

Decentralization, deconcentration and devolution: what do they mean?¹

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Decentralization with its various types has been implemented in many countries, and the terms have been widely used. However, the same word is often used to describe different things. Interpretations vary, and have led to different conceptual frameworks, programs, implementation and implications. Such differences have invited debates and discussion.

This document lists definitions of decentralization, deconcentration, devolution and other related terms used in papers presented at the Interlaken Workshop on Decentralization, 27-30 April 2004, Interlaken, Switzerland.

As this is a work in progress, there may be many parts needing improvement/changes. We look forward to receiving your comments and suggestions (L.yuliani@cgiar.org).

Decentralization

Definitions and descriptions of decentralization used in the papers include:

- "Decentralisation is usually referred to as the transfer of powers from central government to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Crook and Manor 1998, Agrawal and Ribot 1999). This official power transfer can take two main forms. Administrative decentralisation, also known as deconcentration, refers to a transfer to lower-level central government authorities, or to other local authorities who are upwardly accountable to the central government (Ribot 2002). In contrast, political, or democratic, decentralisation refers to the transfer of authority to representative and downwardly accountable actors, such as elected local governments" (Larson).
- "The term decentralisation is used to cover a broad range of transfers of the "locus of decision making" from central governments to regional, municipal or local governments" (Sayer et al.).
- Decentralization reform refers to "transforming the local institutional infrastructure for natural resource management on which local forest management is based" (Ribot).
- "Decentralization is "the means to allow for the participation of people and local governments" (Morell).
- Decentralization is transferring the power from the federal to regional level or delivering management functions to other authorities. Decentralization in decision-making including in forest management: user-defined functions being transferred to the private sector, and arrangements for the Forest Fund are transferred to the regions/administrative units of the Federation, which are badly prepared to implement these rights (Malysheva).

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- “Definitions of the different types of decentralization vary and the same terms are sometimes used in inconsistent ways in the literature on the subject”. The paper by Gregersen, Contreras-Hermosilla, White and Phillips adopts the following definitions:
 - **“Political** decentralization: Groups at different levels of government—central, meso and local—are empowered to make decisions related to what affects them.
 - **Administrative** decentralization: Different levels of government administer resources and matters that have been delegated to them, generally through a constitution. In terms of decentralization as a process of change, and according to the level of transfer of responsibilities, it is useful to distinguish between deconcentration, delegation and devolution.
 - **Fiscal** decentralization. In this case, previously concentrated powers to tax and generate revenues are dispersed to other levels of government, e.g., local governments are given the power to raise and retain financial resources to fulfill their responsibilities.
 - **Market** decentralization: Government privatizes or deregulates private functions, such as occurred in the case of New Zealand forest sector”. (World Bank 2000 in Gregersen et al.),
<http://www.worldbank.org/publicsector/decentralization/admindecen.htm>
- “In Bolivia, decentralization of forest management was strongly linked to two ongoing processes initiated in the mid-1990s. The first sought to institutionalize social participation as part of a broader process of institutional reform of municipalities, and the second was aimed at reforming the forest regulations dating from the mid-1970s. Both have been interlinked through promoting a larger involvement of municipal governments in a wide range of forestry-related issues since the second half of the 1990s” (Pacheco).
- “Decentralization of forest management in Guatemala has taken the form of “municipalization”, or deconcentration, as a highly centralized forest regulatory system has been delegated to municipalities” (Elias and Wittman).
- Decentralization is transforming the local institutional infrastructure on which local forest management is based. Three basic elements of decentralization are *accountability, discretionary power, and security* (Ribot).
- “Decentralization in Zimbabwe’s forest sector has been varied depending on the tenurial status of the land on which the woodlands are found. In protected forest zones, collaborative resource management regimes have only recently been introduced. Collaborative resource management is a variant of decentralization in which communities residing at the margin of state forests can access a limited set of products from the forests” (Hlambela and Kozanayi).
- “Decentralization means to hand over political, financial and administrative authority from central to local (district/city) governments, so that the government can facilitate and guarantee better public services for the people. Decentralization of the forestry sector should, however, be viewed as a positive development to bring public services closer to the people through managing forest resources in a sustainable manner for the community’s welfare” (Ministry of Forestry, Indonesia).

As mentioned above, there are various types of decentralization such as deconcentration, devolution and delegation. Definitions of these terms as used in the papers are listed below.



Deconcentration, is the term referring to:

- "The process by which the agents of central government control are relocated and geographically dispersed" (Sayer et al.).
- "Administrative decentralization, i.e. a transfer to lower-level central government authorities, or to other local authorities who are upwardly accountable to the central government" (Ribot 2002 in Larson).
- "The transfer of administrative responsibility for specified functions to lower levels within the central government bureaucracy, generally on some spatial basis" (Ferguson and Chandrasekharan).
- "One of administrative decentralization which redistributes decision-making authority and financial and management responsibility among levels of the central government; there is no real transfer of authority between levels of government. It may involve only a shift of responsibilities from federal forest service officials of the capital city to those stationed in provinces, districts, etc" (Gregersen et al.).

Devolution, refers to:

- "The transfer of 'natural resource management to local individuals and institutions located within and outside of government' (Edmunds et al. 2003:1), though some people use 'devolution' only in reference to direct community transfers" (Larson)
- "The transfer of rights and assets from the centre to local governments or communities. All of these processes occur within the context of national laws that set the limits within which any decentralised or devolved forest management occurs" (Sayer et al.).
- "The transfer of governance responsibility for specified functions to sub-national levels, either publicly or privately owned, that are largely outside the direct control of the central government" (Ferguson and Chandrasekharan).
- "One form of administrative decentralization which transfers specific decision-making powers from one level of government to another (which could be from lower level to higher level of government, in the case of federations, or government transfers decision-making powers to entities of the civil society. Regional or provincial governments, for example, become semi autonomous and administer forest resources according to their own priorities and within clear geographical boundaries under their control. Most political decentralization is associated with devolution" (Gregersen et al.).

Delegation, refers to:

- "The transfer of managerial responsibility for specified functions to other public organizations outside normal central government control, whether provincial or local government or parastatal agencies" (Ferguson and Chandrasekharan). "One form of administrative decentralization which transfers responsibilities and authority to semi-autonomous entities that respond to the central government but are not totally controlled by it. Public forestry corporations and in some cases implementation units of some forestry projects--often donor supported--are examples of this form of decentralization" (Gregersen et al.)

Besides deconcentration, devolution and delegation, there is another form called privatisation. Ferguson and Chandrasekharan include privatisation as a particular



form of devolution to private ownership that has become prominent in recent times (Ferguson and Chandrasekharan). However Ribot in his paper says that privatization is not a form of decentralization.

Besides the definitions above, there are some other terms related to decentralization defined by the authors. They are:

- "Democratic: substantively refers to the accountability of leaders to the people" (Ribot)
- "Accountability, defined as counter-power—that is, any power that balances or puts a check on the power of other power holders (Agrawal and Ribot 1999). Accountability is constituted by the set of mechanisms and sanctions that can be used to assure policy outcomes are as consistent with local needs, aspirations and the best public interest as policymakers can make them" (Ribot).

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