

Session 3

Is Capacity a Constraint to Decentralized Public Service Delivery? Discourse and Reality: The Case of Pakistan¹

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Abstract

1- Decentralization—the transfer of political, administrative and fiscal authority to lower levels of government—has long been considered to be a promising approach to promote broad-based development. More than 80% of all developing countries have engaged in some type of decentralization during the past decades. However, it has remained a contested question whether decentralization will lead to improved rural service provision and, thus, promote sustainable development. The empirical evidence has been mixed in terms of pro-poor development, and different stakeholders often hold opposite views on this question. The question of capacity plays a central role in the debate on decentralization, since opponents of decentralization often argue that local governments lack adequate capacity, while proponents question the validity of this argument and point to the vested interests of stakeholders at higher levels of government who may lose privileges in the decentralization process.

2- The paper presents a case study from Pakistan on the wide-ranging devolution reforms introduced in 2001 and applies a discourse analytical approach to understand the positions and arguments of different stakeholders on decentralization. The paper compares the different discourses with available evidence and derives policy implications with respect to the design of capacity development initiatives with regard to decentralized public service provision. Table 1 summarizes the major findings of the discourse analysis.

¹ This presentation is based on a joint paper with the same title, written by Sarfraz Khan Qureshi, Kamiljon Akramov and Regina Birner. Kamiljon Akramov is Research Fellow at Governance Division, International Food Policy Research Institute, and Regina Birner is Senior Research Fellow at Governance Division, International Food Policy Research Institute.

Table 1. Overview of the decentralization discourse in Pakistan

	Pro-devolution	Critics/Skeptics of current devolution plan	Anti-devolution
Typical proponents	Current federal government, National Reconstruction Bureau (NRB)—a think tank established to design local government reform packages, Military, ruling coalition, elected local government officials, majority of general public including women, NGOs involved in development activities, majority of donors	Mostly intelligentsia (scholars, university professors, professionals, etc.), NGOs involved in human rights and civil liberties, some retired top-level bureaucrats with academic background	National and provincial political parties in opposition to current regime, bureaucrats belonging to elite civil Services, Senators, and Members of Parliament belonging to opposition parties, Revenue collectors, landlords, some international NGOs
Central argument of the story-lines	Prior to 2001, the local government system was very complex in design, ineffective, and less responsive to people's needs. The system itself was the primary source of corruption and bad governance. Therefore, the administrative, financial and developmental powers needed to be devolved to the elected local governments to improve service delivery. Bureaucracy (district administration) needed to be subordinated to the elected district officials.	There are certain gaps in the design of the devolution plan. The new local government system is not complete in geographical coverage and conceptual design. Even the incomplete system of local government plan is partially implemented. The institution of a district ombudsman conceived in design of local government is not established so far:	The devolution plan is politically motivated to give legitimacy and strengthen authoritarian rule of the current regime.
Goals/ Priorities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Responsible, accountable and responsive governance 2. Improving public service delivery 3. Achieving Millennium Development Goals 	Empowering people, poverty reduction and improved service delivery	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mainstream political parties-reestablishing democracy 2. Conservative religious group—to preserve religious and cultural values
Self- positioning of proponents	Promoters of accountable and responsive governance, efficient and equitable public service delivery	Promoters of more comprehensive countrywide governance reform with clear division and separation of power	Mainstream political parties: defendants of democracy, human rights and civil liberties Religious groups: defendants of traditional religious and cultural values
Positioning of opponents	Opposing devolution by mainstream political parties and bureaucracy seen as sources of corruption and bad governance in the past; Losers trying to regain power. International NGOs seen as one-dimensional and naïve.	Government including NRB seen as inconsistent and neglecting the need for more broad and comprehensive governance reform. Opponents of devolution seen as losers trying to regain the power.	The regime is seen as trying to gain legitimacy and create political base through devolution.

3- In conclusion, the 2001 devolution reforms were introduced throughout the country with a nation-wide uniform design which did not take care of variations in local context. The reform package introduced mechanisms for capacity development at there levels of individual, institutions and society. The incentives and institutions introduced for capacity development did not adequately address the issue of the positions taken by different groups in the public administrative service at the federal, provincial and local levels. Donor priorities in support of the devolution experiment had largely catered to visible activities i.e. courses, manuals, computer systems which implied a bias towards self-contained and pre-ordained packages. While this had made the aid process more manageable; it may have closed off many options for creative capacity development or incremental discovery of new knowledge.

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