e.g. India) local governance takes on a prominent role in politics across South Asia. However, modes of local politics are shaped by different traditions and external influences what lead to a high varieties of formations of governance. Thus this panel aims to understand to what extent differences as well as similarities in local politics can be found across South Asia. Therefore the intention of this panel is to discuss concrete examples of local governance from different places of South Asia. Hereby the bottom line of this panel is which factors generate legitimacy on the local level and are reflected in governance processes.

Moreover, decentralization is assumed to be one of the popular reform policies for strengthening local governance and, thereby, bringing about better policy outcomes in terms of deepening democratic governance and improving delivery of basic services. While the bulk of decentralization literature concentrates on technical, administrative as well as fiscal issues, the political dimension is often enough not taken into consideration. If the political dimension is addressed then usually the discourses of the international development agencies are adopted. They are usually labelled with the term “good governance” and can be summarized as communities should work like they work in the West. Hereby a concrete normative understanding of legitimacy, power and institutions is already presupposed, what disregards other formations of communal self-understanding. Moreover, agencies often enough consider communities as empowered if they have access to information and they are included in forums where deliberations and decision-making take place and they have the capacity to participate effectively in such forums. Theoretically, this can improve accountability and responsiveness of the local officials which in turn improve the delivery of basic services through better matching between what people want and what is provided.

The degrees of decentralization are a major determinant of the extent of opportunities for and on the outcomes of community empowerment. For example, demand driven pressures from communities on local government will be successful only to the extent that decentralized institutional arrangements support an effective supply response in terms of local governments capacity in accommodating citizens in the policy making forums up to the lowest level. Experiences have revealed that while participation in the decision making forums have been quite common, the lack of involvement of the community in the

implementation negates the benefit of decentralization. The effectiveness of empowerment mechanisms for accountability purposes is also influenced by existing distribution of social and political power. For example, the interests and strategies of political parties, politicians and community activists shape the prospects for community empowerment. In essence, the political and institutional dimension as reflected through constitutional and legal framework is critical to the balance between local government capacity to supply democratic governance and community capacity for demand. Decentralization is a process and not an overnight initiative, the benefit of which could be handed over to people, is something which the developing countries have failed to appreciate.

The relative lack of systematic studies, covering the above-mentioned complexities, limits our abilities to make precise conclusive statements as regards the relationship between decentralization, community empowerment and outcomes relating to service delivery effectiveness. Lack of information has not only led to experimentation with faulty decentralized models but also has hampered appropriate policy formulation. Our panel would also attempt to fill this gap. By documenting the successful experiences, and even failures, this panel can provide the basis for the application of empowered democratic governance.

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