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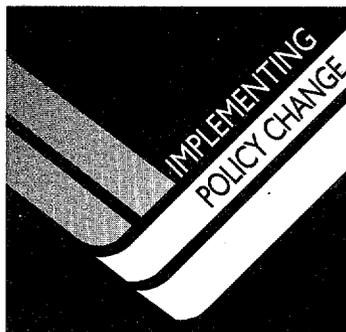
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DECENTRALIZATION AS A MEANS OF BUILDING DEMOCRACY: A SEMINAR TO STUDY EXPERIENCE AND PROSPECTS

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Synthesis Paper

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**Decentralization as a means of building democracy:
A seminar to study experience and prospects**

Synthesis paper

USAID's Democracy and Governance Center convened a seminar on July 30-31, 1996, to address questions relating to the role of decentralization in promoting democracy. The seminar was premised on the notion that exploring a variety of experiences in decentralization and local governance would yield substantive lessons on strengthening democracy. Ten outside specialists from around the world joined with officials from USAID and the World Bank for two days of presentations and discussions in Washington, DC. Approximately 25 people participated in the seminar, organized and facilitated by staff of the D/G Center's Implementing Policy Change Project, Phase 2 (IPC2).

The unifying thread throughout the seminar was a focus on incentives, both positive and negative, that either promote or impede the use of decentralization and local governance as means of building democracy and democratic governance. This paper synthesizes and summarizes the key points that emerged from the seminar's discussions relating to incentives. It concludes with a brief section on implications for change agents and donor agencies.

I. Seminar objectives

Decentralization has featured prominently in development strategies for many years. In its various forms-- deconcentration, delegation, devolution, deregulation and privatization-- decentralization has been pursued as a means of improving administrative efficiency and institutional performance in the public, private, and nongovernmental sectors; achieving increased rates of economic growth; increasing the sustainability of natural resources use; and accomplishing political goals, such as increased participation or regional equity. Although these various decentralization purposes have in some instances incorporated democratic elements or contributed to democratic outcomes, the promotion of democracy has not been their primary intent. The goal of the seminar, however, was precisely to reverse focus and pose the question in terms of: given an objective of promoting democracy and democratic governance, to what extent does/can decentralization contribute to its achievement?

With this goal in mind, the objectives of the seminar were to:

1. Identify a range of incentives for democratic decentralization: what have we learned and what do we need to examine more thoroughly?
2. Formulate some interim conclusions on the state of the art for democratic decentralization: what programmatic implications flow from these?

3. Initiate a dialogue among technical specialists and host country and USAID practitioners with a view to developing a shared understanding of the principles that should inform democratic decentralization strategies.

II. Framework for incentives for democratic decentralization

The presentations by the seminar panelists covered a wide range of topics, from broad overviews of incentives to specific country examples. Participant discussions were also diverse, reflecting both the complexity of the topic and breadth of experience and knowledge among those attending. As several participants noted, decentralization is neither a single model nor an all-or-nothing proposition; rather, it encompasses a gamut of solutions to center-local issues. Despite this diversity, however, an implicit framework underlay the seminar's deliberations on incentives for democratic decentralization. This framework incorporates a generalized social change model whose basic assumptions are: a) change occurs as a function of the presence or absence of sufficient provocation or inducement for people to modify the status quo, and b) the presence or absence of sufficient stimulus for change is influenced by factors both internal and external to the particular change situation. In the context of democratic decentralization the dynamics of the model are as follows:

- **Systemic trends** (global and/or local) impact upon -->
- **Enabling/impeding conditions**, which shape -->
- **Incentives**, positive/negative, which motivate new behaviors -->
- **Adoption of practices** (new democratic/decentralized structures, procedures, and processes) -->
- **Changes** in levels of democratization and democratic governance -->
- **Increased democracy.**

Within the context of this overarching framework, discussion concentrated upon the first three elements (trends, conditions, and incentives): a) specifying and differentiating among trends, conditions, and incentives; b) clarifying and debating the linkages and interactions among the components of the model; and c) addressing the benefits and limitations of democratic decentralization. Some discussion touched upon adoption of practices and changes, exploring how the change process can be effectively managed. The next section presents highlights of the seminar discussion.

III. Key points and lessons

A. Systemic trends with an impact on conditions for democratic decentralization

At the global level, much of the world has experienced political, economic and demographic shifts that have fueled the interest of central governments, local governments, citizens, and international donors in democratic decentralization. Foremost among these is the dramatic failure of centralized command and control economic systems, and the wave of political liberalization that has accompanied market reforms. Another trend is the globalization of the economy and increasing emphasis on regional economic integration, as evidenced by more and stronger supranational institutions and international agreements. Global economic integration, political liberalization, and supranational problem-solving pull regional and local authorities into the ambit of world affairs, while at the same time they weaken the relevance and power of the central nation-state. Increasing urbanization is another trend that gives impetus to decentralizing tendencies. Urban regions need ways of developing and governing themselves that allow for responsiveness and flexibility.

At the local level, the absence of an effective central government presence in developing countries has provided the space for local groups to pursue self-management, often based upon traditional institutional mechanisms, for example, village collectivities, moot courts, traditional chiefs, and so on. In some instances, however, weak central government has opened the door to local tyranny and the breakdown on law and order. Thus, while local action and traditional institutional mechanisms are not inevitably democratic in the broad sense, they do provide a ready repertoire of responsive and accountable local governance options that can be harnessed in the service of democratization.

B. Enabling/impeding conditions that facilitate democratic decentralization

This topic engendered a significant amount of discussion. A few key conditions are presented here. They are presented as enabling conditions; framed as the obverse, they would be impediments to democratic decentralization. These should not necessarily be taken as preconditions; as noted below, interventions can be designed to create or reinforce one or more of them as part of efforts to promote democratic decentralization. In this sense, then, they become means to achieve democratic decentralization objectives.

- National political will. This is an important enabling condition, since official endorsements of decentralization may not necessarily be followed through in practice. Democratic values and processes need to be priorities in their own right, because decentralization does not automatically imply democracy. Political will can emerge from a variety of sources, for example: visionary national (or local) leaders, popular demand, and/or central or local administrators. The stimulus is often the perception of some kind of performance gap, a sense that the status quo is not workable. Personnel in higher level legislative, technical, policing and judicial systems must be committed to the idea of subsidiarity, that is, devolution of authority and autonomy to the smallest local government unit capable of dealing with a problem.

- Facilitative institutional environment. This condition encompasses institutions in the broad sense of the term, meaning not simply individual organizations or agencies, but networks of organizations and social groupings, and the underlying societal rules and mechanisms that govern interactions among them. A positive institutional setting implies changes in the relationship between state and civil society, a reorientation away from dominant state intervention, an expanded role for the market and the private sector, as well as the active involvement of citizens in local and regional affairs. It should allow for and stimulate innovation in production of goods and services at local and regional levels. It should also promote emulation and replicability in other localities, leading to higher efficiency in allocation and production for the entire country. Creating a facilitative institutional environment for democratic decentralization is in essence a system-wide change effort.
- Active civil society institutions. If citizens join organized pressure groups of various kinds that demand change and are in touch with each other, they will begin to see the need for local participation in governance. The development of civil society institutions such as the media, nongovernmental organizations, etc., may thus act as a stimulus for the people to demand decentralization even under a centralized democratic regime.
- Political accountability. Devolution, although it shifts downward the locus at which authority is vested and power is exercised, will not strengthen the democratic character of a regime if it results in local level tyranny. Remedies to encourage accountability and discourage oppression can be introduced and range from some indigenous leadership selection mechanisms to enforceable constitutional guarantees to local level elections. Remedies must be diverse and in place if they are to dissuade potential tyrants.
- Local mechanisms to mobilize financial resources. This is a pivotal condition for the operation of decentralization incentives. Communities and local government need the authority to mobilize resources adequate to allow them to deal with problems. However, lower tier structures cannot be held democratically accountable unless they are able to make and pursue policies. The lack of taxable industrial, commercial and residential property bases and the inability to borrow money are critical impeding conditions for democratic decentralization.
- Diversity of population. The diversity of a country's population in terms of language, culture and related variables can stimulate and reinforce public demand for decentralization. Regional/local feelings of neglect and exploitation by those in power at the center can serve as conditions that lay the groundwork for decentralizing incentives to bear fruit.
- Education and expectations. The stage for democratic decentralization may be set by increased education, exposure to new ideas, and changing expectations about how governments and citizens should interact. For instance, as more and more people

achieve higher education levels and begin to find employment in the formal sector or as their incomes rise, their understanding of what goes on around them increases and their expectations about governance and how it should function tend to change. Cultural values and historical factors also can have an influence on expectations.

C. Incentives for democratic decentralization

In the context of the seminar's framework, incentives refer to those factors that actively motivate, induce, or encourage behaviors and actions in support of democratic decentralized practices. Democratic decentralization is a dynamic outcome, not an end state, which evolves over time and then must be maintained or safeguarded. To reflect this dynamism, incentives have been broadly grouped into three types: those that prompt recognition of decentralization issues by citizens or government, incentives that assist in managing a process of societal transition, and incentives to pursue and adopt tactics, collaborate, negotiate and find solutions.

1. *Incentives that prompt recognition of decentralization issues by citizens or government*

Incentives come into play when the recognition of a difficult problem is coupled with the recognition of an opportunity to address the problem. Citizen interest in decentralization is critical for its success. Since decentralization entails devolution of authority and responsibility to lower levels, citizens and local governments must be willing to exercise that responsibility. Incentives that prompt demand for decentralization by citizens include:

- Expectations for improved service delivery. If centrally provided services are inadequate, inappropriate, or unavailable, citizens may demand decentralization in response to their dissatisfaction. Some service producers may join consumers in calling for decentralization if they suffer from a lack of timely information, a lack of flexibility to adapt services to local conditions, monopoly conditions or principal-agent problems. While people are commonly less concerned about democracy than with solving problems that make their lives difficult, popular participation in decision-making encourages democracy.
- Prior experience with decentralization. Sometimes, due to resource constraints for example, central governments may decentralize if only temporarily. Although this decentralization is not typically motivated by the government's democratic objectives, citizens' experience with decentralization may encourage them to demand further decentralization or local decision making authority.

Central governments are motivated both by incentives from within the government and its leadership and pressure or inducements from outside. Internal incentives include:

- Resource constraints. In recent years, many governments have faced severe resource constraints for a variety of reasons. The expanded role of the state, subsidies and welfare programs, interest payments on debt and unproductive investments are some

of the underlying causes. The declining trend in foreign aid is an additional factor. Resource constraints have forced some governments to resort to decentralization as a means to get local governments to share certain functions and to generate their own resources. This helps the central government to reduce its fiscal burdens and to reallocate resources in preferred ways.

- Sharing responsibility. As solving public problems becomes more complex, decentralization enables central governments to share or transfer responsibility to the local level. An example is increasing urbanization that requires new methodologies to promote the objectives of sustainable cities -- clean environment, a strong economy, social equity and civic engagement -- for a growing number in the population.

Incentives that originate from outside central government include:

- Media coverage. Media coverage, both positive and negative, can be a powerful incentive for central governments by publicizing and thereby holding them accountable for their actions.
- International pressure. A factor that has encouraged some countries to decentralize is the influence of international donors and other governments with whom they have close relations. While external aid is a part of this influence, it is pertinent to point out that broader issues of international competition and the resulting need to improve internal efficiency can also create external pressure in favor of decentralization.

External pressure in this sense has contributed more to economic as opposed to political decentralization. In recent years, many governments have adopted market reforms which in turn have given a larger role to the private sector, public-private partnerships, and outright privatization. These measures have resulted in the transfer of some of the functions and activities of government to the private sector.

There are far fewer examples of successful political decentralization resulting from external pressure. Economic decentralization may, however, pave the way for the strengthening of democratic values. An enlarged role for the private sector encourages pluralism and civil society institutions and may thus prepare the ground for seeding and nurturing democratic practices and values.

Although local governments share with central governments some incentives to decentralize, such as pressure from community groups and NGOs or publicity, both adverse and positive, they also face some additional incentives. Like citizens, local governments must be willing to accept the increased responsibility implicit in decentralization.

- Independent decision making. The primary incentive for local officials is the degree to which they feel they are able to make decisions independently and to affect the local community without interference from central government. Sufficiently clear scope for autonomous local decision making acts as a significant incentive.

- Command of resources. Command of resources is also an incentive. Local officials are more likely to view their work as important the more resources they control. The public is more likely to become involved in decision making if real resources are to be allocated.

2. *Incentives that assist in managing a process of societal transition*

Democratic decentralization requires new behaviors by different parties in society: by central governments, local governments, and civil society. Some of the incentives that encourage this societal transition are common to two, or even all, of these groups. These include:

- Positive response to fear and despair. Recognition of a lack of capacity in government, and the resulting crisis that may ensue, does not necessarily result in decentralization, much less democratic decentralization. These fears, distress, and despair often result in tighter control. For a transition to decentralization, proponents of change must respond effectively to these fears.
- Demonstrated trust. For the implementation of decentralization, what is needed is a commitment sufficient to proceed to the next successive step. This is built on trust. Leaders need to understand how to create trust, by not pushing for particular actions or solutions.
- Redefined roles and responsibilities. Decentralization is about defining the roles of subnational entities in relation to each other and to national entities, and developing competencies to perform these changes. Redefining national, regional and sub-regional roles, and therefore the roles of government, civil society and private enterprise, are all necessary elements in a democratic system. This redefinition and consequent realignment process is a complex one, and can become the focus of a change effort in itself; requiring a process of commitment-building, identification of changes, undertaking those changes, monitoring, documentation, and follow-up. An important issue is assuring access to participate in the process; an undesirable situation is where a strong local group acts as a gatekeeper to exclude others.
- Better and more information. Decentralization results in better information flows among the central government, local governments and civil society. Increased information flows to the central government can be used for more responsive, democratic government. Reverse information flows may improve service delivery and transparency.

Local governments play a key role in accepting and fulfilling the increased responsibility that comes with a societal transition to decentralization. As such, they enjoy additional incentives.

- Capacity-building opportunities. In a democracy, reform can be adopted, including legislation, but be aborted due to lack of capacity at the local level. To avoid frustration of failure to respond to demand for decentralization, local governments need opportunities to develop capacity to meet demand. Such opportunities to strengthen capacity can motivate local governments to support and sustain decentralization. A debate exists regarding the appropriate sequence here: should capacity-building proceed in advance of the delegation of responsibility, or will that delegation stimulate the development of capacity?
- Accepting accountability. To avoid local level tyranny, responsibility, resources and capacity must be accompanied by local accountability. Decentralized institutions must have the powers and resources to accept accountability for what they are supposed to deliver.

Decentralization, especially that which results in democratic benefits, must be supported and demanded by civil society to be sustained. Several incentives can, over time, encourage civil society to express demand for decentralization.

- Understanding democratic values. Democratic decentralization leads to a re-acculturation or reaffirmation of democratic values. This is a learning process in which these values and the roles that they imply become understood and supported by civil society.
- Demonstrable democratic benefits. Democracy, as promoted by decentralization, will best take root if democratic traditions, values and practices are seen to make a difference in people's daily lives.

3. *Incentives to pursue and adopt tactics, collaborate, negotiate and find solutions*

The above sections outline broad incentives that encourage and sustain a societal transition to democratic decentralization. The presentations and discussions also identified a number of more operational incentives that directly motivate individuals to take necessary actions. These have been grouped into five categories: electoral, legislative, performance, fiscal and participatory/associational. Electoral incentives include:

- Electoral systems. Electoral systems represent the ultimate democratic incentives holding public officials to account, but depend on an interested and informed electorate. The capability of citizens to change government leadership at the local level when dissatisfied with performance is the crux of democratic decentralization.
- Checks and balances. In the local government case, checks and balances are typically achieved by a local chief executive and a separately elected legislative council, which act as an effective incentive for democratic decisions. Often, the national constitution serves as the overarching framework here.
- Recall. Citizens have the power to remove abusive or erring elective local officials

- NGO sectoral representatives. NGOs have the right to have their sectoral representatives elected to the various local legislative bodies.

Legislative incentives include:

- Initiative. Citizens enjoy the power to enact, amend or repeal local legislation that used to be the exclusive prerogative of the elected members of local government councils.
- Referendum. Citizens have the power to approve or reject local legislation or projects through a referendum.

A performance incentive is:

- Performance measurement systems. These can act as an incentive in the form of a performance contract between citizens and local officials. Operational statements of the quantity and quality of results expected of local government are the first step in establishing a performance measurement system. By publicizing local government performance, for example through monthly public reports, local officials can be held to account more easily and have incentives for regular and open dialogue with citizens. Such systems do not necessarily have to emphasize failure to perform; recognition and reward can also be incorporated. An additional feature of performance measurement systems is a reduction in the scope for corruption as a function of the freer exchange of information between citizens and local officials.

Fiscal incentives include:

- Fiscal authority. Local officials are motivated by increased authority to tax and raise revenue locally, the power to prepare their own budgets and the authority to obtain credit financing from local and foreign sources.
- Local revenues. Local officials enjoy higher revenues from local taxes and a greater share of national government taxes and other sources of national government revenues.

Participatory and associational incentives include:

- Consultation. Opportunities for citizens and NGOs to be consulted on projects or programs that may be instituted within their districts, which also recognizes them as active partners in local development.
- Public-private collaboration. Greater economic decentralization and competitiveness may lead local governments to seek private sector participation and resources. This can lead to new institutional arrangements and greater participation.

- Pooling resources. By working through municipal associations, municipalities can jointly overcome common problems by coordinating local activities and taking advantage of economies of scale for pooling resources.
- Benefits of horizontal association. Associations among municipalities or other local entities may result in a number of incentives: new inter-institutional arrangements, opportunities to capitalize on participatory traditions and previous experience, better bargaining power with central and regional governments, expanded production and increased welfare by sharing responsibility, and greater regional competitiveness.

IV. Conclusions and implications for change agents and donors

A. Selected conclusions

Among the conclusions of the seminar participants were the following:

- Decentralization has been shown to have considerable promise in enhancing government responsiveness and democratization. This promise is strengthened when accompanied by local elections, increased transparency, greater participation and associational activity both during and between local elections, and the creation of new local elective political positions.
- Decentralization has moderate promise in promoting cooperation between NGOs and the government and reducing corruption through greater transparency.
- Decentralization may help central governments to reduce their fiscal burdens and reallocate resources more effectively. Although the basic urge to decentralize in this case cannot be attributed to the democratic values of the political leadership at the central level, this reform may well sow the seeds of democratic aspirations at the local level and eventually strengthen democratic values and practices in the country.
- Decentralization, however, does not automatically contribute to democratization in the absence of enabling conditions and supportive incentives. For example, while decentralization may result in enhanced service delivery, it does not necessarily lead to expanded citizen participation or increased accountability.

B. Implications and recommendations

Change agents and donors face a range of options to promote democratic decentralization. As the framework summarized above suggests, these options include:

- Creating or reinforcing enabling conditions, and/or reducing or eliminating impeding conditions:

- Strengthening positive incentives and diminishing or abolishing negative ones; and/or

Promoting the adoption of new practices (capacity-building).

Foreign assistance can be most effective at the national level by focusing on enabling conditions and related incentives that foster a supportive environment for democratic decentralization. For example, donors can support the media and encourage intelligent reporting. They can fund civic journalism that identifies, analyzes and publicizes success stories. Donors should encourage governments to disseminate information and engage in dialogue, and civil society to use the information to hold their elected officials accountable.

At the local level, experience suggests that change interventions to build capacity to demand and engage in good governance practices is useful and effective. If host country change agents and/or donors seek to promote democracy at the local level, they can best take advantage of the process of devolution by working to strengthen forces that promote participation, local level government accountability, and transparency in local government operations. Since local governments often do not have the capacity or resources to successfully undertake service delivery, decentralization should be coupled with deliberate efforts to equip and prepare local governments to perform their new functions effectively.

Many host countries and donors are already undertaking projects and programs that have potential beneficial impacts on the promotion of democratic decentralization and governance. Often, however, they tend to focus either on the national or the local level, or to concentrate on a particular sector. The conclusions of the seminar point to the complex and interconnected nature of democratic decentralization. The implication is that efforts to promote democracy through decentralization will increase their chances of success to the extent that they are able to address the linkages among conditions, incentives, and the adoption of new practices. At a minimum host country and/or donor interventions need to be designed and implemented with a keen awareness of those interconnections, even if they are not the direct target of external assistance efforts.

These linkages can sometimes lead to unintended consequences of donor assistance interventions. For example, many projects seek to strengthen local interest groups and associations. However, if local governance arrangements allow privileged access and influence to the interest groups with strengthened capacity, then decentralization could undermine, rather than advance, democracy. If they operate, however, in a competitive pluralist environment, engaging with elected structures to add texture and diversity to public opinion and debate, they could be powerful forces for vibrant local democracy.

Change agents and donors have to be opportunistic in the choice of the decentralization interventions they pursue in a country. Much will depend on the type of regime, the conditions in place, and the incentives at work. Taking advantage of the perception of performance gaps on the part of host country decision-makers can often help to steer donors to choices with the highest potential impact. In the absence of a perceived need, donors can seek to engender political commitment to decentralization. If higher

authorities fear a loss of control, they will pursue decentralization with great reluctance. Confidence is best built at the different levels of government through the formulation of clear and targeted policies and strategies, designed in partnership with key stakeholders. This is a strategy where sector-specific decentralization can be effective.

Finally, another fruitful area for donor assistance is in managing the change process of moving toward democratic decentralization and governance. Experience has shown that addressing enabling conditions, dealing with incentives, and adopting new practices do not depend solely on appropriate technical solutions to the questions and issues they raise. Achieving democratic decentralization and governance objectives is also critically dependent upon putting in place a process that builds ownership for change, deals with trust and commitment issues, creates a set of agreed-upon procedures for guiding the transition, develops a learning process that helps those involved monitor progress and make modifications as needed, and offers fora for stakeholder interchange regarding results and outcomes.

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