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Decentralisation and poverty-alleviation in developing countries: a comparative analysis *or*, is West Bengal unique?

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Summary

Advocates of decentralisation in developing countries argue that bringing government closer to the people will make it more responsive and hence more likely to develop policies and outputs which meet the needs of ordinary citizens – the majority of whom are ‘the poor’. The evidence for this proposition is systematically compared across a selection of African, Asian and Latin American countries. It is concluded that responsiveness to the poor is quite a rare outcome, determined mainly by the politics of local-central relations. Positive outcomes are mainly associated with strong commitment by a national government or party to promoting the interests of the poor at local level; the paradigm case is the Indian state of West Bengal.

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1 Introduction

The degree and type of decentralisation found in a political system is one of the structural variables relevant to the question of what kinds of regimes are likely to be most pro-poor in their policies and policy-outputs. But is decentralisation simply a dependent aspect of regime-type, or can its performance in relation to poverty-alleviation be judged and compared independently? Much of the literature on decentralisation tends to assume that decentralisation of government has generic benefits (as well as problems) which are independent of their regime context. The commonest argument is that, because decentralisation by definition involves bringing government closer to the governed in both the spatial and institutional senses, government will be more knowledgeable about and hence more responsive to the needs of the people.¹ It is the more recent tendency to conflate decentralisation with democratisation and enhancement of participation at the ‘community’ level, however, which underlies the current belief amongst advocates of decentralisation that it will lead to greater responsiveness to the needs of the ‘poor’. Insofar as the majority of the population in developing countries are both poor and excluded from national elite or ‘high’ politics, then any scheme which appears to offer greater political participation to ordinary citizens at the grass-roots seems likely to increase their ‘voice’ and hence (it is hoped) the relevance and effectiveness of government’s developmental outputs.

In this paper we shall therefore address two linked questions: whether decentralised forms of government in general are more responsive to the needs of the poor, and whether there is any systematic relationship between variations in responsiveness and the political and regime context of decentralised systems. We shall focus primarily on political and administrative decentralisation, that is, the allocation of power amongst territorially defined and nested hierarchies. The majority of cases examined will be either devolved local governments with or without federal systems or mixed forms of devolution with deconcentrated administrations; pure deconcentrated administrations whether general or sectoral, are of less interest unless (as is increasingly routine) they incorporate at least some participatory elements (or aspirations).

2 The politics of decentralisation: an analytical framework

A survey of developing countries across all continents shows that since the mid-1980s decentralisation reforms have been introduced in states ruled by virtually all varieties of regime, from military dictatorships, authoritarian presidencies and monarchies through single party or dominant party regimes to multi-party competitive democracies. It is also apparent that different forms of decentralisation appear across most regime types: elected, democratic local governments have been introduced by military regimes – mostly non-partisan but even in one case (Bangladesh under Ershad) with party competition –

¹ An assumption questioned by few – except see (Peterson 1994; Tendler 1997)

whilst technocratic, administrative deconcentration is to be found in a formally multi-party system such as Kenya, and parties are banned in Ghana's District Assembly elections, a multi-party regime where the opposition gained 44 per cent of the vote in the 1996 elections. It can therefore be stated with some confidence that there is no evidence of a connection between regime type and either the presence of decentralised government itself or the broad type of decentralisation system, at least as defined in formal terms.

It is also clear, however, that different governments do have different political purposes and motives for introducing decentralisation reforms and that these purposes are embodied in the details of the structure and form of the decentralisation scheme or, more subtly, are revealed only in the way that the system functions after it is introduced. (The most revealing outcome often being a mode of implementation which virtually guarantees the 'failure' of the reform!) In fact, political variables determine the outcomes of decentralisation, not because of variations in formal structure or broad regime context, or technical failures of implementation, but because decentralisation is essentially about the distribution of power and resources, both amongst different levels and territorial areas of the state, and amongst different interests in their relationship to ruling elites. The politics of central-local relations explains what interests might gain or lose from a particular set of institutional opportunities, policy initiatives and resource allocations and relates these factors to the political purposes of the decentralisation reform. As Boone has noted in her recent analysis of state-building in West Africa, decentralisation schemes cannot be treated as technically neutral devices which can be 'implemented' without constraint, as if there were no pre-existing social context: 'Governments may have important stakes in established powerbrokers and in established, local-level social and political hierarchies that can extend beyond the reach of the state' (Boone 1998: 25). Apparently similar decentralisation reforms could have diametrically opposed purposes according to whether they aim to reinforce vested interests in existing patterns of patronage and central-local linkage, or involve challenges to local elites from groups using decentralised institutions to 'draw down' central resources to bolster local power struggles.

Our comparative political analysis of the performance of decentralisation therefore focuses on five main variables which seem most likely to determine differences in outcome, both amongst countries and amongst regions or localities within countries.

First, is the variation in relations between central and local governments which derives principally from the character and power bases of the ruling elite and their relationships with local elites. What kinds of alliances does the ruling elite have, or seek to build, with local or sub-national elites? Is the ruling elite facing potential challenges which it must deal with either through attack, circumvention or co-optation? Is decentralisation a help or a hindrance if they have an ideological or transformatory programme to implement? Such relationships will determine the extent to which central government is likely both to support decentralisation with adequate resources and to monitor the effectiveness of their use. Four broad scenarios are likely:

1. In the first scenario, the ruling elite or central authority is seeking to build its power bases through alliances with established local or regional elites who are both congenial to its interests and have some degree of autonomy. In such a situation, decentralisation is likely to involve bargaining and cooptation, and devolution of power and allocation of resources, either through fiscal decentralisation or direct central government funding. Such bargains are likely to reinforce conservative forces and – in line with Smith’s pessimistic view that decentralisation is an inherently conservative strategy (Smith 1985: 193) – are unlikely to result in pro-poor outcomes.
2. The second scenario arises when the central ruling elite challenges or tries to circumvent locally powerful groups. The motives can range from party and ideological rivalry, class and ethnic conflict through to the deep distrust often found in federal systems between institutional elites at different levels of government. The desire to challenge entrenched regional and provincial powerholders can follow a popular revolution (as in post-Marcos Philippines) or the victory of reforming social democratic or communist parties, as in a few exceptional Brazilian states² or the Indian states of West Bengal and Kerala. The decentralisation strategy opted for often involves centrally (or federal state) funded development, anti-poverty or agrarian reform programmes which have to be implemented by ‘decentralised’ bodies but in fact involve tightly controlled, deconcentrated central agencies and/or party structures for ensuring their implementation and preventing local elite capture.
3. Particular configurations of ethnic and regional pluralism produce a third kind of decentralisation scenario. If a regime is nervous about providing an institutional base for sub-national, regional or ethnic political rivals, or even potential separatists (e.g. if the regime depends upon maintaining a fragile coalition of ethnic interests, or is based upon a single dominant but not demographically majoritarian group), then it will often adopt a decentralisation scheme which deliberately fragments potential local power bases into smaller, weaker, non-politically significant units. This is often combined with central funding and control mechanisms which permit spatial redistribution and/or centrally-focussed patronage linkages. The actions of the Nigerian military regime in using local governments to undermine state-based ethnic challenges and to transfer resources from the oil-producing to the non-oil producing areas, the extreme weakness and fragmentation of the *commune*-based system in Cote d’Ivoire and the delimitation of local government areas in Uganda which divide the main ethnic power bases, are classic examples.³
4. The fourth scenario is associated with consolidation or renewal of an already powerful ruling elite in a society where local elites do not have significant autonomous power. Here, decentralisation, usually predominantly of the deconcentration type, is used to articulate the power and effectiveness of the

² E.g. Ceara, Minas Gerais (Tendler 1997: 145; World Bank 1997: 123); note too the role of the Brazilian Workers’ Party (PT) in the major cities which it took control of after 1988 (Fox 1994: 111)

³ cf. Barkan and Chege’s analysis of the Kenyan situation, in which they propose an hypothesis that ‘the probability that decentralisation will serve the political interests of the regime varies inversely with the power and resources of the ethno-regional base on which the regime rests’ (Barkan and Chege 1989: 21).

regime down to the local level. If done rationally, it can produce more effective development administration and spatial redistribution (e.g. according to many observers, Indonesia). At its worst, it consolidates a system of corrupt patronage-based linkages (e.g. Bangladesh in the late 1980s/early 90s).

This simple typology of local-central relations suggests that in situations where there is greater local autonomy, there is greater likelihood of conservative ‘elite capture’ of the decentralised institutions. It may be hypothesized that pro-poor outcomes are more likely in situations where continuing central intervention and external alliances for supporting the mobilisation of the disadvantaged are linked to conflict between central and local forces.

Second, the configuration of local (usually agrarian) economic, social and political structures will have an impact on the likelihood of ‘elite capture’ of the decentralised system, and will also independently influence the character of the local-central relations described in our first variable. This is particularly important in understanding regional variations in the outcomes of decentralisation within a country. It has long been argued that decentralisation, particularly devolution to elected representative councils at even the lowest level (village scale) tends to empower local elites insofar as they are best placed (and most likely) to capture such institutions (Smith 1985: 193). Leonard and Marshall, however, suggest a more differentiated model, based on an analysis of the extent to which there is an antagonistic relationship between local power holders and dominated groups (Leonard and Marshall 1982). Decentralisation strategies according to them, will differ according to the type of local class relationships, with external support most needed where relations are antagonistic or where there are strong ‘vertical’ (ethnic/religious) divides.)

The ‘elite capture’ problem suggests that central intervention is nearly always needed to ensure progressive or pro-poor outcomes. Few case-studies of decentralisation and local politics can now avoid an analysis of the relation between local social structure and which particular interests are likely to benefit from decentralisation. Echeverri-Gent’s model of the ‘paradox of participation’ summarises the generally recognised problem, which is that the poor and disadvantaged are normally incapable of using the opportunities for enhanced participation provided by democratic decentralisation (Echeverri-Gent 1992a). But there are not many attempts at comparative models of the relationship, those which do tending to approach the subject more from the perspective of state-society relations and the character of post-colonial states. (Heller 1995) (Crook & Manor 1998) (Boone 1998).

Third, is the variation in the extent to which the increased participation promised by decentralisation (particularly democratic decentralisation) actually leads to more responsive outcomes. This is most likely to be determined by a combination of the local political factors outlined above and the effectiveness of institutional and public accountability mechanisms (e.g. well-institutionalised and legally regulated bureaucracies, fair elections). Enhanced participation alone is not sufficient, without institutional mediation.

Fourth, the system of allocating of resources, both administrative and financial, will inevitably have a crucial impact on outcomes. This is not simply a question of ‘adequacy’ of funding, which is little more than a tautology if used to explain the success or failure of a decentralisation reform. Whilst in most LDCs locally raised revenues are almost by definition inadequate, this does not mean that success is guaranteed by generous allocations of central grants. More important is likely to be the stability, security and degree of targeting of funding, from whatever source, together with effective mechanisms for its management, monitoring and control.

Fifth, is a simple, but often overlooked factor: the length of time a system has been in operation. Most decentralisation reforms take some time to get established and many are changed or abandoned after only a few years, or one electoral cycle. In reality, it may take at least ten to fifteen years in a context of financial and political stability, for a system to show any results which can be fairly judged.

3 Measuring the performance of decentralisation: conceptual and methodological issues

Given the broad political context outlined above, we may now turn to our principal question: how responsive have different forms of decentralisation been to the needs of the poor and is there any evidence that they have had an impact on levels of poverty, either economic or social? Analytically there are in fact two distinct questions here, each posing different problems of data gathering and assessment. The first concerns ‘responsiveness’, the second, social and economic outcomes.

3.1 Responsiveness and participation

The assertion that decentralisation will be more responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens and by extension, to ‘the poor’ is derived from the notion that local, more participatory forms of government and development activity will offer more than just greater effectiveness in promoting economic development. Institutional responsiveness has been defined as the achievement of ‘congruence between community preferences and public policies’ such that the activities of the institution are valued by the public (Fried and Rabinovitz 1980). Others characterise it as the ‘learning capacity’ of an organisation, or its ability to listen to both its own staff and the public and then alter behaviour accordingly (Moris 1991) (Korten 1984). Insofar as poverty is now defined as more than just material deprivation, it is about more than just material outputs; responsiveness of policies is a matter of the processes through which they are devised, the degree of empowerment and ‘ownership’ which is felt by those affected by them (‘to whom is the institution responsive?’) and, therefore, the general legitimacy of the institution and the procedures by which it allocates resources.

This interpretation highlights the importance of distinguishing between responsiveness and developmental effectiveness; the often observed tendency of democratic local governments to favour small social amenity or infrastructural projects may (or may not) reflect local perceptions of need, but

have little to do with raising the levels of income of the local population.⁴ The benefits are seen to lie in the sense of social empowerment which accompanies successful collective action around an agreed goal, and the longer term indirect developmental outcomes which might follow.

The degree of responsiveness is best measured by direct popular or citizens' assessments gathered through representative surveys or other social research techniques. It is only in this way that the real outcomes of institutional actions can be gauged. Output measures on their own (expenditures, numbers of school and clinics, numbers of arrests per police officer) tell us little about the actual impact of those outputs on peoples' lives, nor how their value and quality are perceived (Schick 1990). Unfortunately, very few studies of decentralisation have produced survey evidence of citizen perceptions. Crook and Manor carried out large scale quota sample surveys in their studies of democratic decentralisation in Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Bangladesh and India (Karnataka) in which rankings of popular preferences were compared with the policy priorities and outputs of the local authorities, and respondents were asked about their satisfaction with the new authorities, both compared to the previous system and in relation to current outputs. Webster (1990) and Westergaard (1986) carried out similar research in West Bengal, whilst Fiszbein asked 1,900 respondents in four *municipios* in Colombia about their perceptions of performance, asking them to compare the local government with national government agencies (World Bank 1995)⁵. The Philippines is one country where a number of large-scale empirical research efforts are currently being made. The Department of the Interior and Local Government is developing performance indicators and a census of household 'basic needs' for local governments, Bolongaita and Roberto surveyed two cities (Makati and Cagayan de Oro), and USAID has financed surveys of 150 respondents in 11 sites by Associates in Rural Development (Bolongaita and Roberto 1996). Unfortunately these results are not yet available (Rood 1998).

In the absence of survey material, it is possible to make some judgement about the responsiveness of a decentralised institution by assessing the levels and quality of participation. The *number of people* who participate (e.g. in elections or in public meetings) and the *social scope* of that participation (how representative is it of all groups in the population?) are indirect measures of levels of interest and of the legitimacy or at least perceived relevance of the institutions in question. If increasing participation is a goal of decentralisation, then such measures are an indication of whether that goal is being achieved. They are readily available for most types of participation and are unambiguously a product of the institutional reform. Nevertheless, participation itself must be defined and broken down into a number of sub-types before any judgements are made about the 'success' of decentralisation in enhancing participation.

⁴ cf. Echeverri-Gent's comment that the popularity of small scale infrastructural projects with the West Bengal village councils (gram panchayats) produces development projects which are 'sub-optimal relative to the requisites of efficient rural development' (Echeverri Gent 1992a: 1407)

⁵ Ingham and Kalam's surveys in Bangladesh were interesting but limited to very small numbers – 80 elite respondents, and 38 households at the village level (Ingham and Kalam 1992).

Participation differs according to the three broad settings in which it may occur: (1) representative (usually but not necessarily elective) government; (2) direct participation either at community or project level, and (3) mobilisation from above. These may be combined in various ways.

1. Where decentralisation sets up representative institutions, the main types of participation are:
 - Voting in elections, which produces measures of turn-out and competitiveness, as well as rates of turnover of office-holders.
 - Standing as a candidate, and becoming a representative (a form particularly important for assessing the degree to which the poor and the disadvantaged have been included).
 - Taking part in election campaigns, whether partisan or non-partisan.
 - Contacting or trying to influence government authorities, which can take two main forms: group activities such as attending official meetings with representatives, or associational pressuring including 'protesting'; and individual contacting, either with representatives or directly with government officials.
 - Associational membership, which can be consistent with a very low level of activity, or lead, for some, to campaigning and contacting.

As is commonly observed of representative government, 'elections are not enough' and it is naive to imagine that simply introducing elections for local offices will transform the relationship between government and citizens, or empower the mass of the poor. The introduction of elected local government has failed to encourage participation in systems where local government already has a very bad record or there is no tradition of or experience of electoral politics (as in Nigeria and Tanzania – the former – or Nepal and Papua New Guinea – the latter). Nevertheless, different electoral systems do have different effects on the possibilities of 'elite capture' and there is considerable evidence that direct election of councils on a ward-basis with a ratio of representation as close as possible, and election of the executive from amongst the council, improves the chances of public accountability (see Crook and Manor 1998: 297–300). The forms of the participation which engage people between elections are clearly crucial, and here the record in both Asia (particularly South Asia) and Africa is much more encouraging, particularly where they link in with traditions of community action and self-help (as in much of Africa) or mobilisation of disadvantaged groups, as in India or some Latin American countries.

2. Direct participation is classically contrasted with representative government as the 'Athenian' ideal in which all citizens have an equal chance of actively taking part in making decisions, both by taking it in turns to hold office, and by subjecting all decisions to discussion and approval by all members of the relevant community. The association with decentralisation in LDCs grew with the participatory development movement of the late 70s and early 1980s (see Chambers 1983), a movement which argued that 'development' could only be equitable and effective if people (the beneficiaries)

controlled the process themselves, rather than governments or experts. It is now understood to refer to a wide range of small-scale, community-level institutions and projects based on this ideal, from village and neighbourhood councils or assemblies which form an official part of the local government system, through voluntary community development associations and self-help groups to projects for local self-management of common property resources or women's micro-credit groups. Its most radical advocates argue that direct participation is an 'end in itself', whose ultimate aim is to create solidarity and self-confidence amongst the poor and to 'dissolve the distinction between outsiders and insiders' in the development process. Its key concept is 'empowerment', both psychological and material (Marsden and Oakley 1990) (Marsden 1991). They also argue that it is the only sure way to break through the barriers to participation by the disadvantaged inherent in representative democracy, and to genuinely include the mass of the poor and the traditionally excluded (e.g. women).

Even the keenest supporters of direct participation acknowledge, however, that organising it around the small scale 'community' (i.e. the geographical neighbourhood where people live) glosses over a number of variations in the ways in which such participation might be structured. Given that there are divisions and inequalities in most communities, even direct participation through public meetings or other devices does not ensure that all interests are satisfied equally. Local cultures do not necessarily accept or facilitate 'democratic' procedures which give equal weight to each individual. In many African societies, 'community participation' is most commonly seen in voluntary labour or fund-raising efforts which have been decided on in practice by traditional leaders (whose roles underwent radical changes during the colonial period) or in co-operation with absentee urban elite fund-raisers. In many Asian countries too, community or village based procedures reflect 'hierarchical and instrumental structures and norms' (Rigg 1991), whilst in Latin America, direct 'community politics' is a code-word for anti-establishment urban political movements (the so-called *basismo* movement) who are engaged in conflicts which by definition cannot be inclusive of all interests (Nickson 1995) (Assies 1993).

Another variant of direct participation arises from the attempt to link direct community, interest-group or project based participation with supra-local institutions of government – i.e. to move from the small scale to the wider political arena whilst preserving the empowering benefits of the participatory grass-roots level.⁶ In Brazil, Bolivia and the Philippines, for instance, decentralised governments are required by law to incorporate or formally associate community and 'peoples' organisations with the deliberative procedures of local government as well as to give them a role in the administration of various services and projects. (Unfortunately NGOs are often included in the list of direct, participatory organisations although their democratic credentials are doubtful). The

⁶ One of the key problems of representative government even at local level is the lack of social trust in the legitimacy of government institutions – a district or municipality may be seen as remote and as untrustworthy as central government. Hence the issue of how make a transition from the community level of action to wider arenas.

attempt to link direct and representative institutions in fact often falls victim to political conflict between the two sectors, unless it is part of a nationally articulated hierarchy as found in countries like Uganda, based on a single party or 'movement', in which case the direct participation level functions as an electoral college for the election up of a pyramid of representatives. Nevertheless, many decentralisation schemes formally incorporate direct village level institutions, and (as in Ghana for instance) aim officially to encourage the development of 'self-help' and community development activities. Such policies, labelled 'demand driven development' are often associated with funding systems based on matching grants to locally devised projects.

Measuring the extent and scope of direct participation is inherently more difficult than representative participation in that it does not generate formal, institution- based data so easily. Elections for village committees may produce election statistics (unless they are based on queuing or other informal methods) but information on what proportion of people attend village meetings and their class and gender composition is rarely available at a national level, and is usually dependent on the results of in-depth, case-study fieldwork. It is nonetheless crucial to make a realistic assessment of the 'social representativeness' of the participation delivered by these direct methods, if their bold claims are to be fairly judged.

3. The mobilisational form of participation is akin to what direct participation advocates think of as 'fake' participation – that is, consultation whose purpose is to co-opt and thereby to increase the effectiveness of implementation of policies chosen by those in authority. As such, it is dismissed as little more than a 'tool of management' (Marsden 1991). But it is also a very common and powerful political device, which when used by strong parties or governmental machines can transform even 'grass-roots' institutions into mobilisational mechanisms. The mere fact that an institution is situated at the village level does not guarantee that it will be genuinely representative or spontaneous. Thus village development committees in Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Uganda (Resistance Councils) are (or have been) run as organs of the ruling party, their main role being to 'co-operate in pre-packaged government programmes or other outside-sponsored initiatives' and help mobilize villagers for communal labour on development schemes (Brand 1991) (Mapetla and Rembe 1989) (Omar-Otunnu 1992).

The danger of creating artificial peoples' organisations has also been pointed out in the Asian context (Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific 1992). But it should be acknowledged, particularly in the Asian context, that if the aim is to encourage poor or disadvantaged groups to challenge powerful local elites, a strong party organisation may well be necessary.

It is very important, therefore, in assessing the participatory record of any decentralisation scheme, to distinguish between participation which permits representation or directly active involvement in local institutions, from mobilisation which may well involve large numbers of people right down to the grass roots, but which nevertheless has little to do with enhancing the responsiveness of government bodies. It

is more to do with ensuring the support base of a regime and creating symbols of approval. Recognising the distinction is purely a matter of qualitative and institutional study, unless of course some objective survey or other opinion data is available which might reveal any disjunctions between official policies and self-images, on the one hand, and popular perceptions on the other.

Measuring the quantity and scope of participation as outcomes of decentralisation provides a somewhat imperfect indication of the degree of responsiveness. But it should be emphasised that empowerment and policy responsiveness do not automatically follow from increasing the level of participation, nor from increasing the representation of the poor and disadvantaged. For these to happen, their impact must be felt in the operation of accountability mechanisms, both internally within institutional processes, and externally in relations between local institutions and the public. In this sense, participation must be treated as an 'input' factor, as an element in explaining the development of responsiveness. As an input, it is the concept of 'effectiveness' of participation which is being distinguished from its quantity or scope, and the link between participation and responsiveness is probably best described in terms of theories of accountability. In other words, how do elected representatives actually establish the accountability of bureaucrats to themselves in the policy-formulation and administrative processes, and how well do elected representatives 'listen' to their constituents, or officials deal with the public and civil society generally? How genuinely democratic or inclusive are village level, participatory decision-making bodies? These are matters of the internal workings of institutions and of the influence of the social and economic power structures discussed earlier, and thus not easily understood or assessed except through qualitative, case-study based research.

Participation is, therefore, both an input to the building of accountability, and an outcome of improved responsiveness and sense of empowerment. There is a feedback mechanism at work in which, once effective participation is established and produces good results, a self-reinforcing process is started which should lead to further increases in the level and scope of participation. It is easier to measure as an output than as a contributor to the effectiveness of accountability processes. Often, indeed, in many analyses the effectiveness is inferred, as an explanation of other outcomes.

3.2 Social and economic outcomes

The impact of decentralisation – or, indeed of any other governmental policy – on levels of poverty can be broken down for analytical purposes into four main areas:

1. Pro-poor growth, or changes in the levels of economic activity, wages and or prices which increase the incomes of e.g. small farmers, share-croppers, agricultural labourers, small traders or urban workers particularly in the informal sector.
2. Social equity, or the extent to which there is redistribution of income, or reduction in levels of inequality.
3. Human development, or improvements in the quality of life and hence the life chances of poor people, as reflected in their access to health, education, sanitation, or justice.

4. Spatial or inter-regional inequality, or the extent to which there is redistribution of resources or growth between deprived and economically more wealthy areas of a country.

Measuring whether the actions of decentralised institutions have had an effect on any or all of these areas is fraught with enormous difficulties. Comparison of national economic and HDI statistics would be useful if it were possible to isolate the decentralisation variable by comparing countries with and without decentralisation schemes, and over time. Some attempts have been made to compare using the *degree* of decentralisation as the independent variable, but the measure normally used – subnational expenditures as a proportion of total government expenditure – is so flawed as an indicator of the character and functioning of any particular decentralisation structure that the results obtained can be suggestive at most (see Huther and Shah 1998).⁷ Using national level or aggregate HDI and Gini coefficient figures as measures of the social equity and HD outcomes also raises issues of causality, at least as regards the actions of decentralised governments. Some countries produce household income surveys which can be broken down by enumeration area and possibly related to local government areas. If these could be produced over time on a consistent basis (i.e. the local government areas would have to be stable for ten years or so) and with a sample size sufficient to allow local breakdown with statistically significant numbers, then some useful data might emerge. Even then, the causal link between changes in household income and government actions at the local (as opposed to the macro) level would have to be demonstrated.

Most studies of decentralisation, insofar as they measure impact at all, tend to rely on what might be termed indirect measures. That is, they look at expenditures on ‘social’ sectors such as primary education, health or social infrastructure such as water, on the assumption that these will benefit the poor. Such an assumption is, in fact, unjustified. Constructing a primary school building may be of no more use to the poor of a rural district than building local government offices or (as happened with Mexico’s PRONASOL municipal funding programme) basket ball courts throughout the land (Fox 1995). It is a matter for empirical demonstration, requiring detailed analysis of the operations of the project, its quality and reach in class and gender terms.

It is well known that decentralised governments tend to spend more on small-scale infrastructural projects or social amenities, perhaps in response to popular wishes, for electoral reasons, or because they interpret ‘development’ as building something tangible. But it is often forgotten that when ordinary people are asked what they see as their most pressing developmental needs, they will opt for classic, developmental infrastructural investment in capital projects such as roads (Crook and Manor 1998). In economies which depend upon the marketing and export of agricultural produce, e.g. most of tropical Africa, this should come as no surprise. Yet there is very little evidence ever collected which could confirm the benefits to rural populations which are perceived by those with the ‘local knowledge’. Uganda

⁷ The figure is misleading in the most basic sense in that it aggregates locally – determined spending and spending on sectors or programmes for which the finances are simply transferred to local governments for them to implement (Litvack and Seddon 1999: 19).

is one of the few cases where recent evidence has been accumulated on the beneficial impact of road rehabilitation on producer prices, employment and market opportunities, both of which have a real effect on the incomes of the poor (see p 13).

Where decentralised authorities have been involved in the implementation or administration of direct 'poverty alleviation' programmes there tends to be more systematic evidence collected of their actual impact on the poor. But most of these schemes are inspired and funded by state or central governments, and so the contribution of decentralisation to their success is again a matter of qualitative assessment of the role of local bodies in, for instance, selection of beneficiaries, formulation of projects or effectiveness of administration.

The nature of the evidence relating to the indirect impact of decentralised governmental outputs or administrative activities on levels of poverty is, therefore, mainly case-study based, partial and not systematically comparable. This suggests that the most feasible methodology is to evaluate and rate each case internally, and only then undertake comparison of the configurations or patterns of explanatory factors in each case (see Ragin 1996). Yet even for a case-study to provide good data on the performance of decentralisation there are minimum evidential requirements which are too frequently not satisfied: base-line and longitudinal data to enable comparisons to be made of the situation before and after a decentralisation programme was introduced; some sense of the overall significance and scope of local expenditures within the national development programme; and some representative public assessments of impact. Ideally, 'control group' studies need to be done, but this is usually impossible within one country, an interesting exception being India since 1993, where it would be possible to compare states where a full decentralisation has been introduced with those where it has not. In the absence of this kind of information, much of the evidence is anecdotal.

The nature of the literature on decentralisation means, therefore, that a comparative study of the kind undertaken below has to be based, *faute de mieux*, upon a set of cases where there happens to be some minimum evidence of the performance of decentralisation for poverty reduction. There are sufficient, at least, for some judgements to be made about the differences between countries where there is evidence of some success, and countries where there is general agreement that decentralisation failed, at least on this dimension.

The indirect benefits of infrastructural investment for poverty alleviation in Kibaale district, Uganda

In Kibaale district, in western Uganda, road rehabilitation has been a major factor in economic development:

- District revenues have increased;
- Access to and from the district is vastly improved;
- Small-scale industry appears to have grown;
- New trading centres and markets have sprung up, and old ones have grown;
- More competition and better prices for agricultural produce; and
- There are greater employment opportunities

Table 1 demonstrates some of the improvements in marketing patterns at village level, including new locations for marketing, where distant markets have become more accessible, or the where new trading centres have grown up. Where the same marketing location is cited, the journeys are now considerably easier.

Table 1 Changes in marketing patterns after road rehabilitation at village level in Kibaale District

Village	Crop	Before road rehabilitation	After road rehabilitation
Kyamukubirwa	Coffee	Taken to Bukonda market (USh 200-300 per kg)	Sold direct from village to traders (USh 800 per kg)
	<i>Waragi</i> (local gin)	Sold in Bukonda or Karuguuza (USh 9,000-10,000 per jerry can)	Sold direct from village to traders (USh 18,000-20,000 per jerry can)
	Tobacco	Sold direct to BAT	Sold direct to BAT
	Groundnuts	Sold in Karuguuza	Sold in Karuguuza
Rusekere	Coffee	Unknown	Sold direct from village to traders
	<i>Waragi</i>	Taken to Mabaale on foot	Taken to Mabaale by taxi
	Groundnuts	Sold in Mabaale	Sold in Hoima
Kibogo	Coffee	Unknown	Sold direct from village to traders
	<i>Waragi</i>	Sold in Mabaale	Sold in Nyamarunda
	Tobacco	Sold direct to BAT	Sold direct to BAT
	Groundnuts	Unknown	Sold in Nyamarunda and Kiryanjagi

Road rehabilitation has had social benefits too. Hospital patients can now have timely access to hospital for serious health needs – one respondent summed up the change as ‘we are alive now’. Other benefits cited were: greater personal mobility; the return to the district of ‘sons and daughters of the soil’; reduced travel time; increased confidence and awareness in women; improved housing and schools; and improved quality of education as teachers could now be attracted from outside the District. A significant feature of the rehabilitation of roads in Kibaale was the use of labour-based methods, allowing local individuals to earn wages, which has reportedly had several knock-on effects. Kibaale district is unusual in Uganda, in that it has benefited from considerable donor funding, a key factor in the success of the district’s road rehabilitation work, but decentralisation has also proved an important catalyst. There are continuing problems in maintenance of roads that are the responsibility of the central government, whereas with the other roads, decentralisation has contributed to a sense of ownership and pride, hence maintenance is less likely to prove a problem. Source: Sverrisson (1999); Bishop and Tazarn (1998).

4 The performance of decentralisation: empirical evidence

Comparative analysis of the literature on decentralisation on a world-wide basis reveals a limited number of cases where there is a minimal degree of evidence on the performance of decentralisation with respect to responsiveness to the poor and poverty alleviation. The Indian states of West Bengal and Karnataka stand out as probably the most systematically studied and richly documented of any in the world, whilst the Philippines is beginning to generate a mass of research evidence which has yet to come to fruition. There are other interesting cases from the rest of Asia, African and Latin America but the evidence is frequently partial and contradictory. Bangladesh, Ghana, Brazil and Colombia count as amongst the best documented. These cases are sufficient in number to enable us to compare positive and negative outcomes for the participation and poverty variables described above.

4.1 Participation and responsiveness – positive outcomes

India: West Bengal – improved participation and representation

The Indian system of local government, or Panchayati Raj,⁸ was originally a utopian Gandhian idea, based on village self-government, which was embodied as an aspiration in the 1950 Constitution but devolved to the states for implementation. In practice, little was achieved and only limited autonomy given to local government for the first three decades following independence. In the late seventies and early eighties, however, opposition parties were elected into power in some states, notably West Bengal and Karnataka, who gave a new impetus to local government, aiming, at least in part, to enhance thereby their electoral strength. In both cases, therefore, the reforms were at least partly an attempt to build the influence and power of the new ruling parties at the grass-roots. The underlying thrust of these new panchayat systems was to create devolved, democratic local authorities, thus transforming them from mere implementers of development programmes to political organisations in their own right (Mathew 1996). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a wider recognition that national level reform was required, and in 1993 the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution envisaged the universal application of three tiers of democratically elected local government. The foundation was to be the village assembly (*gram sabha*), with councils at village (*gram panchayat*), intermediate (*panchayat samitis* or *mandal panchayats*) and district levels (*zilla parishads*). In addition, seats are now reserved for Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SCTs), according to their proportion of the population, at all levels, together with 33 per cent quotas for women. (Meenakshisundaram 1994: 70). However, although all states were required to pass or amend their panchayat legislation by April 1994, the extent of devolved power and resource allocation was left to the discretion of individual states (Webster 1995: 191), and to date, only four states have introduced functioning decentralised systems.⁹

⁸ The term Panchayati Raj came to denote all governmental organisations below the state level. The term 'panchayat' is derived from the word five, panchayat, meaning forum of five village elders (Mathew 1996).

⁹ These are: West Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala and Madhya Pradesh (communication from James Manor).

In 1978, a leftist coalition, known as the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]), was elected to government in the state of West Bengal. In order to challenge the power of the Congress party and the landlord classes in the countryside, and to provide a strong popular power base, the Left Front government aimed to increase the decision making power of the poor by devolving implementation of government programmes to the *gram panchayats*, and mobilising poor peasants to participate, using the CPI(M) machinery. This was critical in that one of the most significant political aspects of the reform had been to open up local elections to party competition for the first time. The district or *zilla parishads* (ZP) – which were the main level of authority in the new three-tier decentralised system – were devolved local government bodies which were legally obliged to liaise closely with the district-level state Ministries, but did not have any authority over them. The power of the state government was exercised through the District Magistrate, who was *ex officio* the Chief Executive of the ZP (Meenakshisundaram 1994). All of the reforms carried out by the Left Front clearly had an ideological motivation, which meant that the political and economic empowerment of poor and landless peasants was deliberately intended to give impetus and mass support to the CPI (M)'s radical agrarian reform programmes. The latter aimed to restructure the semi-feudal basis of Bengali rural society through share-cropper protection and land redistribution.

Representation of the poor

In terms of the **scope of participation**, West Bengal's record of representation of the poor, whether defined by caste, occupation, or land ownership is good. In Birbhum District, for example, the approximate proportion of total panchayat membership held by SCTs increased from 26.9 per cent in 1977 to 46 per cent in 1988, and at gram panchayat level, the proportion held by SCTs went from 34 per cent to 41.5 per cent. By 1988, 44.3 per cent of all gram panchayat members were either small peasants, share-croppers or agricultural labourers, or a combination of the above (Lieten 1988: 2070–2). Webster's study showed that small peasants and the landless increased their share of representation between 1978 and 1988 (Webster 1990: 71), and the perception is that vested interests have been removed (Webster 1989: 206). The record on female representation had been very poor during the 1980s (Lieten 1988: 2071; Webster 1990: 67), but since seats were reserved for women in the 1993 elections, women now account for just over the statutory one-third minimum (Lieten 1996: 127).

Although representation of the poor and previously excluded in West Bengal has increased significantly as a result of the panchayat reforms, it has nonetheless to be recognised that mobilisation through the party machine has meant that the electoral necessity to build broad cross-class coalitions has also played its part. The electoral success of the CPI(M) attracted many opportunists and by the early 90s the panchayat representatives included a substantial group of 'middle class' or white collar employees (school teachers, clerks) and middle peasants, the so-called 'rural middle strata' who formed a new 'party elite'. Echeverri-Gent's study of Midnapur District revealed that 65 per cent of the elected leaders of the *gram panchayats* (called *pradhans*) were white collar employees (mainly school teachers), and a sample survey

across the whole state recorded that 29 per cent of *pradhans* were teachers of middle *caste* (Mahishya) origin (Echeverri-Gent 1992a).

Participation by the poor

However, even if representation of the poor has improved, and compares favourably with the situation in other Indian states, this does not translate into meaningful participation in the affairs of the panchayats. One study showed that panchayat members from scheduled castes or tribes rarely spoke in meetings, and if they did they tended to be ignored (Westergaard 1986: 88). This is backed up in another study which demonstrated that just two per cent of scheduled caste and tribe members spoke in meetings (Webster 1990: 113). Nevertheless, the Left Front has set in motion important changes, that will encourage greater popular participation (Westergaard 1986: 89).

Accountability and responsiveness

Measuring responsiveness in terms of perceived change under the panchayat system, Webster's survey of 150 households shows some positive results. The vast majority (78 per cent) of landless or land-poor (under two acres) men saw substantial change under the panchayat system, as did 84 per cent of interviewees from Scheduled Castes, and all respondents from Scheduled Tribes. Amongst women the results were less striking, although a slight majority among the landless or land-poor and Scheduled Castes or Tribes did see positive change (Webster 1992: 158). However, the impact of participation has been restrained by the kinds of functions and resources that have been devolved to local government level. The ability of local government institutions to provide 'voice' to the poor is limited by their role as, for the most part, implementers of government programmes (particularly those relating to poverty alleviation), rather than being instigators of development in their own right (Webster 1989: 206). Their main function is to select beneficiaries for poverty programme benefits such as work or loans.

Direct participation: a comparison with Kerala

There are parallels in West Bengal's experience with the current programme of **direct participation** in decentralised planning in Kerala. In 1996, an (ostensibly) highly participatory planning process was introduced (the so-called 'Peoples' Campaign for the IXth Plan'), and there have been some encouraging results. Attendance at village level meetings was higher than expected, and the process has contributed in significant ways to local resource mobilisation. In contrast to West Bengal, women's participation has been as high as 40 per cent in some areas (Datta 1997). The decentralised planning process appears to have been enthusiastically received (Mathew 1997), and the plans produced appear to have been of a high quality (Bandyopadhyay 1997).

However, some important qualifications need to be made with respect to the Keralan decentralisation programme. There are reports of variable attendance at village meetings, with some meetings inquorate, particularly the more urbanised villages (Mathew 1997). Others have speculated that

the current wave is benefiting from an initial euphoria that may well die down (Bandyopadhyay 1997). Finally, there is a parallel with the CPI(M)'s strategy of using popular participation in decentralised institutions as a means of increasing electoral support, and (in this case) reviving the power of the party. Unlike in West Bengal, the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Kerala faces much stronger opposition from the Congress which controls nearly 50 per cent of local governments, and there is evidence that the decentralised planning campaign is a response to the current climate of liberalisation in India. The CPI is aiming to counter accusations that it is a conservative, Stalinist machine dominated by the Trade Unions and a centralised, statist bureaucracy by relaunching itself as a participatory, 'peoples' party, based on grass-roots co-operative action by the masses (Rajagopalan 1999). It is too soon to tell (and the evidence is not yet available) whether the participation encouraged by the new decentralisation programme will turn out to be as dominated by the party as the old system.¹⁰

India: Karnataka – improved representation, but low levels of participation obstruct pro-poor outcomes

The Karnataka decentralisation system was introduced in 1987 by the Janata Party state government which had won power for the first time in 1983. The Janata Party was a centrist, agrarian reformist coalition formed mainly to challenge the Congress Party's dominance of Indian politics. The decentralisation reform in Karnataka was principally intended to build the party's rural electoral base by giving power and resources to the dominant middle peasant, landowning castes and the associated elites. The 1987 scheme set up two tiers of panchayats at District (*Zilla*) and local (*Mandal*) level, with village assemblies (*gram sabhas*) for each of the villages within the *Mandal* areas of around 8,000 – 12,000 people. The resources and power given to the Districts (average population around 2 million) were far more radical than in West Bengal, in that the devolved authorities were given control over deconcentrated state line Ministries. This meant that the elected Presidents (with the status of junior minister in the state government) took responsibility for more than half of the state's civil servants, 40 per cent of the state budget and nearly all the main developmental functions (Crook and Manor 1998: 22, 53). This first set of councils elected in 1987 lasted only until 1992, when the experiment was suspended by the incoming Congress until a new three tier system was introduced under the 73rd Amendment provisions. Further elections were held in 1993 (*gram panchayats*) and 1995 (*taluk* and *zilla panchayats*) (Subha 1997).

Representation of the poor

The initial prognosis was not good, and within the state-level bureaucracy, there was a feeling that decentralisation would strengthen vested interests in rural areas, and promote the exploitation of the weaker sections of society (Meenakshisundaram 1994: 83–84). Nevertheless, the Indian commitment to reservation or quotas for underprivileged groups, dating from the setting up of quotas for the SCTs in the

¹⁰ Note: the CPI lost power in Kerala in the elections of May 2001.

1950 Constitution, was almost guaranteed to balance that tendency to some extent. Karnataka was no exception and under the 1987 system, 25 per cent of seats on the councils were reserved for women and a minimum of 18 per cent, or in proportion to their share of the population, for the SCTs. These reservations were extended after 1993 to include 33 per cent for the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs), subdivided into 26.6 per cent for the 'most backward' and 6.4 per cent for the others, and the women's quota was increased to 33 per cent ; in all, therefore, 84 per cent of seats are reserved for so-called disadvantaged groups, although the politics of reservation is such that in Karnataka many of the dominant castes can benefit from the OBC provisions, and not all women representatives will be poor or low caste.¹¹

The reservation policy has undoubtedly brought about a shift in the composition of local representative bodies in Karnataka. In the 1987–92 councils, the Scheduled Castes held 20.4 per cent of all seats across the state (although they account for only 15.1 per cent of the population) and women 25 per cent – no more than their allocated quota of reserved seats. On the other hand, the two politically dominant landowning castes,¹² who accounted for 27 per cent of the population, held 50.6 per cent of the seats (Crook and Manor 1998).

In the councils elected between 1993 and 1995, however, a sample survey of 4,775 elected panchayat members (around 10 per cent of the total) found that 40.5 per cent belonged to OBCs, representing an upward trend, and SCTs had 20.5 per cent of the total. The two dominant castes were reduced to only 31 per cent of members between them. Although Scheduled Tribes were poorly represented, with just 5 per cent of panchayat members, this was roughly equivalent to their share of the total population. It should be noted, however, that while nearly 50 per cent of Karnataka's population is illiterate, this sector of society was under-represented in Karnataka's panchayats, as only 9.6 per cent of members surveyed were illiterate, whereas 13.3 per cent had received some form of higher education. Women did even better than their quota amount, achieving 43.6 per cent across the state (actual figure) but they tended to come mainly from the dominant and higher castes (Subha 1997: 11). A further problem in interpreting the significance of reservations is that, in spite of the political importance attributed to caste in India, economic privilege cannot be automatically 'read off' from caste category. Thus the survey of panchayat members showed that 60 per cent at the *Zilla* level owned irrigated land and 27.5 per cent admitted to an income of over 50,000 rupees, as opposed to 43 per cent and 9 per cent respectively at the *Gram* level. This indicates that the richer landowning groups were still over-represented on the District Councils, but that less privileged groups were achieving a substantial presence in the village-level councils (Subha 1997: 50–63).

¹¹ The term 'Other Backward Classes' in India, or OBCs as they are called, is a constitutional term of art which has been defined to mean middle castes, that is those between the Scheduled Castes and the high castes such as Brahmins.

¹² Vokkaliga and Lingayat castes.

Participation by the poor

The Karnataka local councils have offered the poor, the disadvantaged and women enormously enhanced opportunities for participation, both through the representative system and directly. Survey evidence from the 1987–92 period shows that both the uneducated and the SCTs did engage in such activities as contacting officials and councillors, sending petitions, attending meetings and joining associations at almost the same rate as other social groups, and in proportions not significantly less than their numbers in the population. They were therefore by no means excluded by representative politics as is often alleged. The story for women was different, in that men still tended to dominate these kinds of activities. But when it came to participating in meetings and making a contribution as elected councillors, the outcome was much less positive. At the District level, neither the poor nor the Scheduled Castes were able to form effective pressure groups, whilst at the *Mandal* level the social dominance of the landowning elites and the more intimate scale of the encounter was such that these individuals were effectively excluded from making any real contribution – as were the women (Crook and Manor 1998).

The Karnataka *gram sabhas* or village assemblies also offered real possibilities for direct participation, including decision-making about the allocation of benefits from centrally funded poverty programmes. But the record of this kind of participation has continued to be extremely disappointing. After they were introduced in 1987, the village level meetings worked well for the first two years, but the number of meetings, the number of villages where meetings were held, as well as the attendance levels, gradually declined, until they were virtually abandoned.

Crook and Manor's survey of four sub-districts recorded that 17 per cent of respondents had attended such meetings, which was superior to the *Mandals* in Bangalore and Dharwan Districts studied by Bhargava and Raphael who found that average attendance declined from 5.2 per cent to 2.1 per cent of the registered electorate between 1987 and 1991 in the former and from 7.5 per cent to 5.2 per cent in the latter. Their explanation is that the meetings became too politicised, leading to unhelpful 'mob discussion' shouting matches between rival groups which alienated ordinary people, and they eventually degenerated into being little more than 'complaint-lodging meetings' (Bhargava and Raphael 1994). The highest attendance, at 30–5 per cent of the electorate, was recorded by Sivanna in a two village case-study in Chitradurga District. But even here he notes that attendance gradually dropped to the point where the only citizens who attended were those who were going to get benefits from the poverty programme. This was because the meetings were perceived as being called by and run by the President, who made the real decisions on who the beneficiaries would be. Their main general function was to raise issues of location of amenities and pass resolutions on the 'needs' of the village. He argues that the commitment to participatory planning was largely rhetorical, as there had been no serious effort on the part of the state government to establish planning machinery at either *mandal* or block level. (Sivanna 1990).

Responsiveness

The Crook and Manor survey found that in their case-study Districts the development project outputs of the councils were quite congruent with the perceived needs expressed by their respondents, and that the majority were very or fairly 'satisfied' with both the projects and the general record of the councils. The local Mandal councils, however, were much less highly rated than the Districts.¹³ But responsiveness to the specific needs of the poor and the vulnerable was found to be quite low, and this can be related to the failure of these groups to achieve effective participation, that is, to establish accountability. The implementation of specific poverty programmes and the requirement to spend 18 per cent of development funds on the Scheduled Castes were widely distorted or flouted by the council leaders and the bureaucrats. Indeed at the Mandal level, the councils 'systematically prevented funds from reaching the SCTs' (Crook and Manor 1998: 40). SCTs only received 40 per cent to 44 per cent of benefits from the national IRDP credit programme (Sivanna 1990: 198), in marked contrast to West Bengal, where the SCTs received 85 per cent of the total work in the national NREP works programme (Webster 1990: 135). The crucial difference lay in the fact that selection for IRDP benefits in Karnataka was based on information provided by panchayat chairmen and other influential leaders, and this meant many quite well-off families were included (Sivanna 1990: 200; Kurian 1999).

Nevertheless, in spite of the imperfections of the Karnataka system it is still argued that the general level and scope of participation which has developed since 1987 is an improvement on the previous system (Crook and Manor 1998; Aziz, Nelson and Babu 1996: 155). Electoral participation certainly improved and continued to remain healthy, showing a high degree of general interest and competitiveness.¹⁴

Colombia – improved participation and representation leading to positive outcomes

The decentralisation reforms in Colombia from 1982 onwards were part of a general reform in the structure of state organisation. The reforms attempted a democratic opening in local government, and reallocated sectoral functions to municipalities, away from quasi-autonomous agencies. Mayors were to be elected, plebiscites on particular issues allowed, and consumer and local voices were to be represented on local development agencies (Collins 1989: 144–5). The reforms can be interpreted either as a significant democratic opening, or as an attempt to devolve conflict to the local level, making it more manageable for the national government, although one study concluded that they were essentially progressive and democratic (Collins 1987). However, it is important to note that a major motivation behind the reforms was an attempt by the two traditional parties in Colombia (Liberal and Conservative) – an effective

¹³ Only 12 per cent were 'very satisfied' with their Mandal, as opposed to 40 per cent for the Districts (Crook and Manor 1998: 73).

¹⁴ Turnout in the 1987 District and Mandal elections was 60 per cent and 75 per cent respectively, and in the 1993–5 elections, 65–72 per cent, comparing favourably with the previous average of 46.5 per cent in state elections over the period 1962–89 (Crook and Manor 1998: 27; Subha 1997: 12).

oligarchy at the municipal level for a century - to restore legitimacy and rebuild local power bases in the face of growing opposition from sub-municipal *juntas* (Velasquez 1991).

The Colombian case is difficult to evaluate because of the paucity of evidence and the nature of the data available. There are few detailed studies, and most of the material below originates from the same research project. The fact that the cases cited were to an extent hand-picked as 'interesting' examples may undermine their representative value. It is also the case that the findings of Fiszbein appear counter-intuitive, especially given the impression found elsewhere in the literature on Colombian local government. However, other studies are, if anything, less representative – Velasquez's study is based on just two cities.

Representation of the poor

There is some evidence to suggest that democratic decentralisation has increased the representation of non-elites in Colombia. It is argued that the integration of state and society, when organised interests seize opportunities provided by decentralisation, as occurred in Colombia, can often outweigh some of the problems associated with decentralisation, such as elite capture of local government (World Bank 1996). Certainly, if the Liberal and Conservative parties are taken as a proxy for local elites, the 'near absolute control of municipal apparatus' that had persisted since the late nineteenth century (Velasquez 1991) has diminished. In 1988, the two parties had 80 per cent of the popular vote, increasing to 90 per cent in 1990, and controlled almost 90 per cent of municipalities, but this decreased to 65 per cent of the popular vote by 1992, and non-traditional parties controlled about 300 of Colombia's 1,007 municipalities (World Bank 1995: 17).

Participation by the poor

The Fiszbein study provides examples of direct participation, where individual municipalities have adopted a participatory approach to local governance. One of these is in Valledupar, where local government staff wear badges which proclaim 'we govern with your participation', and the mayor has established various means of dissemination through local media. In other municipalities, community participation occurs in just one sector, or independently of the municipal administration. However, it is concluded that the local authorities that have followed a more open and inclusive approach have enhanced their capacities and are thus better positioned for better outcomes (Fiszbein 1997: 1034). However, some important qualifications need to be made with respect to the Colombian case study. It should be noted that some participatory practices in Colombia pre-date decentralisation, especially with regard to community self-help (Fiszbein 1997: 1036). Furthermore, other studies, while lacking detailed empirical evidence, remain sceptical about increased community participation in local government, and tend to emphasise the continuing strength of traditional, elite-run patronage politics in the new municipalities (Forero and Salazar 1991) (Velasquez 1991).

Responsiveness and accountability

A key element of the Colombian reform programme is the move towards a 'demand-driven' approach to public services, involving extensive participation. Opinion surveys of four municipalities show that the resulting sectoral allocations of resources are consistent with community preferences (World Bank 1996: 140). Most individuals saw local government as central to service provision, and the overwhelming majority trusted local government more than the national government – the figures ranged from 90 per cent in two municipalities to 75 per cent and 60 per cent respectively in the other two. The majority of respondents stated they would prefer the municipality to be in charge of service provision, with the notable exception of the education sector (Fiszbein 1997: 1034).

The World Bank study of sixteen Colombian municipalities showed that competition for political office acted as a catalyst for responsible and innovative leadership, which in turn became the driving force behind capacity building. For their part, active local communities have been able to increase demands for effective local government, adding to local accountability. However, the extent to which participation has enhanced accountability remains dependent on the functioning of individual administrations with the 'leadership factor' being heavily emphasized by the World Bank research team. Democratic decentralisation in Colombia has also meant an increase in 'voice', with protests leading to local government action. There are many cases where local governments have established channels for systematic expression of needs and problems by the community. In one municipality, the policies were changed once a survey had revealed a gap between the local government programme and local needs (Fiszbein 1997: 1032–4).

Philippines – institutionalised participation through NGOs

The Philippine decentralisation programme presents an interesting case because indirect popular participation through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or peoples organisation (POs)¹⁵ became a statutory part of local governance. This has a particular significance in the Philippine case, as the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 owed much to the role of 'people power', through POs, in particular. Decentralisation was opposed by many POs and NGOs because it was seen to hand power back to traditional local elites, who could range from local potentates to warlords. The 1991 Local Government Code (LGC) devolved responsibility for basic service delivery and regulatory and licencing powers; increased internal revenue allotments; expanded local government taxation powers and administrative structures; and promoted partnership between governmental, non-governmental and private sectors. The idea of 'convergence' between public, private and NGO sectors was a feature of some earlier sectoral programmes (Tapales, Padilla, Joaquin and Santiago 1996: 72), and thus appears to have been a key interest of the Aquino administration.

¹⁵ Elsewhere, these organisations would be classified as Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

Linking direct and representative participation

Several dangers were immediately identified in the active participatory role envisaged for NGOs in the Local Government Code. First, a danger of abuse, mainly from so-called ‘come N’Gos’ – organisations set up specifically as a means of gaining influence by the back door. There is also mutual distrust and lack of knowledge between NGOs and local government administration, dating from the anti-Marcos struggle (Brilliantes 1996: 201–7). Experience shows that the government and non-government sectors have different visions and different styles, and it can be argued that involvement in local governance might prove a distraction. In fact, NGOs and POs may find themselves in a ‘no-win’ situation, for lack of involvement may open the way for ‘pseudo NGOs’, even though involvement in local governance is neither the aim, nor the area of expertise for NGOs. It is also important not to underestimate the role of local political dynamics where patronage, elites, and even warlords have traditionally dominated (Cariño 1992: 34–37).

Despite the gloomy predictions, it appears that the level and quality of participation can be good, albeit variable overall. Several studies state that there is continued mistrust between local government and NGOs or POs, leading to hesitancy to participate (Brilliantes 1998: 51) (Rood 1998: 64). One study, based on 78 case studies, concluded that the typical level of participation was ‘medium’ (Semeon-Bulosan, nd). One study states that NGOs have been accredited and there is little appearance of interference in the selection of NGO representatives on local committees. Some NGOs participate in local special bodies, engaging in joint projects, and service delivery with local governments. However, the actual receptiveness of local government officials to NGOs and POs was variable. In one case the mayor was hostile, while the health department was sympathetic; in another, despite personal links to an NGO, the mayor was dismissive of their role in local governance; and in a third case officials had little time for NGO participation (Zialata *et al.* 1995: 80–5).

There are some good examples of NGO participation in local governance, and one overall assessment argues that the Local Government Code has contributed to the restoration of democratic governance in the Philippines. Good practice and innovation are rewarded, with four out of twelve *Galing Pook* award winners¹⁶ being commended because of partnerships with NGOs. Nevertheless, gains appear fragile, because the devolution of power may yet lead to the restoration of elite-dominated politics at the local level (Brilliantes 1998: 47–51).

Furthermore, the issue of whether NGOs or POs represent the poor, or offer better opportunities for direct participation by the poor or disadvantaged, remains unexamined in the Philippine case. During the overthrow of Marcos, NGOs were credited with raising the democratic awareness of the poor (Clark 1990: 97–8), and since 1986 it is argued that a durable tradition of collective practice has emerged, where NGOs and POs have formed an intermediate link between state and society (Clarke 1995). However, the

¹⁶ The Gantimpalang Panglingkod Pook, or *Galing Pook* for short, is a prize awarded for best practice, innovations and excellence at the local level. Winners are selected on the following criteria: the effectiveness of service delivery; positive socio-economic or environmental impact; promotion of empowerment; and transferability (Brilliantes 1998: 47–8).

concept of democratisation employed by Philippine NGOs tends to be a smooth, linear, time-based progression, suggesting a naïve understanding of political processes (Biggs and Neame 1995: 35).

The use of non-governmental or community based organisations as a means of ensuring participation in local governance is gaining popularity, based on some successful examples in Latin America and the Caribbean (see, for example, Fiszbein and Lowden 1999; Fox 1994). However, there is little empirical evidence of positive outcomes, as successful individual cases need to be balanced with less successful ones from the same country. The Philippine case demonstrates the essential variability and fragility of such efforts.

4.2 Participation and responsiveness – negative outcomes

Cote d'Ivoire

Decentralisation in Cote d'Ivoire has taken a very particular form, that of the *commune* based upon a single town or settlement (ranging from large villages to the capital city) with its jurisdiction restricted to the 'urban' area and the immediately surrounding countryside. They are devolved authorities with no control over any of the deconcentrated central line Ministries, and are monitored and controlled by the prefectural territorial administration. Although a few *communes* existed from the colonial period, the process of *communalisation* of increasing numbers of towns on a step-by-step basis really began in 1980. The reform was very much associated with an attempt by President Houphouët-Boigny to revive the then single ruling party, Parti Démocratique de la Cote d'Ivoire (PDCI) through a process of internal democratisation. It was hoped that the election of local councillors and mayors would bring new generations of cadres into politics, and address the perceived problem of public apathy. There was also an expectation that local development would be enhanced by encouraging the elites of these towns to associate themselves with the new bodies, participate in the elections, bring in patronage and organise community projects. The main boost to the reform came in 1985, when 98 small 'towns of the interior' were made into *communes*, bringing the total up to 135; by 1996, the total had reached 196 – mostly with populations of less than 20,000. They do not therefore present any political challenge to a regime whose power is based upon the construction of 'winning' ethnic coalitions, held together by Presidentially-controlled patronage and a consensual form of politics which prefers where possible to coopt. (Opposition is confined to a few 'excluded' sub-regional areas, and some disgruntled Muslim elites in the north). Such a fragmented and partial form of decentralisation keeps central power strong and helps to prevent the consolidation of any possible ethnic or regional power bases.

A further step in the democratisation process occurred in 1990, when multi-party competition was introduced, and the *communes* have experienced two multi-party elections, in 1990 and 1996, although the ruling party won control of 93 per cent of all *communes* in 1990 and 80 per cent in 1996.

Representation of the poor

As very small, community based councils, it might be thought that the Ivorian *communes* would have developed a genuinely popular base. But the structures of power both local and national, and the logic of Ivorian politics produced a very elite dominated system. Most of the elected councils, elected on a single closed list system without ward representation, are in effect the lists put together by the powerful political entrepreneurs who became mayors. Such representativeness as they have is a product of the desire of the political elite to represent main interests and factions in the town – or to exclude others. Crook and Manor's case-study of four *communes* showed that, as in Ghana, the socio-economic profile of the elected councillors was very sharply divided, with 33.3 per cent from elite, highly educated professional and managerial occupations (clearly an over-representation) but the rest illiterate farmers, traders, artisans etc. – many of whom were in fact important community leaders. 3.7 per cent were women. Politically, the lists tended to reflect a multiplicity of criteria: the representation of geographical quarters; the incorporation of interest groups, community leaders and certain political office holders; the need to involve the town's cadres and people perceived as 'competent'; and loyalty to the Mayor and his party or faction (Crook and Manor 1998: 162). The councils did therefore offer a new opportunity for significant numbers of uneducated, younger and often low status citizens to participate in public life. But representation of 'disadvantaged groups' was not really a concern of the system, nor part of the political discourse. In Cote d'Ivoire, there is a strong popular expectation that effective representation of a community's interests is best assured by electing the town's 'cadres'. This is a recognition of the realities of politics in a stable and deeply entrenched patronage-based dominant party system.

A further factor to note about the significance of the elected councils is that they have a very limited role compared to that of the mayor and his deputies, elected from amongst their number. And the social profile of all the mayors elected in 1985-90 reflected very accurately their politically connected, elite status. 74 of 125 mayors of *communes* outside Abidjan actually resided and/or worked in Abidjan; 29 per cent were simultaneously *députés* in the National Assembly and 9 per cent were actually ministers and holders of high office. 77 per cent had modern sector, professional and managerial occupations (Crook and Manor 1998: 171).

Participation by the poor

The lack of connection between elected councillors and electors even in these small communities (58 per cent of respondents in Crook and Manor's survey could not name a councillor), and the perceived domination of *commune* affairs by the mayors meant that participation rates in contacting activities were relatively low. The most frequent participation (17.7 per cent of all respondents) was in the most direct form, that of the 'neighbourhood committee' – an institution long associated with the ruling party. Those who participated in this activity were mainly male (73 per cent), but tended to be relatively representative of the (male) population in educational, age and occupational terms, although inevitably there was some skewing towards older people and the better educated. In the more remote, less developed northern

communes, the very small numbers of educated people were over-represented. When it came to speaking or contributing at meetings, however, this activity was strongly dominated by older men, as might be expected. But this form of participation had little connection anyway with the affairs of the *commune*, so the overall picture is one of very limited input by citizens generally, let alone the poor and disadvantaged. It could be argued that this was part of the legacy of quiescence developed over 30 years of single party rule and ‘departicipation’. But the political structure of the *commune* itself, particularly the electoral system, did not help to challenge this legacy, when combined with very clear ‘elite capture’.

Responsiveness and accountability

The responsiveness rating of the four communes studied by Crook and Manor was very low; only 36 per cent of respondents felt that the commune could satisfy their development needs. The preferred development outputs of the communes – building ‘town halls’ and secondary schools – had little congruence with respondents’ preferences for roads, social facilities and water supplies. Even with projects that did have some popular resonance, the record of the communes in consulting their citizens was dismal; many projects, particularly schools, were stalled because political leaders were unable to persuade people to contribute to special funds for the purpose. The general view (which had some rationality to it) was that the wealthy and the powerful should provide.

Elections did provide some degree of accountability in the Ivorian system, particularly after 1990. Although turnout was much lower than in national elections, the figures over the 1985-96 period of between 35 per cent and 44 per cent concealed huge differences between the big cities and the small towns of the interior (25 per cent as opposed to 51 per cent on average in 1990). In addition there was some degree of turnover: 50 per cent of all mayors changed in 1990, and 37 per cent in 1996. But much of this can be attributed to the internal politics of the party and local elites.

Overall, the lack of responsiveness of the Ivorian communes can be attributed to a general failure of elected councillors and officials to establish any strong relationships of public accountability or communication with their electorates. The commune council was very weak and councillors did not appear to ‘represent’ any particular group of constituents. The list system, moreover, meant that the winning list literally took all, and the losers were totally excluded from the council. This helped to give the council a partial or factional image, if the town was in any way divided, and encouraged non-cooperation from groups who felt themselves thus excluded. The Mayors were elite politicians whose main concern (symbolised by the amount of time they spent in Abidjan) was to work through central political patronage networks.

Finally, in fairness to the commune leaders, one should note the severe financial crisis of the Ivorian state over the period 1990–5, during which time cuts in public spending led to the virtual collapse of most of the communes’ development programmes. And the communes did not have the powers to engage other government agencies in crucial policy areas such as rural road building, employment, agricultural marketing or main water/electricity supplies. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in the cases studied, the

projects which survived the financial cuts were hardly those which responded to popular priorities, let alone the needs of the poor.

Bangladesh; alliance between central government and local elites excludes the poor

The decentralised system introduced by the military government of President H.M. Ershad in 1985 was intended to enhance the legitimacy of the regime and contribute to the building of its newly created party, the Jatiyo Party. There was only a marginal commitment to power-sharing, and the regime attempted to coopt rural landed elites and power brokers in order to build a political power base (Ingham and Kalam 1991: 4). The reform created two tiers of elected local councils; the basic authorities were the directly elected Union Councils with populations of around 20,000. Above them were the sub-District (*upazila*) Councils with an average population of 245,000, which consisted of the indirectly elected Union Chairmen, various appointees, the heads of a restricted range of newly deconcentrated ministries at sub-District level and a directly elected Chairman. The system therefore combined devolution and deconcentration, but of a much less radical kind than that found in Karnataka; the range of functions was more limited, and the status and power of the sub-District Chairmen much less elevated. The Councils had very limited revenue raising powers and in practice were dependent upon the (generous) funding given by the central government. Nevertheless these were more powerful local government organisations than had been seen before in Bangladesh (Crook and Manor 1998: 85).

Representation of the poor

Unlike in India, there are no reservation or positive discrimination provisions which might have helped disadvantaged groups to gain access to the new councils. Only at the sub-District level was there a provision for the *appointment* of three women, who did not have voting rights, provisions which virtually guaranteed their political irrelevance. In the country as a whole, 6 women out of a total of 4,401 councillors served on the sub-District Councils in their capacity as Union Chairwomen, virtually all of whom were 'stand ins' for their husbands. As for the poor, most studies concur that both the Union and sub-District councils were captured by the wealthy landed classes; the landless were excluded, and even 'middle peasant' owner-cultivators were a minority. As one writer observes, the overall impact of decentralisation was to 'intensify already extreme inequalities' (Crook and Manor 1998: 99; cf. Ingham and Kalam 1992; and Khan 1987). The majority of the elected sub-District Chairmen were prosperous elite politicians who spent most of their time in Dhaka cultivating their patronage links with Ministers, senior civil servants and MPs. After they were elected in 1985, 55 per cent of them 'joined' the Jatiyo Party, giving Ershad the support of three quarters of all sub-Districts (Crook and Manor 1998: 104; Khan 1987: 411).

Participation by the poor

The evidence with respect to participation in the activities which link citizens with the institutions of elected local government varies somewhat according to the districts studied and the time of the research. In the four sub-Districts surveyed by Crook and Manor, it was found that overall nearly a quarter of respondents had contacted either Union councillors (11 per cent) their sub-District councillor (6.3 per cent) or an unspecified councillor, and the same proportion had attended officially organised meetings, a higher level than in Karnataka. Although the vast majority of these were men, the poor had not been excluded to the extent that uneducated people had participated in these activities more or less in proportion to their numbers in the population (Crook and Manor 1998: 94–6).¹⁷ Ingham and Kalam's earlier work in three sub-Districts between 1988 and 89 produced much gloomier results, showing that the majority of their respondents had no detailed knowledge of the *upazila*, and an insignificant proportion had attended any meetings even those connected with offering information on agriculture, prices, or local development. Some respondents believed that decentralisation had increased communications, but this perception was based on the increase in visible local government apparatus – such as buildings, offices and staff – and not on any increased practical use of the facilities (Ingham and Kalam 1991: 14).¹⁸ They also questioned 84 elite respondents, over half of whom said that political participation had decreased, and 70 per cent of whom said that there was significant political pressure from central government, the ruling party and locally dominant groups on the local administration. Overall, they felt that there was no democracy in the *upazila* councils and over half of them said that the political environment had worsened (Ingham and Kalam 1992: 380).

One explanation of the difference between the findings could be the time of the fieldwork, the earlier survey having taken place during the height of the Ershad regime's grip on power, whilst the later one was conducted after the collapse of the regime. Another factor might be that two of the Crook and Manor cases were located in a District where there was a high NGO presence, which could explain higher levels of participation. But it also gave rise to some interesting findings about the link between NGOs and local government, echoed by other scholars.

Linking direct and representative participation

Given the extremely high barriers to local participation faced by the poor and the disadvantaged in Bangladesh, it has been argued that they are only likely to make any progress if NGOs intervene to support and encourage the formation of community and interest group associations for collective action. Crook and Manor found evidence that the presence of NGOs actively organising the poor to connect with and protest to the local governments produced modest concessions and increased awareness on the part of a minority of council Chairmen of the needs and rights of the poor (Crook and Manor 1998: 101).

¹⁷ The sub-Districts were: Manikganj Sadar and Saturia (Manikganj District) and Bogra Sadar and Sherpur (Bogra District). The survey was a stratified quota sample of 288 mass respondents, and 96 elite respondents.

¹⁸ The sub-Districts were: Singair (Manikganj), Jhikarhacha (Jessore) and Madhupur (Tangail). It should be noted that their survey was based on 38 randomly selected households.

Their research is supported by another study of how two NGOs had a significant effect on empowerment by helping members of poor groups get elected, although some of those elected were in fact middle peasants or rural middle class. Nevertheless, once elected some were supportive of the poor, suggesting that organisation of the poor for electoral purposes can make them a significant factor in the formation of electoral alliances (Westergaard 1992: 16–7).

Responsiveness

The general failure of the poor and disadvantaged to gain any significant representation on the new local councils would suggest that their responsiveness was very low. But the record is in fact more ambiguous and complex than that. On the one hand, general views of the record of the councils were consistently bad; the Crook and Manor survey found that 64 per cent of respondents were ‘not at all satisfied’ with either the Union or the *upazila* councils, mainly because of the corrupt and dictatorial behaviour of their political leaders (Crook and Manor 1998: 129). Similarly, 75 per cent of Ingham and Kalam’s elite respondents felt that NGOs and voluntary associations had performed better than local governments, 70 per cent said there was increased corruption in the delivery of justice, and 90 per cent claimed to have had personal experience of corruption (Ingham and Kalam 1992: 380). It is also clear that a lot of the central funding given to the councils was spent on patronage related activities which benefited the better off and clients of the council leaders; one assessment is that hardly any projects specifically geared to the needs of vulnerable groups emerged from the decentralisation experiment, and that the poor were rarely involved in the project selection process (Westergaard and Alam 1995: 684).

On the other hand, as Westergaard admits, some projects were ‘wanted’ by and benefited the poor and Crook and Manor also found that many of the project outputs of the councils were congruent with expressed needs, particularly those for infrastructure. The main explanation would seem to be that a great deal of the spending created local employment opportunities, much of it through road building as well as water projects and educational buildings. Indeed, one of most frequently expressed popular demands was for employment. This propensity to engage in job-creating construction projects has, in turn, another very simple explanation: by 1988–9, 90 per cent of the resources being transferred to the sub-Districts by central government came in the form of grain, which could only be used to pay people for work (Crook and Manor 1998: 124). To this extent, therefore, the decentralised authorities during the Ershad period did serve to transfer real resources to the rural poor, although it had little to do with any sense of accountability to the poor, or to the electorate generally.

The importance of elections in helping to establish public accountability is, however, again demonstrated in the Bangladesh case. Following the emergence of strong opposition to the regime in the late 80s, the abuses which had characterised earlier elections were less blatant in the 1990 local elections, which were regarded as ‘reasonably’ fair. The result was that the gross behaviour of the *upazila* Chairmen was punished by the electorate, in that over 90 per cent were thrown out. The regime collapsed a year

later, after many of these newly elected Chairmen had themselves tried to join the Jatiyo gravy-train (Crook and Manor 1998: 93).

Ghana – enhanced participation fails to produce more responsiveness to the poor

Ghana's District Assembly system was introduced in 1989 by the then-military government of Jerry Rawlings. The 'Rawlings Revolution' of 1981 was based on radical populist ideas of direct participation and no-party people's democracy, and the decentralisation reform of 1989 was portrayed as a fulfillment of that commitment to introduce a 'truly Ghanaian' form of grass-roots democracy. With the transition to a more conventional, representative multi-party democracy in 1992, the District Assemblies (DAs) were incorporated into the 1992 Constitution of the Fourth Republic and strengthened with new legislation and extra sources of funding from a District Assemblies Common Fund in 1993. Politically, the reform was clearly an attempt to create a rural power base for Rawlings, embodying as it did a privileged position for pro-Rawlings revolutionary organisations (which later became the core of his party, the NDC), and mechanisms for coopting rural business, professional and agrarian elites.

The Assemblies themselves are directly elected representative bodies (two-thirds elected, one third nominated by government) and the original ban on party activity has been retained. The DAs' official mission is still to create and encourage, in cooperation with sub-district town and village councils or committees, community-based forms of self-reliant economic and social development (or self-help, as it is called in Ghana), a project which forms the main political and ideological justification of the system. Administratively, they are a mixed form of decentralisation in that their other main function is to supervise the various former line Ministries which have been deconcentrated (or are in the process of being transferred) to District level since 1989, to form an integrated district governmental and financial apparatus.

Given its official aspirations and the strong political commitment of the central government, the prognosis for the pro-poor performance of such a system should have been good. Yet the Ghanaian system exemplifies the problems which occur when new opportunities for participation are not matched by effective accountability mechanisms and a politics of local-central relations which undermines their operation.

Representation of the poor

The government's aim to include the 'poor and the unschooled' in the Assembly system was only partially achieved. Elected representatives on the Assemblies still tended to come disproportionately from the male, educated and professional strata of society – although not as dramatically as might have been expected relative to the known preference of Ghanaian rural voters for 'educated' representatives. Across Ghana as a whole, 33 per cent of those elected in 1989 had agricultural occupations (an under-representation), whilst 32 per cent were teachers – a massive over-representation – and 13 per cent civil servants. Only 1.6 per cent were women. The two Assemblies studied by Crook and Manor had a

distinctly dualistic membership, in which whilst 56 per cent and 74 per cent respectively of the elected members had secondary or higher levels of education, the remainder tended to be uneducated or poorly educated farmers. But the elite character of the Assemblies was substantially boosted by the government nominees who formed one-third of the membership. The most that can be said is that the Assemblies did give access and representation to small numbers of locally-based and uneducated farmers, traders, and artisans who had previously been excluded from politics even in previous democratic interludes (Crook and Manor 1998: 224).

Participation by the poor

The 'poor and the unschooled' participated much more widely in village-level and contacting activities. According to Crook and Manor's survey, those who had engaged in contacting their representative (12 per cent of respondents) or had attended official and unofficial meetings (32 per cent and 5 per cent of respondents) were fairly typical of the general population in terms of their age, occupation and educational level (Crook and Manor 1998:228). As regards the 'gender balance', men were strongly dominant in contacting but less so in the other activities. One area, however, where the female participation rate was better than or nearly as good as that of men was in the village level Unit Committee meetings, particularly in southern Ghana, but this can hardly be interpreted as a victory for the poor and deprived, in that the women tended to be younger and well-educated. These Committees were very much part of the Rawlings 'revolutionary structure' and the women's participation reflected the enormous strength of the 31st December Women's Movement at the local level.

It was in fact at the level of direct participation in village-level bodies that the Assembly system failed to live up to the expectations loaded on it by government's populist, radical aspirations. Even though the Unit Committees ceased to have an official connection with the former military government's 'revolutionary organs' after 1992, legal delays and the political realities of domination by Rawlings' party the NDC meant that they never really shook off their association, and never really functioned as intended. When popular elections for the Unit Committees were finally held in 1998 (nine years after the DAs were set up), 65 per cent of the elections were uncontested, reflecting both apathy and alienation caused by conflict, intimidation of rivals and administrative chaos (Crook 1999).

The one area of local politics where direct participation was and continues to be successful is in the well-established Ghanaian institution of 'self-help' community development associations. Unfortunately, these can hardly be cited as examples of empowerment of the poor and disadvantaged. One of the duties of the Assembly representative is to act as an animator and facilitator of self-help projects in his/her area. But few can achieve success in this without the support of local leaders such as the chiefs and the wealthy, professional often absentee elites (successful sons and daughters of the town) whose efforts underpin the community development association and its projects. Decisions taken in public meetings called by such an association might well respect 'traditional' Ghanaian procedures for achieving consensus through exhaustive discussion, but would rarely challenge existing social hierarchies, or go

outside the parameters of choice offered by the local elite. It is also clear that Assembly representatives have in fact experienced growing contradictions between their role in community self help activities and their role as District Assembly members. The more successful the self-help projects of the community association, the less willing local constituents are to pay Assembly taxes or accord any legitimacy or usefulness to its activities. A particular grievance derives from the fact that so many self-help projects which remain unfinished are those where matching help has been promised by the DA, but never delivered (Crook and Manor 1998).

Responsiveness and accountability

Compared to what had gone before, the DA system has greatly enhanced popular participation in local government, and included greater numbers of previously excluded groups. Yet the responsiveness of the DAs to popular development needs and to those of the poor in particular, has not been good. In the two Districts surveyed by Crook and Manor, 70 per cent of respondents felt that the DA did not respond to their needs, and only 22 per cent felt it was better than the previous (unelected) system. This was partly because general development performance was disappointing with recurrent expenditures continuing to dominate (on average, 85 per cent) and per capita development expenditure remaining at derisory levels even after real increases. This picture was repeated in other many other Districts across the country (Ayee 1992; Ayee 1996; Acheampong 1995) and in Kumasi City (Kessey 1995).

The critical popular assessments also reflected the lack of congruence between District Assembly-funded outputs and popular preferences for road repairs, health facilities, water supplies and electricity. DA policies tended to reflect either government pressure to mobilise local revenue sources, leading to expenditure on commercial transport services, farming or manufacturing enterprises and markets; or they reflected centrally determined programmes and priorities, the costs of which had been pushed down onto the Districts. One of these was the government's national educational reform which required the construction of Junior Secondary Schools throughout the country; another was the cost of office buildings and equipment, official housing and the like. Political corruption in the shape of excessive transport, travel and entertainment expenditures was again linked to the pressures on – and lack of local control over – the government-appointed District Assembly bosses, the District Secretaries.

An explanation of why increased participation was not translated into more effective accountability at the institutional level and into more responsive outputs is complex, but would include the following factors. First, the political context meant that neither the military regime nor its successor (under the same leader) were willing to relinquish close political control (and its associated patronage considerations) over the Assemblies. Even under the post-1992 multi-party regime, the President managed to secure the appointment of government loyalists as District Chief Executives, officials who to all intents and purposes ran the District Assembly and government. The former 'revolutionary organs', now officially classified as 'NGOs', still occupied a privileged place in local politics and continued to be indirectly funded and controlled by the government and ruling party. In other settings, the connection with

centrally directed 'revolutionary cadres' might have encourage a pro-poor outcome (as in West Bengal); but in Ghana by the late 1980s the Rawlings loyalists had long since lost their radical ardour and their conversion into the National Democratic Congress (NDC) turned them into a part of the patronage system along with the established local elites.

Second, the 'no-party' rule continued to prevent the emergence of official opposition and public monitoring of the Assembly's programme. It can be argued that a no-party system makes accountability within a representative democracy quite hard to sustain, in the context of a council where the representatives are all 'delegates' of their communities, dedicated to pursuing that particular interest, and therefore reluctant to accept the legitimacy of any general allocative decision. General public accountability is also weakened if competitiveness and general interest decline. To some extent this has already happened in Ghana over the three Assembly elections which have now been held: 1989, 1994 and 1998. The turnout, which in the first elections reflected real public enthusiasm compared to previous local elections, declined from 58 per cent in 1989 to 29 per cent in 1994, climbing back to 39.5 per cent in 1998. Even the recovery in 1998 is to some extent misleading as it is a function of the registered electorate. The absolute number of people voting in 1998 was only marginally higher than in 1989. And elected representatives were also so disillusioned with their role in 1994 that only about one-third stood again (Crook 1999)

Third, there were institutional factors which prevented elected members from participating fully in policy making and control of implementation and from establishing the accountability of government-appointed officials and civil servants to themselves. The elected leader of the Assembly, the Presiding Member, had no executive powers and was indeed excluded from the Executive Committee. In addition, the Assemblies lacked both the political and the legal capacity to establish control over the field agencies of the supposedly deconcentrated Ministries. This meant that whatever their level of awareness of popular demands, they often lacked the means to translate those demands into outputs in such areas as roads, water supplies or electricity. The government was to blame for much of this insofar as it failed fully to implement its own decentralisation programme.

If all these factors are combined with the resource constraints, both administrative and financial, which resulted from the coincidence of the decentralisation programme with a series of SAPs, then it is not difficult to see why the development performance of the Assemblies had such little responsiveness to the needs of the poor.

Other cases where central control has undermined accountability

Kenya

Kenya's District Focus for Rural Development (DFRD) was inaugurated in 1983, a strategy of deconcentration of central ministry functions to the districts. The purported rationale was to turn districts into centres of development, allowing for more equitable distribution of resources, and to provide the citizenry with avenues for active participation in planning and implementation. District level planning was

to be carried out by District Development Committees, composed of district level central government bureaucrats, elected representatives, KANU (the ruling party) officials, and representatives from selected NGOs and other development organisations. However, the overall political background is equally, if not more important. By 1983, Moi was reshaping the political system in order to restore legitimacy following the 1982 coup attempt, and to fragment the Kikuyu hegemony fostered under Kenyatta (Ng'ethe 1998: 22).

The participatory and responsiveness record of this deconcentrated system has been dismal. **Direct participation** continues to be an illusion in Kenya, despite the rhetoric of the District Focus programme.

To say that ordinary people participate in making decisions is a joke: they have to be guided by the 'elite' or at least energised to participate – District Official in the Meru District Council's office (Ng'ethe 1998: 44).

Furthermore, effective **representation** of the poor, and the **responsiveness** of the District Development Committees were also low, given that elected representatives did not attempt to represent their electorate's wishes but rather attempted to promote and retain their own personal political stature. Few District Development Committee meetings are held, and chiefs can delete project proposals they feel are 'irrelevant', without recourse to democratic procedure. Overall, the local elites with political ambitions remain in control of participatory mechanisms and institutions (Ng'ethe 1998). This is nothing new. In Kenya, local participation has traditionally been limited to arrangements for obtaining greater compliance with central government policies (Rondinelli 1981: 139–40).

The evolution of District Focus is part of the personalisation and anti-institutionalisation of the political process in Kenya (Ng'ethe 1998: 44). Rather than promoting participation in local governance and equitable distribution of resources between districts, President Moi used the District Focus programme to restructure the regional political support base in his favour. However, decentralisation has resulted in more money going to poorer areas, although this redistribution was based on the political logic of ethnic conflict in Kenya, rather than equity concerns (Barkan and Chege 1989: 449–50).

Nigeria

Democratic decentralisation in Nigeria has proceeded on a stop-start basis since the 1970s. Initially, decentralisation was an exercise in strengthening federal government power, using the devolution of power to local councils to undermine ethno-regional blocs at the state level. Elected local governments were introduced by the military regime in 1976, and renewed under the Presidency of Babangida in 1983, after the state governments in the civilian Second Republic (1979–1983) had undermined the earlier reforms (Gboyega 1998). Military governments since 1983 have continued to give local government greater autonomy in relation to state governments – state control and monitoring of local government was given over to Federal agencies, and large increases in direct Federal funding, which now account for 90 per cent of local revenues, were awarded (Awotukun 1995). By the end of the 1980s local authorities

were acting as agents for the implementation of major federal programmes under the control of the Federal Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (Olowu 1989). This was accompanied by an increasing fragmentation of the system, from 301 to 589 local authorities. These changes served two purposes: first, they in effect increased the degree of centralisation in the system (Olowu 1997: 171) and weakened potential political challenges, and, second, they increased the amount of patronage being fed down to local elites who supported the military.

Following the Abacha coup of 1993, the role of local government as representative or participatory institutions diminished again, following a further military repression and tightening of central control. The current process of democratisation may result, however, in a revitalisation of local government.

Participation by the poor

One detailed study shows the lack of real participation in decision making, whether direct or indirect, in primary health care (PHC), even though responsibility was devolved to elected officials at the local level. It was expected that the reform would result in improved access for poor and rural people, but in terms of participation and grassroots involvement, little use was made of community organisations, and both the PHC office and community health committees were haphazard and disorganised. There was declining confidence in local health committees, as there were doubts that their deliberations and recommendations were being taken seriously. Overall, local residents saw PHC as unreliable, ineffective and unresponsive to their needs. In addition, councillors were unaware of the health needs of constituents, had little contact with communities, and had little knowledge of health plans and activities. Community awareness of the PHC system and organisation was minimal, occasionally non-existent, and by 1993 there was little evidence of an active political process or debate (Wunsch and Olowu 1996–7: 70–72).

Electoral participation might have offered some degree of access for the poor, but whilst the local elections of 1988 claimed an improved turnout of around 50 per cent, this figure conceals enormous regional and local variations – for example, the figure in Lagos was only 22 per cent – and is, moreover, of dubious reliability, due to maladministration and inflated registrations (Jinadu and Edoh 1990). Thus while electoral participation may have improved a little, the pattern of events in Nigeria during the 1990s probably undermined participation still further.

Accountability and responsiveness

Until the death of Abacha, and the democratic renewal that has occurred since, the prognosis for local government was gloomy. A 1997 summary of the status of local government stated that local government *accountability* had been weakened under the Abacha regime, and undermined further by the reluctance of some local governments to tax, so that few questions could be asked locally about money (Olowu 1997: 171). A major problem was the unrestrained power of the ‘Presidential’ style chairmen who, since the 1992 changes had been able to appoint their own team of ‘Supervisory Councillors’ (each with administrative portfolios) and the chief administrator of the council. Local government staff were so appalled at the prospect of being transformed into wholly locally employed staff, under the control of the

executive chairman, that Trade Union action and other pressure persuaded the government to reverse its proposed abolition of the Local Government Service Commission (Awotukun 1995). Most observers agree that the Nigerian chairmen have a reputation for behaviour which is corrupt, dictatorial and lacking even 'minimal' consultation with popular opinion (Olowu 1994; Gboyega 1998; Awotukun 1995). As they owe their power to Federal patronage, Councils have been unable to exercise any restraining influence on them and as consequence have begun to abuse the impeachment process, for instance in an effort to influence the allocation of resources (Awotukun 1995). These conflicts have led to the paralysis of many councils.

There are, however, some success stories, demonstrating a degree of *responsiveness*. Onitsha local government, in Anambra state, is said to provide tangible services for its citizens. Its success is due to well-established commerce, a good relationship between the local government and the state government, the continuity of the local government, and good relations with the people. In part this is helped by the fact that the local community has significant 'voice', being able to influence the choice of local officials (Olowu 1992: 45–48). However, it appears that such examples are the exception rather than the rule, as the system of direct popular election of presidential style chairmen has not resulted in any greater accountability.

Local governments in Nigeria are not accountable, whether upward – to organisational or governmental superiors – or downward – to clients or citizens. In the specific case of the PHC programme, downward accountability was weak because of the lack of local organisations and awareness of the programme, and the weakness or absence of a viable and active political process at local government level. In addition, there was a lack of local funding for local government and no culture of client responsiveness. Some scholars argue that the real problem was lack of real devolution of power in Nigeria, although it could equally well be argued that the lack of any viable structures of legal and financial auditing by state or federal governments was at least as important (Wunsch and Olowu 1996–7: 79).

4.3 Social and economic outputs – positive cases

West Bengal and Kerala – the importance of pro-poor central government

Pro-poor growth

Democratic decentralisation in West Bengal, when combined with land redistribution, sharecropper programmes, and the popular mobilisation programmes of the Left Front has resulted in significant benefits to the poor. West Bengal remains one of the poorest of Indian states, ranking second only to Bihar in the incidence of rural poverty (Echeverri-Gent 1992: 1403). The material changes in the state since the election of the Left Front government are considerable, particularly in agricultural production and in the provision of infrastructure (Webster 1992: 161). The continuing high levels of support for the Left Front government can also be used as a yardstick for its success (Webster 1989: 205). In one survey,

the overwhelming majority of male interviewees from poorer households perceive the panchayats to have had a positive impact, although the response from female interviewees was ambiguous - the numbers of respondents saying there had been no change being approximately equal to those who perceived substantial benefits (Webster 1992: 158).

Any assessment of the effect of decentralised institutions in West Bengal must acknowledge the general political context of the CPI(M)'s development strategies. Many of the ascribed benefits are only indirect results of decentralisation, as the Panchayati Raj reforms went alongside the restructuring of the agrarian political economy, in particular, the sharecropper programmes (Operation Barga) and the redistribution of land. Several authors agree that this combination of reforms has resulted in an improvement in West Bengal's agricultural performance¹⁹ (Sanyal, Biswas and Bardhan 1998; Bagchi 1998), with West Bengal's agricultural sector growing faster than other eastern Indian states (all of which had experienced growth) between 1981 and 1991 (Rawal and Swaminathan 1998). Furthermore, this growth has had a positive effect on poverty (Ghosh 1998). As Chatterjee (1998) notes, after a careful analysis of Planning Commission and Expert Group data on poverty levels between 1972 and 1993–4,

Both the percentage of poor and the number of poor in rural West Bengal has declined sharply during the 1980s ... this decline is largely due to a combination of technology-induced productivity upsurge in agricultural production, and institutional reforms like operation barga, land redistribution and decentralised planning through elected panchayats (Chatterjee 1998: 3006).

It appears now that the CPI(M) is a victim of its own success, as economic success and participation in decentralised institutions have contributed to a dissatisfaction with the pace of progress among a new generation of rural middle class, and hence the CPI(M) has lost a lot of electoral ground at village level (EPW 1998).

A parallel example is emerging in Kerala, where a Leftist government has been implementing a highly participatory programme of decentralised planning since 1996, with 40 per cent of state budgets devolved to the local level. There have been some positive outcomes already, including a decline in the prevailing cynicism towards development activities (Datta 1997). In one village, mass mobilisation for decentralised planning has given 'windfall results', through increased agricultural extension resulting in improved productivity (Bandyopadhyay 1997: 2454). As a result, there is a degree of optimism surrounding the potential for positive poverty alleviation outcomes in Kerala. However, there are no in-depth studies of poverty outcomes, and any improvements may be undermined by fiscal crises in Kerala, as the state's industrial sector is in decline, and the economy is stagnant.

¹⁹ Annual agricultural growth for the period 1949–80 was 1.74 per cent; whereas between 1981–2 and 1990–1 it is estimated at 6.4 per cent (Sanyal, Biswas and Bardhan 1998). Harris (1992) plays down of the role of institutional factors in this improvement, stating that the main cause was improvements in irrigation technology. However, Sanyal *et al.* conclude that, although difficult to measure exactly, institutional reforms must have had an effect on breaking West Bengal's 'agrarian impasse'.

Social equity

The reforms have meant that elected institutions are now responsible for government development programmes, and that the benefits of such programmes have gone to the poorest. In one case study, 85 per cent of beneficiaries of one national works programme were from the SCTs (Webster 1990: 112). However, there are allegations that the benefits of works programmes tended to go to CPI(M) members (Westergaard 1986: 91–92), although this does not square easily with the non-corrupt reputation of the Left Front and CPI(M) (Webster 1990: 59–60).

However, there are criticisms that the West Bengal reform programme did not go far enough in alleviating poverty. Although the landless and land-poor were the main beneficiaries of government policies – indeed no big or middle farmers received benefits from government credit programmes – the resources provided were insufficient, and the poor, particularly sharecroppers, are mainly dependent on land-owners. As Westergaard argues, in a situation of such extreme land scarcity and pauperisation, any improvement requires a fundamental transformation of agricultural production and the development of an industrial sector (Westergaard 1986: 84). Other critics point out that the government credit programmes in West Bengal failed to reach women and the landless (Webster 1990: 103). Similarly, although the panchayats have been much better at co-ordinating relief work, following natural disasters such as floods or droughts, this is criticised from within the CPI(M), as a move away from addressing the structural issues that cause vulnerability (Webster 1990: 41). This is part of a debate concerning the CPI(M) overall political strategy, as the approach has had to be softened to maintain electoral support (Webster 1989: 205–6).

Human development

There is some, albeit limited evidence of improved human development indicators in West Bengal. Bhattacharya notes that the state's Human Development Index improved slightly between 1981 and 1991, and the extent of deprivation, relative to other states also decreased (Bhattacharya 1998). Other studies have shown that the poor themselves perceive that they now have greater human dignity, having greater access to the systems of justice and to administrative system, sometimes to the exclusion of the wealthy (Lieten 1988: 2069–70). Webster shows that villagers themselves saw improvements in the provision of water (Webster 1992: 159). Since 1977, when tubewells were shallow and the upper castes had privileged access, the tubewells have been dug three times deeper, general access has improved, most wells being within walking distance, and there is a decreased likelihood of water-borne disease (Webster 1990).

The parallel example of Kerala provides a cautionary note in this regard. The Keralan development model has already established its success, with a high level of female literacy, increased life expectancy, reduced infant mortality and decreased domestic fertility (Datta 1997). It should be noted that these achievements pre-date the programme of decentralised planning, and are not necessarily linked to decentralisation. Furthermore, as pointed out above, any improvements in social indicators may be undermined by fiscal crises.

Spatial equity

Overall evidence is lacking, but it appears that decentralisation in West Bengal has not had a uniform impact across the state. The state government's Joint Director of Panchayati Raj, argued that, while decentralisation had been successful in five districts, there had been problems in other districts (Webster 1992: 160). However, most of the evidence is based on small samples, mainly in the more central districts, and thus there is no conclusive data on the spatial impact of decentralisation.

Brazil – synergy between local and central government

The 1988 Constitution granted an unparalleled degree of autonomy to local government within the federal system (Nickson 1995: 119). In 1992, 44 per cent of total national revenue was retained by the states, and of the remainder, half was put into pensions, health and regional development by the federal government. The states also have a measure of freedom in spending the revenue – just 25 per cent is reserved for education. Brazil has the most decentralised fiscal system of all developing countries, a degree of decentralisation within the range of many developed countries. In addition, the use of federal transfers for presidential pork-barrelling appears to have declined under Cardoso (Souza 1996: 540–3). However the involvement of the federal government in state and local functions remains considerable (Shah 1991). Politically, the reform was a reversal of the centralisation trend under the military, and aimed to restore the powers of states and state-based patronage machines. Brazilian political parties, always weak, became more dependent on state and local power brokers.

Social equity

Most of the positive results associated with decentralisation in Brazil are a product of the decentralisation of poverty alleviation programmes in particular states.²⁰ The Northeast Rural Development Programme (NRDP) is an integrated rural development programme, which, in 1993, was transformed into an entirely community based programme – before, over-centralisation had been a major impediment to success. There were two funding mechanisms in the NRDP providing matching grants to the *municípios* (local governments): the *Programa de Apoio Comunitario* (PAC), operated by the state administration in response to proposals submitted to it, and the *Fundo Municipal de Apoio Comunitario* (FUMAC), administered directly by the local governments in response to local communities. In general it is agreed that the locally-run FUMAC scheme worked best, although the relationship of NRDP to Brazilian decentralisation is tellingly illustrated by the finding that PAC was seen as a way of by-passing local governments if project applicants felt that they were being obstructed by the traditional patron-client system. The whole approach was in essence a way of using central funding to weaken the power of the locally-embedded political elites who controlled the patronage networks (van Zyl *et al.* 1995).

²⁰ These programmes are better described as 'social funds', as they give grants to projects implemented by local governments on a demand driven basis. There are other examples throughout Latin America, such as the Emergency Social Fund in Bolivia.

Among the positive results reported from the NRDP are the following: there has been an improvement in the living standards and nutritional status of the poor; successful sub-projects have had a positive multiplier effect; rural activities, including production, incomes and employment generation, have had value added; and rural-urban migration has been contained. Although the programme has faced procedural problems, and the level and quality of participation could be improved, the various components of the NRDP have had a positive impact on the quality of life in general, and, in productive sub-projects, on employment and the income of beneficiary associations and communities. Overall, the projects funded by the NRDP appear to have been efficient and financially sustainable (van Zyl, Barbosa, Parker and Sonn 1995: 21–3; Parker 1995: 42).

Human development outcomes

There is some evidence of positive results in relation to poverty statistics, again in particular states. In the field of education, in Minas Gerais, a south-eastern state, autonomy was given to elected school boards, and central government grants were given on the basis of enrollment and special needs, to combat familiar problems, such as low pay and poor funding. The early results of this initiative are encouraging, as achievement scores increased 7 per cent in science, 20 per cent in Portuguese, and 41 per cent in maths (World Bank 1997: 123).

In Ceara state (also in the poverty-stricken north-east), the election of a reforming social democratic party (PSDB) Governor in 1987 led to the launching of state programmes in preventive health and in emergency employment-generating public works programme which have been outstanding and innovative. In health, vaccination coverage for measles increased from 25 per cent to 90 per cent of the child population, infant mortality decreased from 102 per 1,000 to 65 per 1,000, and the state won a UNICEF prize for child support programmes. The public works programme gave work to one million unemployed rural farmers, employing roughly half of the state's rural population during its peak month. By comparison with previous programmes, the 1987 programme dramatically reduced the level of clientelism in project, job and relief allocations, delivered jobs and supplies faster, and created more jobs per dollar. However, one of the key conclusions drawn by Tendler and others is that improvements in the performance of these local pro-poor programmes were the result of a three-way dynamic between local government, civil society, and an active central (state) government, rather than decentralisation *per se* (Tendler 1997: 145).

Her analysis of the reasons for the success of the health programme, for instance, emphasises the critical importance of the unusual degree of job commitment by staff, a feature created in the main by measures such as job enrichment, public recognition and the inculcation of pride in the work, and public monitoring and accountability. The fact that such measures were taken and implemented successfully was very much a product of the decision of the state-level directors of the programme to keep an 'iron control' over the hiring and firing of the workforce, their socialisation and training, and the running of

the public information campaigns associated with it. But this did not mean that it was an entirely state-run show, which owed nothing to the decentralised system.

The 1988 reforms meant that the state government was forced to share power with local governments. But its experience had been that the extra revenues passed down to the *municípios* had had little effect on the quality of health services; much of it had been used by mayors for patronage, such as using ambulances to transport friends and relatives, and giving out medicines from their homes to supplicants. The state therefore determined to allocate the considerable funds involved on a conditional basis, to mayors who agreed to play by the new rules. At first, this meant that most mayors saw the programme as a threat to their position. But individual *municípios* gradually joined the programme as its success developed, and the political benefits of both the large number of extra local employees and the public credit for the programme's operation became apparent. In other words, an initially reluctant local government establishment was brought 'on board' by the political and capacity-building potentiality of the scheme. The actions of the state also helped to develop a more active public interest in demanding accountability and decent standards of service from local employees (Tendler 1993: xxii; Tendler and Freedheim 1994; Tendler 1997).

Tendler argues, therefore, that the Ceara experiment showed that decentralisation and even increased representation of the poor on local councils do not necessarily lead to 'pro-poor' outcomes. That the health or drought or employment programmes served the needs of the poor was less to do with representation or the demands of civil society than it was to do with the emergence of competing elites at local level, and the creation of 'the conditions for the emergence of a more public-serving elite vision of local governance' (Tendler 1997: 154). Given the general logic of Brazilian decentralisation it could be argued that the Minas Gerais and Ceara cases are not typical of the system as a whole, but resulted from the particular political circumstances and regimes present in those states at a particular time.

Spatial equity

The record of Brazilian decentralisation on equality between regions and states is, as might be expected, less encouraging. Significant inequalities still exist, and some states and many municipalities need financial assistance from the federal government to survive. Over 200 municipalities in the north-east have no chance of levying revenue, as there is little or no economic activity and generalised poverty amongst the population. It is very clear that decentralisation has reduced the ability of the federal government to transfer funds to the poorer areas, and it is up to individual states to develop funding programmes similar to those of the NRDP (Souza 1996: 542).

Colombia – evidence of improved performance in some municipalities

Pro-poor growth

The Colombian case is often used as an example of the increased responsiveness of local government following democratic decentralisation (World Bank 1996). As in Venezuela and other South American

countries, active local government has made the local administration more responsive, and thereby improved the quality of the services provided, in some cases dramatically. Once local office holders were made accountable (being elected positions, for the first time) they have tended to be much more concerned with staff quality and the efficiency of administrative tools (World Bank 1997: 120–2). One survey, using a representative sample of the adult population, looked in detail at the levels of citizen satisfaction, and found that in two municipalities, 75 per cent of respondents thought that services had improved since mayors were elected (World Bank 1995). In five out of sixteen municipalities, there was a high level of satisfaction across sectors, although in three cases there was a consistent pattern of dissatisfaction (Fiszbein 1997:1034).

However, it should be noted that most of the hard evidence of improved poverty outcomes in Colombia comes from the same research project, and there is little additional material. The sixteen municipalities studied in that project were chosen by local experts, on the basis of being “interesting” cases. This may mean that the results are not generalisable for the country as a whole. Elsewhere, one study concludes, based on the experience of two city municipalities, that most local government projects are allocated on the basis of electoral patronage, and are often useless – for example video equipment to schools which don’t have the capacity to operate them (Velasquez 1991).

Human development

The evidence on the effect of decentralisation on human development outcomes, is mixed. As in Chile, decentralisation of education did not improve the quality of service delivery, and the gap between the best and the worst off widened (Prawda 1993). In the provision of basic services, Velasquez showed that owing to the disparity between resources and responsibilities, there had been a deterioration in public services (Velasquez 1991: 512). However, the World Bank study of sixteen municipalities suggests that these authorities had made significant progress on production efficiency, sectoral balance and distributive performance across three sectors: in education, roads and water supply.²¹ Indeed, across all three sectors, the municipalities studied scored most on distributive performance. Survey responses in four municipalities also revealed a slight preference for municipalities as implementers of water, roads and education policy, although in two municipalities the national government was preferred for education, and the private sector scored highly as well, especially with regard to roads (World Bank 1995: 44–6). However, the survey responses may be biased by the fact that local governments now have responsibility for water, roads and education policy.

Spatial equity

Like other Latin American states, Colombia has a national fund, the integrated rural development fund (Fondo DRI), which gives funds to municipalities for small investment sub-projects, on a matching grant

²¹ Performance on these three criteria was measured on a simple three point scale according to the degree of improvement since decentralisation (World Bank 1995: 44).

basis. Communities contribute labour and materials, identify needs, and select sub-projects, of which 1,600 were funded in 1993 to the tune of US\$ 38 million, with World Bank and IDB assistance. The Fondo DRI aims to reach poor communities and redress the imbalance between rich and poor municipalities through a capacity building component and a co-financing matrix, which targets poorer municipalities and less privately profitable investments (Parker 1995: 39–40). However, experience with other such programmes shows that they can be susceptible to the ‘basketball court’ effect, whereby a useless amenity is built, and amounts spent do not necessarily correspond to improvements in poverty outcomes.

4.4 Social and economic outputs– negative cases

Chile – an example of conflict of evidence and problems of evaluation

Evaluating the effects of decentralisation on poverty alleviation is made difficult by the ideological cleavage between different commentators. Part of the difficulty arises from Chile’s status as a pioneer of neo-liberal social service reforms carried out under the military government of General Pinochet. In 1981, Chile became the first country in the world to privatise social security, and these reforms were linked to the decentralisation programme (Tankersley and Cuzán 1996). In addition, the reforms were part of an attempt to establish a power base for the military government, as officials were appointed by central government. Responsibility for health, primary education, water and sanitation, low income housing programmes and child care was transferred to the municipal level in 1975, the year after the military coup that put General Pinochet into government. At the same time, line Ministries were deconcentrated to the regional level (Castaneda 1992). Following the plebiscite that voted Pinochet out of office in 1990, the new democratically elected government has attempted to restore democratic local government and undermine local elites, although the continuing presence of central government appointees and the persistent popular distrust of local authorities may undermine these efforts.

In addition, there are significant problems in evaluating the effects of decentralisation in Chile. First, decentralisation has not until recently involved devolution, but rather de-concentration and delegation. Choices at the local level have been severely constrained, and under Pinochet, local appointees made the decisions. Second, there have been other changes occurring simultaneously, in particular a squeeze on government expenditure and the privatisation of government services. Third, there is a lack of data, especially at the municipal level (Stewart and Ranis 1994: 11). Finally, the slant of each commentator affects his or her evaluation of poverty outcomes.

Social equity

Many positive evaluations of Chilean decentralisation and social reform are based on its emphasis on improved targeting to the poor. A World Bank study found that decentralisation improved the capacity of local government, allowing municipalities to develop sophisticated targeting mechanisms. The

combination of better staff and better data increased the level of sophistication in municipalities, allowing them to meet specific poverty alleviation requirements. These include the direct delivery, or contracting out, of pre-school meals, nutrition supplements, and similar policies, which often failed to reach their intended beneficiaries elsewhere (World Bank 1996: 135). Improved targeting has had an effect on the poor, as the biggest declines in infant mortality were in the poorest rural areas, and the poorest 30 per cent of the population enjoyed an increasing proportion of education spending between 1974 and 1986 (Castaneda 1992). Indeed, the success of the Pinochet regime in targeting the poorest has been noted elsewhere (Graham 1994).

A different and less positive argument is that Chilean public services have become commodified, with decisions made on 'economic' rather than on a 'political' (or clientelist) basis. The delivery of some public services, especially urban collective services, has been either privatised or contracted out. To pay for works, neighbours and neighbourhood associations can now apply for loans, and public authorities are only responsible for evaluating the feasibility of projects. After twenty years of reform group solidarity and social relations have suffered. However, political manipulation has disappeared from the procedures to request services (Pont-Lezica 1997: 201–14).

Human development

The evidence on the effects of decentralisation on various human development indicators is mixed. Decentralisation of education in Chile tends to show a negative impact overall, and appears to have reinforced inequality. Education was decentralised to the school level, with grants allocated per student to both private and municipal schools. Private schools have tended to fare better, while municipal schools have suffered from deteriorating facilities. The results have been mixed, because in municipal schools standards fell and differences between social groups widened (World Bank 1996: 132; Parry 1997: 127). A survey of mothers in one municipality showed a generally negative response to the decentralisation of education, with complaints of frequent teacher changes, poor conditions, low morale and declining teaching standards (Raczynski, Serrano and Bousquet 1990: 13–15). There were also cuts in teacher salaries, and a rising student-teacher ratio. However, secondary school enrollment rates increased and the average number of years taken to complete school decreased. The same study concludes that declining standards were due to reduced resource allocations, rather than decentralisation *per se*, although it could be argued that there is a connection, in that the grants offered to the school authorities to 'offer' education were insufficient to maintain the same level of service as previously (Stewart and Ranis 1994: 29).

Similar problems of evaluation occur in the health sector, where there is some improvement in some statistics, despite an increase in inequality and declining governmental expenditure. Decentralisation has reduced the real public resources spent on health, although this fall was largely due to privatisation (World Bank 1996: 132). Municipalities have provided additional resources to the health sector, but the richer municipalities were able to provide more. However, this tendency was less pronounced in 1983, following decentralisation than it had been in 1980, before the reforms. Negative comments were

reported with regard to the health service, but these comments have no time perspective, and it is therefore difficult to see what effect decentralisation has had. However, improvements in maternal and child health suggest that efficiency has improved (or has definitely not decreased) following decentralisation (Stewart and Ranis 1994: 30–5).

Spatial equity

Although Chilean decentralisation and social reforms have been lauded for efficiency in targeting the poor, this has not translated into greater spatial equity. For example, while health improvements targeted at the poor have been noted, it is also the case that some municipalities are financing operational deficits with their own resources, which is affecting poorer municipalities with limited revenue sources (Castaneda 1992: 217). Despite the reduced impact of political influence on project allocation, it remains the case that not all neighbourhoods have the same access to funds (Pont-Lezica 1997: 201–14). In education, a Municipal Common Fund, designed to redistribute funds to the poorest municipalities from the wealthiest, failed to prevent large differences between rich and poor, with evident disparities in school quality (Parry 1997: 115–6). The highest levels of educational attainment have tended to come from private schools in high income neighbourhoods in Santiago, whereas the lowest come from rural municipal schools (Prawda 1993: 260–1). It is even acknowledged in the pro-Pinochet literature that more targeting is needed to the poorest areas (Castaneda 1992: 38).

Overall, the evidence on human development indicators and spatial equity suggests that social equity outcomes are not as positive as Castaneda argues, despite the benefits from improved targeting. Regional disparities appear to be growing, and education statistics show a decline for the poorer and rural sectors of society following decentralisation.

Bangladesh, Mexico and Nigeria – generous resources but negative outcomes for the poor

The political motives behind the Ershad regime's attempts at decentralisation are important factors in the negative impact the scheme had on poverty (see above). The decentralised system was intended to build and extend a rural support network for Ershad, by establishing a political party at the local level. Following the fall of Ershad in 1991, the newly elected government felt such resentment at the previous government that it decided to suspend the system (Crook and Manor 1998: 85–135). A new system of decentralisation, introduced in 1993, modified the old structure but has not removed many of the drawbacks of the old, aiming for control rather than local government autonomy (Alam, Huque and Westergaard 1994: 98–9). This was underlined by a 1997 bill reforming the village councils, whereby all members are selected by a controlling authority appointed by the central government (Economist Intelligence Unit 1998: 7). Parallels to the Bangladesh experience, where authoritarian or military regimes with support based on patronage have sought to use decentralisation as a means of re-establishing central government power, can be found in Mexico and Nigeria. In both cases, despite an increase in resources to the local level, poverty outputs have tended to be negative.

Pro-poor growth

Decentralisation in Bangladesh has historically been unsuccessful in terms of poverty alleviation. Three decentralisation schemes in Bangladesh prior to Ershad's *upazila* scheme all failed to deliver. Material welfare, in terms of agricultural output, did not increase, there was little evidence of greater equity at grassroots level, and a number of studies indicated that the beneficiaries were the rich and well-born. Instead, decentralisation was generally seen as a means to channel development resources into the hands of the better off (Ingham and Kalam 1991: 3–4). The Ershad experiment appears to have fared little better, as most generalised findings show a negative impact on the poor. Very few projects specifically for vulnerable groups emerged from the decentralisation experiment, since the rise in relief employment for the rural poor and unemployed was a central government scheme (Westergaard and Alam 1995: 684).

Social equity

The only real efforts to address poverty and equity issues under the Ershad decentralisation scheme were in the implementation of disaster relief programmes by local governments. The view from the grassroots of these programmes was generally negative. Flood rehabilitation programmes were said to suffer from poor management, maldistribution, corruption and shortages of resources (Ingham and Kalam 1992: 382–3). Very few poor households had received any benefits, and what was received was very little compared to actual losses. There were claims that government officials and local representatives had little sympathy for flood victims, and few officers were seen visiting flood affected areas. Furthermore, there was a strong belief that once the immediate danger had passed, rehabilitation work on flood protection was neglected in favour of roads, bridges and buildings, all of which provided greater opportunities for personal enrichment (Ingham and Kalam 1991: 15–6).

In Mexico, the story is similar, but even more pronounced, because programmes intended to promote social equity were in reality attempts to alter patronage relations in favour of the central government and the ruling party. Local governments were given responsibility for the implementation of the national Solidarity fund, ostensibly a poverty alleviation programme. Most projects funded by Solidarity were concerned with rapid results rather than meeting the needs of the poor - state officials, rather than local communities defined projects. In many cases, the building of apparently unnecessary infrastructure, such as basketball courts, was considered to be better than nothing, given the paucity of funds and the time pressures applied by programme officials to produce a tangible result (Fox 1995: 12–3). Overall, vulnerable groups were often increasingly marginalised by the decentralisation process (Fox and Aranda 1996). In Nigeria, even case studies of successful local governments show poor performance on equity issues (Olowu 1992: 44–51).

Human development

Surveys of grassroots opinion show that, in terms of service delivery for the poor, the Ershad experiment failed. It was found that private health care, in the form of traditional doctors was considerably more

popular than local government health facilities. This was because of a lack of medicines and an unsympathetic and impersonal service provided by the local administration. Health officials and doctors were unwilling to visit villages, compounding problems of access for poor patients. Little headway was made in transforming traditional fears of vaccination programmes, and there was general evidence of neglect of health services by local administrations, suggesting that health was not prioritised at this level (Ingham and Kalam 1991: 14–5; Ingham and Kalam 1992: 382). The implementation of decentralised social sector policies in Nigeria was, if anything, even worse. Decentralisation of education led to teacher strikes in one state, as the low priority afforded to education by local governments meant that salaries were left unpaid and teachers feared the consequences of being under the direct control of the council Chairmen (Gboyega 1998: 28) The decentralised implementation of primary health care has also been a disaster (Wunsch and Olowu 1996–7: 70–4).

Spatial equity

There is little evidence on the effects of decentralisation on inter-regional equity in Bangladesh, but the parallel cases of Nigeria and Mexico suggest that the impact has been negative. In Nigeria, the spatial structure of local government encourages urban bias around local government headquarters (Akpan 1990: 268). In Mexico, the Solidarity programme targeted middle income, rather than poorer states, because electoral competition and politics were the major issues in programme allocation. In the states where the local branch of the ruling party retained a *de facto* monopoly – which tended to coincide with the poorer states, such as Chiapas – Solidarity funding was not needed as much (Fox 1995: 12–3). Hence, the lack of positive poverty outcomes can be seen as a result of the overall aim of decentralisation and the Solidarity fund – the maintenance of the ruling party in power.

5 Comparing explanations of the outcomes of decentralisation: is there a common pattern?

The evidence from the cases reviewed above gives a distribution of outcomes which enables us to classify some decentralisation schemes as having performed in a broadly positive manner, and others as having performed poorly with respect to responsiveness to the poor and pro-poor social and economic development. These are summarised in Table 2. The review (together with comparative evidence from other cases not fully reviewed) shows that only the evidence relating to West Bengal indicates an unambiguously positive outcome on both dimensions, whilst Karnataka, Colombia and Brazil show good results in some aspects or for particular local cases. Both the Philippines and Chile have to be regarded as cases whose record is highly contested or which await further evidence and must therefore be sidelined. The other cases – Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Bangladesh, Kenya, Nigeria and Mexico have all to be regarded as examples of the failure of decentralisation to help the poor, with Ghana being the 'least bad' in that its participation record was relatively good and recent increases in its funding mean that it may now have

more potential, at least, to provide more development. But its Achilles heel is its lack of accountability. Bangladesh, Nigeria, Mexico and Kenya can be rated as unambiguously disastrous.

A configurative analysis of these cases reveals the combined impact of the different variables identified in our initial analytical framework (see Table 3).

First, is the variation in relations between local and central governments: one of the clearest contrasts between West Bengal, Karnataka and the Brazilian states on the one hand, and Bangladesh, Nigeria, Mexico and perhaps Kenya on the other, is that even though the latter countries allocated substantial resources to the decentralised authorities, they failed to ensure that they were used in a responsible and accountable manner, whilst respecting local autonomy.

An explanation of why the latter group of governments failed sufficiently to support and monitor the decentralised system may be sought in the politics of local-central relations. It is highly significant that the most successful cases were the ones where central government not only had an ideological commitment to pro-poor policies, but was prepared to engage actively with local politics (even if for its own politically self-serving reasons), to challenge local elite resistance if necessary and to ensure implementation of policies. In India (West Bengal) and Brazil pro-poor outcomes were in fact a product of the synergy between local and central factors: centrally funded, poverty-relevant programmes implemented in cooperation with local governments, and given a strong ideological and organisational impetus at the local level from the commitment of local employees and political activists.

To achieve this it was necessary to have either a strong political party which mobilised an electoral coalition in favour of such policies, or elites who, in the process of competition, saw the policies as a way of achieving popularity. Such success as the Colombian cases achieved can be explained in a similar way, in that directed central funding was accompanied by the emergence of an elected leadership which made a virtue out of its commitment to popular, participatory, policies. But it may be predicted that the Colombian successes will never be generalised nationally without the commitment of a strong national party. It should also be noted that none of these developments would have been possible in the successful cases without regular, competitive elections.

In Nigeria, Bangladesh and Mexico, on the other hand, the linkage between central government funding and local leaders had an entirely different purpose. In these cases, central governments were using funding either to create *ab initio* or to consolidate an alliance with local elites based on the availability of patronage opportunities. In Mexico, the initiative took place within an already well established ruling party structure, and its purpose was simply to strengthen or revive the party in key local areas. In Bangladesh, the intention was to create a party with a rural political base to support the regime, whilst in Nigeria, the military aimed to undermine state government challenges to its hegemony, and to create dependent local government-based elites who would be its supporters throughout the small towns and rural areas of the country. The political need to construct such alliances and clientelistic power bases in turn explains the utter lack of accountability and corruption which characterised the Nigerian system.

In none of these three countries was it likely that decentralisation would empower any kind of challenge to local elites resistant to, or uninterested in the development of pro-poor policies.

Table 2 The outcomes of decentralisation, by country

Country:	Outcomes:	
	Participation by/ responsiveness to the poor	Impact on social and economic poverty
West Bengal	Good: improved participation and representation, improved responsiveness	Good: positive on growth, equity, HD; evidence lacking on spatial equity
Karnataka	Fairly good: improved representation, but participation of poor less effective and responsiveness low	Neutral: did little to directly help pro-poor growth, or equity; HD and spatial equity indirectly benefited from funding allocations and development progress
Colombia	Fairly good: evidence on participation/representation ambiguous, but responsiveness improved.	Fairly good: little evidence on growth or equity, but good results on HD, spatial equity
Philippines	Mixed: representation and participation improved through POs and NGOs, but evidence on responsiveness contested, local elites still powerful	No evidence presented
Brazil	Little evidence, but thought to be poor as spoils/patronage system run by powerful Mayors and Governors still dominant	Good on equity, HD in <i>exceptional areas</i> where state or federal programmes combined with decentralisation; poor generally on spatial equity
Chile	No evidence presented	Mixed: growth, equity good as result of targetting, but evidence on HD, spatial equity contested, tends to show negative effects .
Cote d'Ivoire	Poor: participation and representation low, responsiveness very low	No evidence presented, but spatial equity probably improved through government allocations to rural areas
Bangladesh	Poor: some improvement in participation, but very negative on representation of poor, responsiveness low	Very poor on all criteria, undermined by corruption and political patronage
Ghana	Fairly poor: Participation by poor and community groups improves, limited improvement in representation, but responsiveness low.	Limited evidence shows that resources involved too insignificant to have made much impact. Spatial equity may have improved through government allocations
Kenya	Very poor: politically-run deconcentration scheme	Some impact on spatial equity through politically motivated redistribution
Nigeria	Very poor: low participation and representation, very bad record of responsiveness and lack of accountability	Poor: very bad record on equity, HD; spatial equity subject to political manipulation and urban bias.
Mexico	No evidence presented, but assumed that party-dominated patronage system remains little changed	Poor in spite of significant central funding allocations: equity, spatial equity and HD undermined by political patronage considerations and 'basketball court' syndrome .

Neither Ghana nor Cote d'Ivoire can be put into the same extreme category as the previous three cases, but the same factors are relevant to explaining some aspects of their decentralisation outcomes. In Cote d'Ivoire, a 'Mexican' logic was initially at work: a long-established, dominant ruling party seeking to renew itself by offering openings to new cadres and allocating resources to the small towns of the rural areas, but in a way which would prevent the emergence of any broader political challenge to the regime.

The mayors were simply an extension of the ruling party network, and at the local level the reform was virtually guaranteed to remain a fairly conservative, elite-based exercise. In Ghana, it is possible, had the initial 'revolutionary' trajectory of the regime survived, that a West Bengal scenario might have developed. But by the late 1980s, the revolutionary organisations were little more than 'Rawlings loyalists' and once they were converted into a conventional political party, they became part of a centrally controlled power and patronage system, working with coopted local elites where possible, and excluding the opposition elites where necessary. Ghana also lacked (and still lacks) competitive party elections at local level, a key factor in forcing the kinds of alliances seen in the successful cases.

Second, the problem of 'elite capture' and local power structures: in West Bengal and Brazil (the only two with positive social and economic outcomes), conservative local elites were challenged locally by groups supported externally by an ideologically committed government and/or party. In Karnataka, as in other states of Brazil, elite capture probably vitiated the otherwise positive effects of the reform, whilst in Colombia in the cases cited, electoral competition seems to have produced a more reform-minded local elite. In Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Kenya, by contrast, conservative elite capture of decentralisation was actually facilitated by the government's desire to create and sustain a power base in the countryside and to prevent opposition forces coalescing, whilst in Ghana a similar motivation took over after an initial commitment to radical reform faded. Cote d'Ivoire and Mexico exemplify a third scenario in which decentralisation was used by a ruling party to renew and extend the party's support without any real commitment to pro-poor policies which might disturb the entrenched but dependent networks of influence and patronage.

Third, the extent to which enhanced participation was effective in establishing accountability. As noted already, fair and competitive elections were a key factor in developing public accountability in the most successful cases. Even in cases like Bangladesh or Ghana, elections have had important effects at certain points, when they operated to throw out local elected officials even though the general regime context prevented the results from changing the real character of the local governments. At the level of institutional accountability, the difference between the successful and unsuccessful cases is absolutely clear

In the Indian cases, an existing tradition of democratic government, a well-established civil service and the scale of the authorities themselves at district level meant that there was a good balance between the political clout which elected politicians could exercise, and the ability of civil servants and council committees to invoke legal and accounting norms if politicians tried to exceed or abuse their powers. In other states of India, of course, this balance has been severely challenged, but relative to cases such as Bangladesh or Nigeria, the situation in West Bengal or Karnataka is clearly of a different order. In Bangladesh, the elected Chairmen were out of control, their main concern being to maintain their political relationships with the Ershad patronage machine; in Nigeria, the behaviour of Local Council Chairmen led eventually to a wave of ineffective 'impeachment' proceedings which were themselves an abuse of procedure. The contrast with the Brazilian cases is again instructive; although these were situations where

the local political elites were not instinctively sympathetic to the policies they were being asked to cooperate with, the strongest possible accountability was ensured through the organisational and public controls.

The importance of accountability for pro-poor outcomes lies simply in the fact that if a pro-poor political interest is represented at the institutional level (either through participation or through sympathetic elites) then it can be manifested in the development and implementation of policy. Thus the Karnataka outcome can be explained by the lack of an actual representation of the poor within the panchayati institutions; whilst one of the factors explaining the Ghana outcome is the failure of elected politicians (whoever they represented) to establish control over the administrative and financial machinery of district government.

Another variation in this set of factors underlies the low responsiveness of the Ivorian communes. In this case, although elected officials (the mayors) were able, because of their political status and the effectiveness of the Ivorian state administrative and financial system, to establish good control over their administrations, their connections with the electorate were so weak that their public accountability was virtually non-existent. This may be directly compared with the Colombian cases, where the most successful mayors clearly had established a public constituency for their approach.

In the Philippines, it seems clear that there is organised representation of ostensibly pro-poor groups (although their credentials need to be established in some cases), strong central government support for programmes which promote their interests, and devolution of power and resources. The prognosis should therefore be good, the main negative factors being the empowerment of conservative local elites which has taken place, and conflict between local governments and the staff of deconcentrated central government agencies.

Fourth, the system for allocating resources, both administrative and financial. With respect to funding, as indicated, simply giving generous amounts is not enough. The most successful systems in our review enjoyed:

1. secure and adequate earmarked funding (linked with deconcentration) together with ‘ringfenced’ allocations from general taxation, or:
2. targeted central poverty-relevant programmes or ‘social funds’ for development (with the appropriate accountability). Success in ameliorating spatial inequality only came (as in Colombia) with the allocation of such funds using an adequate equalisation formula, or:
3. a hierarchy of authorities which, at the larger end, (regions, districts in India, states in some federal systems) had sufficient scale to handle the resources, raise some of their own revenues and provide effective support to the lower level, grass roots bodies.

With respect to administrative resources, the successful cases were able to overcome the standard problems of lack of both high and middle level staff, and lack of administrative ‘infrastructure’ by using existing, well-established administrations at a level where there was sufficient strength for careers,

recruitment and management not to suffer. Apart from their other problems, the decentralised experiments in Ghana, Bangladesh, and Nigeria all suffered from attempting to set up new authorities with inadequate staffing and poor management, and failing to address the legal and personnel problems which inevitably arose. They also underestimated the costs both of the extra staffing required and of the inter-agency/ parallel hierarchy conflicts which arose.

A further aspect of administrative capacity lies in the organisational commitment and 'morale' of the local administrations. In the unsuccessful cases this was clearly low, indeed had probably been made worse by the kind of decentralisation they had experienced (the fear of Nigerian public servants faced with decentralised control is instructive). In West Bengal, Karnataka, Brazil and Colombia, by contrast, the evidence shows that commitment and willingness to serve the public improved. In Brazil this was connected to the specific organisational form of the programmes, which, it must be recognised, had little to do with decentralisation, and more to do with trying to evade the implications of purely local control. In the other cases, political leadership was clearly a crucial factor.²²

The impact of the **fifth** variable – the length of time a system has been in operation – was again clearly evident in the West Bengal case, which has experienced the longest and most stable existence of any of the schemes examined (twenty years). This has enabled many detailed studies to reveal all its faults, but also given it a political and administrative solidity and a record of relative achievement which few other systems can yet emulate.

One might conclude that accountability and responsiveness to the poor is still most likely to emerge locally where representation of their interests can be supported externally, in the context of a conflict between local and central forces with different power bases. It is this point which is illustrated so clearly by the West Bengal case. Here, as Echeverri-Gent argues, elite capture by an 'anti-poor' class was prevented by a combination of competitive electoral politics and the ability of a 'counter-elite' (the Communist Party) to mobilise a broad alliance of the poor, middle peasants and salariat against the old landlord class (Echeverri-Gent 1992a and 1992b).

The notion that there is a predictable or general link between decentralisation of government and the development of more 'pro-poor' policies or poverty-alleviating outcomes clearly lacks any convincing evidence. Those who advocate decentralisation on these grounds, at least, should be more cautious, which is not to say that there are not other important benefits, particularly in the field of participation and empowerment. Our comparative analysis also highlights the importance of 'regime' in understanding the circumstances in which decentralisation of government might benefit the poor. Parties, and the ideological character of parties, do matter; decentralisation in the cases we reviewed only produced more pro-poor outcomes when a national (or state-level) party and government was elected with a commitment and a programme for social and economic redistribution, and the capacity to prevent locally hostile elites from sabotaging such a programme. This requires both adequate central state capacity (in order to

²² In Uganda, the two districts studied showed increases in morale which were a combination of the greater control given by decentralisation and the encouraging effects of generous donor sponsorship.

monitor local government performance) and the willingness to provide positive financial and administrative support to decentralised governments.

Table 3 Strength of explanatory factors in decentralisation outcomes, by country

Country/State	Explanatory factor					
	1a	1b	2	3a	3b	4
West Bengal	2	2	2	2	2	2
Colombia	2	1	1	2	2	1
Brazil (Ceara)	2	2	1	2	2	2
Karnataka	2	1	1	2	2	1
Philippines	2	2	1	1	1	0
Chile	1	0	1	2	1	1
Ghana	0	1	0	1	0	2
Cote d'Ivoire	1	0	0	1	1	2
Mexico	0	0	0	2	0	1
Bangladesh	0	0	0	1	0	0
Nigeria	0	0	0	0	0	1

Key: 0 = low, 1 = medium, 2 = high. Explanatory factors: 1a, Central government commitment to support decentralisation and enforce accountability; 1b, Central government commitment to pro-poor policies, challenge local elites; 2, Representation of poor AND effective accountability; 3a, Targeted funding; 3b, Administrative capacity and organisational commitment; 4, Time

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