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Making environmental management more responsive to local needs: Decentralisation and evidence-based policy in Ghana

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This paper reports on research in Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region concerning the implications of democratic decentralisation on management of the natural environment, particularly forest resources. It argues that, despite nominal decentralisation, environmental policy remains largely unresponsive to rural interests. The paper considers the types of interventions which could enhance the flow of information between rural dwellers and policy makers, so as to strengthen local-level influence.

Policy Conclusions

- Environmental policy discourse is often marked by crisis narratives that reflect elite perceptions and justify elite claims. Narratives of external origin may be manipulated by local groups to support partisan interests, thus developing an appearance of local ownership.
- Central to these crisis narratives is a simplified image of the 'traditional farming system'. In the Ghana case, the wide variety of farming systems and their constant history of adaptation to local circumstances draw this notion seriously into question as an analytical tool.
- The tendency to view environmental change in terms of overall trends can be misleading in that it predisposes the analysis towards negative anthropogenic explanations and obscures contrary tendencies. In relation to policy-making, the areas of positive environmental change may be just as important as the negative.
- One of the benefits of democratic decentralisation lies in the provision of a forum for conflict resolution, but this needs to be actively supported at an appropriate level. In the present instance, the critical arena is the lowest level at which resources are managed. Where the higher levels of local government have the legislative powers, strong downward accountability is essential for decentralisation to function effectively.
- A key question is the extent of local authority over natural resources. Where resources are alienated wholly or partly from local control (as is often the case in Ghana), then resource conflicts will tend to be resolved outside of the structures of democratic authority. Nevertheless, there are steps that can be taken to enhance the quality of information for local decision-making.

Decentralisation and the environment

Democratic decentralisation is much in vogue in development policy circles. Among its claimed benefits are rural poverty reduction and improved management of the natural environment. The argument is that if decision making can be brought closer to the primary users, then resources will

be more efficiently, equitably and sustainably managed, in line with their long-term interests.

The effectiveness of environmental management under decentralisation will depend on whether the environmental agendas that are promoted at the local level are ones that resource users are able to influence. One obstacle to this is the tendency in much of the developing world for environmental narratives to treat the existing rural economy as a problem to be overcome, rather than an asset on which to build (Leach and Mearns, 1996, after Roe, 1991). As Leach and Mearns show, these environmental narratives function to shift claims of 'ownership' of environmental problems away from the small farmers towards elites. A move towards 'environmental democracy' – environmental management that is both sustainable and just – would require that the dominant narratives be challenged in a way that asserts the ownership of the resource users (cf. Mason, 1999). This would create the conditions to address real livelihood concerns.

Evidence from Ghana

These considerations are particularly pertinent to the case of Ghana, where a policy of local government reform has been pursued since 1987 (see Ayee, 1996). The approach to decentralisation is still evolving, but the model is intended to give control over district services to democratically constituted local authorities with some revenue-generating powers. However, most departments have resisted decentralisation (agriculture is an exception); central government has so far hesitated to impose the new model; the Local Government Civil Service Bill is still to be ratified.

With funding from DFID's Natural Resource Systems Programme, collaborative research between the University of Ghana and the ODI has been underway since 2001 on the environmental implications of democratic decentralisation in the Brong Ahafo Region. Research to date has included historical and contemporary reviews and field studies of farming systems at the forest/savanna interface; studies of the recruitment and functioning of selected District Assemblies; and an assessment of the patterns and quantum of changes in the relative cover of agricultural lands and woodlands, using remote sensing techniques (Amanor *et al*, 2002; Pabi &



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University of Ghana

Morgan, 2002). The foci of study are environmental conflicts relating to issues such as fire control and charcoal and fuelwood production – conflicts which should be amenable to local resolution and hence, prime subjects for decentralised management.

The Brong Ahafo Region

The transitional zone in Ghana's Brong Ahafo Region is an interesting case study of management of the natural environment under decentralisation. The dominant characteristics of the Brong-Ahafo's natural and social environment can be summarised as follows:

Considerable heterogeneity in farming systems

These are associated with biotic and climatic variations in this transitional zone, but other factors (including major external interventions which have transformed the landscape, such as state farms) must also be taken into account. In some areas, land is in short supply so that extensive shifting cultivation is not feasible; elsewhere, land is in surplus and labour is a much greater constraint on agricultural production; deforestation is an issue in some areas, not in others; markets exert variable influences; some farmers use inputs for all or some of their crops, others do not; the costs of land conversion vary according to the landscape and the history of previous investments in it, such as whether the terrain was previously stumped for mechanised cultivation.

High levels of social heterogeneity

Throughout Ghana, there are complex labour markets of long standing, involving migrants working under a variety of contracts, on a daily, seasonal or annual basis; various tenurial relationships are found, ranging from share-cropping to temporary or permanent land tenancy and purchase arrangements. There are important variations in the gender relations of production. 'Migrants' are an almost universal component of the village population throughout Ghana's southern forest and transitional zones.

Tenurial rules

These are generally unfavourable to the primary producers. Despite a widespread presumption that land and tree tenure in Ghana are under 'community ownership', a substantial part of the natural resource base is actually alienated from those in direct contact with the resource. The ultimate stewardship of key revenue resources, such as timber, is invested in the chieftaincies and Ghana Forest Service, not in the farm owner or resource user.

How the District Assemblies have functioned on the environment

The structure of decentralised government in Ghana is three-tier, with the District Assembly (DA) being the primary legislative forum, above intermediate Area Councils (ACs) and village-level Unit Committees (UCs). Within the DA, the main environmental body is the District Environmental Management Sub-Committee (DEMC). To date, the performance of the DAs on the environmental front has been weak. This is partly a reflection of the chronic under-resourcing of the whole system, and its resulting incapacity. This limits the effectiveness of the institutions of local government on all matters, including the environment.

The DAs have the ultimate responsibility for developing plans for the environment. However, other bodies have overlapping authority. Aside from the chiefs, the most important of these is the Ghana Forest Service. This is a semi-

autonomous national service with no statutory responsibilities towards the citizenry of the districts; like the chiefs, it acts independently of the democratic local authorities in both legislative and operational terms. Thus the environmental committee cannot fully reflect the needs, aspirations and problems of the citizens on forest-related matters.

- In practice, the average citizen has only limited representation in district institutions through their Assembly member and Unit Committee. Farmers are not well represented in these organisations, which are often dominated by the educated village elites.
- The debate on the environment in the decentralised authorities is preoccupied with narratives of external origin, which have more to do with conflicts between the Ghanaian elite and the farmer population, and with the interest of the former in claiming rights over resources through processes of cultural modernisation, than with recognising the interests of the small-scale primary producers. Assembly members tend to identify themselves with ideologies that replace the cultural frameworks of farming people with a new cosmopolitanism. They are thus more receptive to promoting change models emanating from the state than representing the concerns of their rural constituents.

Modernisation theory lives on?

The narratives which dominate environmental discourse are marked by a striking degree of simplicity and uniformity. Their common theme is the culpability of smallholder agriculture. They speak of:

- A general and consistent trend towards loss of forest cover and woody biomass, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in all parts of the region.
- This is held to be due to a system of 'traditional agriculture' marked by destructiveness of the natural environment and non-sustainability, particularly as regards swidden practices ('slash and burn').
- Widespread and recurrent bush fires are held to be one of the most negative effects of traditional agriculture. They are regarded as compelling evidence of the need for major changes in small farmer agricultural and household practices.
- The narratives warn of an impending crisis in agriculture which is allegedly being caused by rampant population growth, resulting in environmental problems (shortening fallows, land degradation and food security decline), all of which imply the need for a rapid transformation in traditional agriculture through intensification of land use.

Such perceptions about the outmodedness of small farmer practices accord well with recent international discourse about environmental decline in Africa. But they are open to question in a number of fundamental respects. For example:

- The huge variability in farm practices makes the concept of a 'traditional farming system' a very doubtful analytical tool to understand environmental change in the Brong Ahafo.
- Assumptions about the anthropogenic origins of bushfires are at odds with the long history of fire in transitional environments, suggesting that the occurrence of fire may be the independent variable, and human causality only one influence among many upon its incidence.
- The focus on the overall loss of forest biomass, while not necessarily 'wrong' as such, obscures some important variations in experience, both positive and negative. The evidence of areas where the landscape has been enriched

in recent years may be as important, from the perspective of policy-making, as those where it has been degraded.

Interestingly, such narratives make very little mention of the often-catastrophic effects of previous interventions to transform the rural economy of a modernising kind, such as the state and large-scale mechanised farms. Nor do they question currently popular initiatives such as teak plantations, which have negative effects on biodiversity and soil quality, and produce an oily leaf litter that acts as a fire accelerant.

It is pertinent to ask why, when these narratives of cultural modernisation are so dismissive of local capacities, they are not rejected outright by the rural dwellers. Why has local democracy led to a rejuvenation of such crisis narratives – rather than their repudiation in favour of fresh explanations that seek to place small farmer interests more firmly at the centre of the environmental debate?

A number of overlapping influences comes into play here:

- The mere fact of local democracy is not necessarily a strong indicator of a functioning local agenda. When assembly members operate at DA level on behalf of their settlement members, they compete for scarce resources. In this field of political discourse, ‘the environment’ becomes coterminous with sanitation facilities and projects with tangible material products, such as tree planting schemes. There is little room or inclination for a discussion of the appropriateness of central government policy. Similarly, since one of the major functions of the UCs is in organising communal labour for rural development, they tend to be more amenable to promoting top-down directives than citizen democracy and ‘citizen science’.
- There is a lack of strong representative farmer organisations within the districts. Existing farmer organisations tend to be state creations, with representatives picked by the state to convey government policy to farmers, or to represent elites as allies of the government. The great heterogeneity of the rural sector has also tended to hinder the emergence of farmer solidarity.

- Given their low levels of control over the resources they use, farmers find it difficult to express their interests within the institutional framework of local government and they thus turn elsewhere. They are tempted to engage in processes in which policy issues become negotiated through direct conflict and conflict resolution, or in which the legal institutional framework of local government is deliberately violated. Paradoxically, the social heterogeneity of the local population tends to sustain and dynamise the modernising narratives on behalf of factional interests, in support of their own causes and against competing claims (Box 1).

What can be done to make environmental management more responsive to local interests?

In summary, local government reform in the Brong-Ahafo is not responding well to the needs of the farming population. Despite the advent of democratic decentralisation, real ‘environmental democracy’ is still a distant prospect. New approaches are required to improve decision-making in natural resource management at all levels, from local producers up to national administrators. Institutional innovations are required which:

- create strong local platforms for negotiation by the users of the key resources;
- promote feedback on the environment and production systems from various localities;
- lead to the creation of information systems the public and policy makers can use to learn about the conditions which effect the farmers’ daily lives.

These information systems should facilitate debate at the various policy levels to foster more informed and appropriate policy options.

Engaging with Decentralisation

The picture as regards decentralisation is not entirely negative,

Box 1: Charcoal as a case study of multiple land use conflicts

Charcoal production has become an important policy issue in the Brong Ahafo. Some district administrations are attempting to ban charcoal production while others are seeking to regulate it. Conflicts over charcoal production are common between different interest groups. These groups included migrant Sisala charcoal burners, indigenous youth with interests in charcoal burning, and chiefs and elders attempting to control the charcoal trade. Conflicts arise between charcoal burners and farmers about rights over trees, and between chiefs and DAs/UCs over rights to regulate charcoal. Chiefs have the right to issue exploitation rights or permits to diverse persons for non-timber products. They may contract out rights over trees for charcoal burning to migrant producers, on farms and fallow lands. The resident cultivators may or may not be consulted first, but they have no right of refusal anyway.

One village in the more northerly part of the zone illustrates the types of conflicts which arise, and the ways in which they are played out. In this village, a process of local take-over of charcoal burning has occurred over the last two years and can be documented. In the *first stage* the village chief granted permission for migrant charcoal burners to operate in fallow lands in return for a fee. In the *second stage* the District Assembly, responding to the need to develop environmental management, began to deliberate on regulating and even banning charcoal production in the district believing that it was encouraging “desertification”. (At the same time, local youth were studying charcoal burning techniques and beginning to engage in its production since it was recognised to be a lucrative off-farm income.) In the *third stage* local farmers and youth demanded that the chief and unit committee regulate charcoal production citing its alleged environmental destructiveness. They called for charcoal production to be limited to trees cut by farmers in the process of farm clearance, with a total ban on the cutting of trees in fallow land. The local youth demanded that their parents release charcoal resources to them rather than the migrant charcoal burners. Lacking easy access to trees on-farm, the frustrated Sisalas were forced to move to other areas. However, in the process, the chief lost access to the revenues he gained from granting rights to migrant charcoal burners (levies could not be levied on local youth since, as citizens, they could claim rights of personal use to farmland and the natural resources on them). The chiefs and elders now allege that the youth are cutting charcoal from green wood in the bush and vow to make sure that the youth are brought back into line.

What is striking in such cases is the way in which farmers gain rights not by challenging injustices in natural resource tenure but by politicising vague narratives about environmental crisis.

Box 2: Land cover change in the northern forest transition

Remote sensing and GIS techniques ('LandSat Thematic Mapper' satellite imagery and aerial photographic data), complemented by surveys of local perceptions of environmental change, were employed to investigate changes in the relative covers of agricultural lands and woodlands in selected locations across the Brong Ahafo Region, in three historical periods, 1971/2; 1984 and 2000/1 (Pabi & Morgan, 2002).

Some interesting and unexpected results were obtained. Some areas have seen an increased coverage of biomass, particularly in the more northerly zones. While tree girth has tended to diminish in these areas, the number of trees and the overall volume of biomass have often increased. In general, the savanna has proven the more resilient environment, while the semi-deciduous forest is prone to rapid conversion to grasslands of low fertility and diminished biodiversity. Thus, the notion that environmental change in the transitional zone inevitably means a one-way transition from forest to savanna is an over-simplification, likewise the view of the savanna as a purely 'derived' environment.

Comparisons of vegetative cover in two periods (1984 and 2001) showed a number of common features, including great pressure on the forest reserves, almost all of which have been heavily encroached. However, the process of change was by no means unilinear. Indeed, in one case, satellite imagery for the two periods presented mirror images – areas which had been heavily forested in the past were now converted to fallows and low bush, while the former fallows and bush were now reconstituted as woodland. Even where change was less pronounced, a general if fairly low-level build-up of natural vegetation could often still be detected, particularly in the northern transition zone (where land was in significant surplus).

There are plans to make the processed images available to elective bodies, particularly the UCs and ACs.

however. It offers some hope for future democratic reform. On the positive side, the legal framework for decentralisation provides ample scope for:

- Accountability
- Civil society participation in development planning
- Communities to develop their own development plans.

It requires district departments to collaborate in developing district sector plans that are ratified by an Assembly with a majority of members. It requires UCs and ACs with an elected majority to initiate development plans that have been discussed with the communities. Strengthening these linkages has the potential to build upon civil society participation and make DAs more accountable to a rural electorate.

The premise for a better policy process is thus not increased public awareness, in the pejorative sense (as is the presumption of conventional 'environmental education'), but the setting up new information systems which are:

- Socially and occupationally inclusive
- Involve a consultative process with a wide range of interest groups within the rural areas
- Bind policy-makers to downward accountability.

These information systems need to collect empirical data on the different interest and livelihood groups and their natural resource base, and the economic potential of the various localities. They also need to reflect the perceptions and interests of the various groups within the localities. Work undertaken by Pabi and Morgan (2002) at the University of Ghana Remote Sensing Laboratory has already offered some interesting findings that may help to feed this debate and re-orient decision-making to local level interests (Box 2).

In its next phase, the NRSP research project reported here will be seeking to advance the case for an improved process of environmental management, where appropriate information reaches the decision makers (including the primary producers and their representatives) in ways which allows it to function as evidence for policy.

The institutional mechanism for the validation of policy prescriptions must ultimately be the democratic process. Whatever its limitations, the process of decentralisation in Ghana offers the only avenue through which rural dwellers

come into contact with development administration and can have any say in development planning.

It is equally the only forum with the authority to arbitrate between competing interests in a manner which accords legitimacy. Thus, the ultimate aim of the research is to strengthen elective local government, to allow it to achieve its mandate of environmental democracy.

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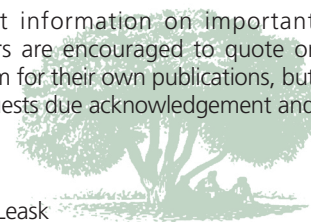
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