

**Human Development Report Office**

**OCCASIONAL PAPER**

**Background paper for HDR 2003**

**Democratisation with Inclusion: Political Reforms and People's Empowerment  
at the Grassroots**

**James Manor**

**2002/3**



Background Paper

Human Development Report 2003

***Democratisation with Inclusion:  
Political Reforms and People's  
Empowerment at the Grassroots***

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December 2002

In recent years, many governments in developing countries have – in various ways and to varying degrees – democratised their political systems. But as they have done so, it has become clear that democracy does not automatically benefit poor people and groups that have long faced social exclusion.

This realisation is bound up with the recognition that there is more to poverty than just low incomes and a scarcity of material assets. Poor people – both the poorest<sup>1</sup> and large numbers of decidedly poor people who are not quite so destitute – not only suffer from the problems that are captured in the Human Development Index (illiteracy, malnutrition, disease, etc). They are also afflicted by socio-political disadvantages that impede their ability to share in the benefits of democratisation.

The least well off tend strongly to be:

- the least confident,
- the least well organised,
- the least capable of articulating their concerns,
- the least knowledgeable about the political and policy processes,
- the least able to gain access to those two processes, to benefits that flow from them, and to public services and legal protection,
- the least skilled at exerting influence over those two processes,
- the least well connected (with one another and with influential people), and
- the least independent of larger economic forces.

Their needs are great, but need by itself does not imply the awareness and the ability to take collective action in increasingly democratised systems.<sup>2</sup>

The growing understanding of these realities has persuaded many in developing countries that, if the poor are to make the gains which are necessary to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, steps must be taken to address these problems. Democratisation alone is insufficient. Poor people must be more fully included in newly democratised systems. Just as an earlier generation recognised the need for growth with redistribution, many today have come to see the need for *democratisation with inclusion*.

With this in mind, many governments in developing countries have recently undertaken political reforms -- new policies, institutions and strategies that are intended to promote the empowerment and inclusion of ordinary people, especially the poor, and their capacity to take collective action. This chapter

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, M. Lipton, *The Poor and the Poorest. Some Interim Findings*, World Bank Discussion Paper 25 (Washington, 1988); and J. Sachs' contribution to *Annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics – 2000: Proceedings*, on the World Bank website.

<sup>2</sup> V.S.P. Coelho, I.A.L. De Andrade and M.C. Montoya, "Deliberative Fora and the Democratisation of Social Policies in Brazil", *IDS Bulletin* (April 2002) p, 71.

examines these by focusing mainly at and just above the *local level*, since it is there that the impact of these new initiatives must be felt.

It has to be said that some governments in developing countries are (so far at least) disinclined to attempt such reforms. Some have initiated reforms that impinge at the local level as substitutes for reforms higher up. Some have hesitated to pursue reforms very far. By assessing the promise of various reforms, this chapter seeks to encourage greater efforts in this vein.

Political reforms can yield significant benefits not just for poor and excluded groups, but also for the *governments* that undertake them. Reforms which have real substance and which enable significant bottom-up input from poor and excluded groups, can enhance efforts to address many of the problems identified in other chapters of this report. That is clearly in the interests of governments in developing nations that have committed themselves to the Millennium Development Goals. And – not incidentally from political leaders’ point of view – these reforms tend strongly to increase the legitimacy and the popularity of the governments that introduce them.

There is no shortage of studies that focus on, or assume the likelihood of state failure. By contrast, this chapter concentrates on state potential and the potential of political reforms. This can be done in a spirit of hard-headed realism. There is plenty of empirical evidence to indicate not just the limitations of governments – on which so many analyses have dwelt -- but also the promise of political reforms. The presumption of state failure is as unrealistic as starry-eyed optimism. This analysis seeks to avoid both extremes.

This chapter consists of three parts. Part I identifies the range of political reforms that have gained momentum in recent years. Part II examines how these have worked in practice, and the conditions that tend to enhance (or undermine) their constructive potential. Part III focuses on actions that might strengthen that potential – on issues that need to be addressed and on supportive initiatives, conditions and coalitions that could make a difference.

Much of this analysis applies to countries that are falling short in the pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals. But it is also relevant to countries that are largely on track to achieve those goals, since large numbers of people in many of those countries do not fully enjoy the benefits which flow from that achievement. The initiatives assessed here can help in both cases.

## PART I: POTENTIALLY CONSTRUCTIVE INITIATIVES

These initiatives fall into five broad categories.

- The devolution of powers and resources onto elected, multi-purpose local councils, which have been created or strengthened in over 60 developing countries.
- The creation of ‘user committees’ in connection with development programmes in single sectors.
- The introduction of other processes and devices to promote bottom-up participation, consultation, downward accountability and empowerment.
- Government efforts to engage with, and to enlist support from, sections of civil society.
- The encouragement of competition among elites who need political support from poor, excluded groups.

None of these sets of initiatives is a panacea. None is free of ambiguities. But they hold genuine promise of headway towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and towards greater influence, autonomy, liberty and dignity for ordinary people – and not least for disadvantaged groups -- in developing countries. We need to consider each of them in a little more detail.

### *Devolution to Elected Multi-Purpose Councils*

Since the early 1980s, many governments (of widely varying character) have created elected councils or revived moribund councils at and above the local level. These councils are assigned multiple tasks – often local schools, health centres, minor roads, minor public works, natural resource management, etc. The stated purpose of these initiatives has been to draw ordinary people – through their elected representatives – into decisions about development policies and projects.

Most of the early initiatives in this vein were taken by governments in developing countries *on their own* – without encouragement from international donor agencies. Donors later began to press for decentralisation, but even when they did so, the demonstration effect from successful experiments in other developing countries was often the main trigger for action by governments.

Almost all decisions to experiment with democratic decentralisation have been taken by senior government figures in the absence of pressure from below for devolution.<sup>3</sup> But to say this is not to suggest that these reforms are

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<sup>3</sup> The only exceptions are South Korea and, arguably, the Philippines.

somehow invalid. Where decentralised systems have worked tolerably well, these supply-driven initiatives have catalysed substantial demand from below for influence over decisions that affect the well being of ordinary folk. Such systems tend to take on a life of their own and sometimes make it impossible for governments to continue using them as substitutes for political reform at higher levels – as Box 1 illustrates.

***Box 1: Political Reforms Can Take on a Life of Their Own and Help to Trigger Broader Reforms***

In Bangladesh in 1985, the military dictatorship of General H.M Ershad created new councils at the sub-district level to serve as a substitute for genuine democracy at the national level. Free and fair elections selected chairpersons for these councils, while council members were indirectly elected by local-level councils that had long existed. General Ershad channelled substantial development funds to the new chairpersons and, thereby, turned them into valuable allies at a level in the political system where he had previously lacked backers. For a time, this decentralised system seemed a tame bulwark of the military regime.

This emboldened the government to go to excess at the elections to village-level councils in 1988. It used violence very widely to intimidate opposition parties. In many areas this frightened many voters away from the polls, and in others the security forces barred voters' way. In most parts of the country, few (or no) people voted – but this did not stop the government from declaring candidates sympathetic to it as victors. This violent episode became known as “the voter less election”.

In reaction to this, and to the subservience to the regime of sub-district council chairpersons, voters at a freer sub-district council election in March 1990 ousted over 90% of incumbent chairpersons. This was a clear signal that they preferred genuinely autonomous councils, and more generally, that they were fed up with military rule. That election added fuel to a mounting campaign of mass protest for the restoration of democracy – which in November 1990, toppled the dictatorship. This decentralised system, which began as a *substitute* for national-level democracy, eventually became a key element in its *restoration*.

Where governments have been generous in devolving powers and resources, these institutions have often managed impressive achievements. The political and policy processes become more transparent, accountable and effective. Government becomes more responsive – in three senses. The *speed* of responses from government institutions increases because local authorities need no longer wait (often for long periods) for permission from higher levels before

acting. The *quantity* of responses increases because local councils almost always prefer to spend money on numerous small projects, rather than on a few big, expensive things -- hospitals, dams, etc. – which are often favoured by those higher up. And crucially, the *quality* of responses improves – if ‘quality’ is measured by the degree to which responses conform to popular preferences.

The overall amount of money corruptly diverted from development programmes has sometimes declined – because decentralisation enhances transparency. Absenteeism by government employees in local schools and health centres has sometimes declined, as Box 2 illustrates. Information flows between governments and ordinary people improves markedly – in both directions. Bureaucrats are empowered by an increase in the flow of information from below, through elected members of local councils. They receive early warnings of potential disasters in remote localities – outbreaks of disease, floods, droughts, etc. – and empowered local authorities are able to react swiftly, before things mushroom into catastrophes. The uptake on government health programmes increases because elected local councillors are better able than bureaucrats to explain the rationale for them in terms that ordinary folk can grasp. These gains enhance the job satisfaction of lower-level bureaucrats, and compensate somewhat for the loss of some of their former powers. Decentralising governments gain greater legitimacy and popularity in the eyes of local dwellers. And because ordinary people gain a voice in decisions about development projects, they acquire a sense of ownership of them, so that projects (and development) become more sustainable.<sup>4</sup>

***Box 2: Reducing Absenteeism among Government Employees in Health and Education***

In South Asia, absenteeism by government employees in schools and local health centres is a severe problem. By some estimates, these people go missing more than 70% of the time. In certain Indian states where decentralised councils have been substantially empowered, absenteeism has been significantly (though not spectacularly) reduced. Members and chairperson of the councils have the power to reprimand, suspend -- and in certain places, even to dismiss – errant employees. And when ordinary people learn of these powers – which council members delight in announcing – they routinely bring complaints about absenteeism to councillors. Prompt action tends to follow. The reduction in absenteeism thus enhances the delivery of basic health and education services at no extra cost to the exchequer. This can have a palpable impact in the pursuit of Millennium Development Goals 2 (achieving universal primary education), 4 (reducing child mortality), 5 (improving maternal health) and 6 (combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases).

In a large number of cases, however, elected local councils have found it difficult to make great headway because governments have been unwilling to devolve substantial powers and resources to them. Some of these systems have stagnated. Many have performed tolerably well, though not spectacularly. Even those that work only tolerably well usually stimulate greater participation, civil society activity, and information flows between governments and society. They tend to make government at least somewhat more transparent, accountable and responsive. This often reduces popular apathy, alienation and cynicism.

But – as we shall see in more detail in Part II -- they do not automatically or consistently benefit poor and socially excluded groups. This problem needs to be tackled since, if they can be made more inclusive, they have even greater promise.

### *Creating Single-Purpose ‘User Committees’*

Since the early 1990s, many governments in developing countries have created ‘user committees’ (sometimes called ‘stakeholder committees’). Their stated purpose is to encourage consultation with ordinary folk at the local level about development policies within single sectors – health committees, parent teacher associations, water users’ committees, joint forest management committees, etc. The proliferation of user committees has been vast and rapid. In just one sector in just one Indian state, there are no fewer than 10,000 user committees.<sup>5</sup> When we multiply that across other sectors and all developing countries, the number of such committees is staggering.

User committees are both extremely important and little studied, partly because they are relatively new. So the comments on them here are more tentative than the remarks made about other initiatives. But despite this – and despite *serious doubts about how often they qualify as political reforms that empower ordinary people* (discussed in Part II), the rapid spread of these bodies compels us to consider them.

They differ from multi-purpose local councils in several important ways -- four of which are worth stressing.

- Their *origins* are different – they are mostly inspired by donor programs, which sometimes means that governments in developing countries have a rather tenuous sense of ownership of them and are inclined to manipulate them in ways that donors do not intend.

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<sup>4</sup> R.C. Crook and J. Manor, *Democracy and Decentralisation in South Asia and West Africa: Participation, Accountability and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> This refers to committees for the welfare of women and children in the state of Andhra Pradesh.



- Their *remits* are different – they deal with single developmental sectors, in contrast to local councils with multiple responsibilities.
- The *funding* provided to them (often from donors) is usually more (often far more) generous than that provided to local councils.
- The *processes by which their members are selected* are often less reliably democratic than the secret ballot elections that are normally used to choose members of local councils.

Because their members are often selected by less fully democratic means than are local councillors, and because some governments are even more inclined than with local councils to seek to coopt and control them, user committees usually do less than local councils to promote participation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, etc. And like councils, they often fail to serve the needs of poorer groups – not least because governments sometimes draw prosperous people onto user committees. But they are not without promise, and their often abundant funding gives them substantial potential – if governments manage them in ways that can benefit the poor.

#### *Other Devices to Promote Bottom-Up Participation and Empowerment*

Governments in many developing countries have also experimented with other devices and processes to promote more bottom-up participation, downward accountability to ordinary people – especially the poor -- and greater responsiveness from state actors. Some of these have been linked to councils and user committees, while others stand apart from them.

These initiatives include the following.

1. Mass local-level meetings to deliberate on development issues
2. Direct democracy at the local level
3. Incorporating pro-poor civil society organisations into decentralised systems
4. Instruments to permit action to secure citizens' rights
5. Devices to improve access to information and services
6. Exercises in participatory auditing
7. Initiatives to change the ethos and behaviour of government employees
8. Incentives and sanctions for government employees
9. Exercises in participatory planning
10. Joint management with civil society organisations of development programmes

The workings of these devices are examined in Part II.

### *Enlisting Support from Sections of Civil Society*

If political leaders' efforts at reform are to be *politically sustainable*, they need backing from important interest groups at all levels in the political system. And if reforms are to *make an impact on disadvantaged groups* at the local level (and thus on the Millennium Development Goals), they need help from those groups themselves and from organisations that support them.

Some organisations within civil society -- both at local and at higher levels - will either oppose political reforms or seek to prevent the poor and socially excluded from benefiting from them. Civil society, like democratic decentralisation, sometimes tends to reproduce and not to challenge existing hierarchies, inequalities and patterns of exclusion. So governments need to reach out *not* to civil society in general, but to poor peoples' organisations and their allies.<sup>6</sup>

Many political leaders actively seek to enlist support from sympathetic sections of civil society. But some are reluctant to engage with civic associations -- often because they regard them as alien, truculent, illegitimate or weak. In many developing countries, civil society is indeed rather weak -- and that is often especially true of organisations consisting of or supporting the poor. It is thus a matter of urgency that governments -- which do far more to shape civil society than the social science literature suggests -- develop sympathetic views of civic associations -- especially pro-poor organisations -- and do their best to encourage them.

If pro-poor reforms are to be politically sustainable, 'allies' of the poor are critically important. It is *almost always* necessary to cultivate support from *broad* social coalitions that include both poorer groups and some elements of the *non-poor*. Coalitions of this kind seldom develop without some encouragement by powerful actors in governments. So leaders who are serious about progress towards the Millennium Development Goals need to pay attention to the creation -- and, over time, the maintenance -- of such coalitions. Political reforms are usually very attractive to non-poor groups. But to ensure that some of those groups join forces with poorer groups to support efforts to ensure that the poor also benefit, governments need to

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<sup>6</sup> It is important, for analytical reasons, that we not define 'uncivil' organisations out of civil society -- as some do. The term 'civil society' applies to *all* voluntary associations with significant autonomy from the state -- including those representing prosperous groups that may oppose gains for the poor, and those that might favour autocracy, hierarchy and social exclusion. The civil society initiatives discussed in this chapter tend, of course, to emerge from organisations that are more enlightened. Also note that 'civil society' includes not just large NGOs, but also smaller, more informal organisations at lower levels.

- bring organisations representing the poor and the non-poor together, around issues of mutual concern and interest, and
- include elements in new initiatives that appeal to some non-poor groups while benefiting and empowering the poor.

When governments adopt this approach, and encourage the pursuit of goals which are shared by diverse interests, unexpectedly constructive results sometimes emerge – partnerships involving government institutions, civil society organisations and, at times, even the private sector (see Box 3).

***Box 3: A Partnership between Decentralised Councils, Civil Society Organisations and the Private Sector***

Projects to provide basic infrastructure like roads to extractive industries often provoke bitter resentment and conflict with residents of the localities affected. But the sensitive construction of partnerships between companies, elected local councils, civil society organisations and ordinary people can sometimes overcome these problems – to everyone’s benefit.

In the Indian state of West Bengal, a coal mining company needed to construct a road linking one of its mines to a railway siding. To achieve this, it had to gain permission to construct the road across numerous plots of land owned by local residents. Local civil society organisations and the elected council for the area saw that the road would make the mine financially viable – which would ensure long-term employment in the mine for poorer local residents. It would also give everyone living in the locality access to a nearby hospital and school, and to markets for their handicrafts and other produce. Negotiations among these diverse interests – which entailed the use of participatory devices -- yielded an agreement in a much shorter time than usual. Permission from landowners for the building of the road in exchange for compensation from the company was granted, and local councils agreed to assume the costs of road maintenance after four years. The involvement of civil society organisations (in a state which had previously been reluctant to interact with them) and participatory devices ensured that local residents understood that this was not a zero sum game and thus did not regard the project with resentment.

This yielded not just economic benefits but other, important but intangible gains for all of the three sectors (voluntary, governmental and industrial) involved. Civic associations saw the benefits of engagement with the other two sectors. Government institutions, which had previously been reluctant to deal with civil society, changed their view. And the mining company recognised

that negotiations with the other sectors minimised delays and yielded a dependable consensus that secured its interests. Actors in all three sectors acquired negotiating skills which had previously been absent or badly underdeveloped.<sup>7</sup>

In reaching out to non-poor organisations that are avowedly pro-poor, governments need to be aware of one key problem. In many developing countries, large national or regional non-governmental organisations that are pro-poor often claim

- to have effective networks that penetrate down into local arenas, and
- to be using those networks to integrate civic associations consisting of or supporting the poor in otherwise isolated localities, and to build their capacity to reap benefits from political reforms.

But there is considerable evidence to indicate that those large organisations actually achieve this in only a few cases – examples include Brazil, the Philippines, India and Bangladesh.<sup>8</sup> Governments that pursue pro-poor political reforms need to encourage and assist such large organisations to become more effective at reaching and integrating poor and pro-poor organisations at the local level, since their reforms are more likely to yield positive results where this is true.

Pro-poor civil society organisations can of course be relied upon to mount initiatives of their own, quite apart from efforts by governments to enlist their support. Some of these are entirely the creations of local-level voluntary associations. More often, they result from collaborations between local associations and larger, higher-level non-governmental organisations and/or donor agencies. Whatever their origin, such initiatives need to be tolerated and, if possible, assisted by reforming governments. In some instances, the best way to assist them is by lending active support. But in others, it is advisable to leave them alone – while removing impediments, especially those erected by low-level bureaucrats who are often more hostile to civil society than are their superiors. This and other issues are discussed further in Part II.

#### *Encouraging Elite Competition for the Support of Poor and Excluded Groups*

This last potential initiative is less widely recognised by political leaders in developing countries than those discussed above. If however, they wish to base their future political prospects on popularity among the poor whose numerical

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<sup>7</sup> Natural Resources Cluster, Business Partners for Development, *Case Study 6: Sarshatali Coal Mine, India – Update* (London, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> This is based on interviews during 2002 with numerous World Bank civil society specialists and programme officers of the Ford Foundation who work to strengthen civil society.

strength in many newly democratised systems offers a solid foundation, it is very important – both for politicians and for the poor.

Evidence from a number of developing countries indicates that poor and excluded groups at the grassroots are far more able to reap political gains from the institutions and processes discussed above if elites at and/or just above the local level feel compelled to compete for their support. Indeed, this often appears to have a greater impact than (i) reservations of seats on local bodies for members of poor or excluded groups, and perhaps even (ii) the efforts of pro-poor civil society organisations (especially in countries where civil society is weak). If a local leader (or elite) concludes that it is in his vital interests to cultivate poorer groups, he (such leaders are almost always men) may not just appeal to them and offer them benefits, he may also work to organise and mobilise them. Rival leaders and elites quickly perceive what is happening and often follow suit. Competition ensues.

Such competition can take four different forms, which may coexist. If inter-party competition is a factor in local politics, competition may develop between *parties*. Even if one party predominates within a local arena, different *factions* within it may compete in this way. Where parties matter little, rival *local elites* may engage in competition. And sometimes, *individual local leaders* may vie for the backing of the poor. In many localities in developing countries, poor people are so numerous that – once democratisation begins -- it is only a matter of time before such competition develops. Part II provides a discussion of how leaders at higher levels in political systems may encourage this sort of contestation. It is often difficult to do much in this vein, but contestation often breaks out even if they do nothing.

## **PART II: HOW INITIATIVES WORK -- AND CONDITIONS THAT ENHANCE THEIR CONSTRUCTIVE POTENTIAL**

Before we turn to detailed discussions of the specific issues identified in Part I, it is important to call attention to three over-arching themes that affect all aspects of government in developing countries, and events at all levels – including of course the grassroots. These themes powerfully influence how the initiatives examined here emerge and evolve. And they give rise to many of the conditions or contextual features that inhibit or facilitate the pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals.

### *This is an Era of Centrist Governments*

Since the early 1990s, centrist governments have predominated – in and beyond the developing nations. If this chapter were about governments that tried to do something for the poor in the 1970s or early 1980s, we would find three different types of regimes and leaders present in significant numbers – radicals, populists, and reforming centrists.<sup>9</sup>

Today, things are different. We find only a tiny number of radical governments – Cuba is a rare example -- which are mainly survivals from that earlier era. A few populists have emerged in recent years – Chavez in Venezuela, Estrada in the Philippines, N.T. Rama Rao in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. But they are scarce, and have little staying power – the last two of those leaders were overthrown, and Chavez was nearly ousted and may yet be.

If we look at what governments do rather than what they say, we find that the great majority of them have felt compelled, mainly by the international economic order, to operate as centrists. Even governments that we might have expected to be radical or leftist – in China, Vietnam, South Africa and the Indian state of West Bengal – have in practice situated themselves in the centre or the centre-left. The same can be expected of the new government in Brazil.<sup>10</sup>

Centrist predominance has ambiguous implications for the kinds of initiatives and policies that concern us here, and for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Centrists tend to pursue change cautiously and incrementally. In some cases, this means that the pursuit of political reform may be slower and less dramatic than some observers might wish. Nearly all of the reforms examined in this chapter entail incremental changes.

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<sup>9</sup> William Ascher found precisely this in his important book *Scheming for the Poor: The Politics of Redistribution in Latin America* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> To say all of this is not, of course, to argue that centrist predominance is here to stay. It may well turn out to be a passing phase – but for the present, it is a reality that looms large.

On the other hand, many of these reforms have clear promise. And – taken together – they add up to a new approach to development, a new paradigm that offers poor and excluded groups more than the narrowly economic, neo-liberal perspective that dominated the 1980s.

It is also encouraging that in earlier periods, centrists with a reformist bent tended to succeed more often than populists (who were too capricious, self-absorbed and disorganised) and even radicals (whose vehement words and actions usually provoked disastrous rightist reactions). In particular, centrist reformers are especially good at constructing and maintaining pro-poor coalitions that contain large numbers of the non-poor – which are almost always essential to success.<sup>11</sup> So centrist predominance should not necessarily make us despair of achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

### *This is an Era of Severe Fiscal Constraints*

One of the main reasons governments tend to be centrist is that they nearly all face tight fiscal constraints. They are also hamstrung by the loss of much of their former influence over key economic levers. One analyst has argued that these problems have become so excruciating that governments in developing countries must now choose between (on the one hand) maintaining fiscal discipline in order to meet debt repayments and to attract foreign investment, and (on the other) attending to the material well-being of their citizens.<sup>12</sup>

This is an exaggeration, but there is no doubt that it is extremely difficult for governments to do both of these things at the same time. Fiscal constraints – and the need to proceed incrementally – create a painful dilemma for political leaders. They risk becoming *boring* – something that politicians loathe, not least because it may lead to their political undoing. They long to do something exciting, even heroic – for the sake of their own self esteem, and because it is good politics. But most exciting things cost money, usually a great deal of money.

This is not at all irrelevant to the initiatives that we are considering. The political reforms examined here tend *not* to cost substantial amounts of money. They mainly require changes in political and administrative behaviour and processes, and (in response) greater assertiveness from ordinary people and disadvantaged groups. And yet, despite their incremental nature, the politicians undertaking them often regard them as ways to make the business of government and leaders themselves appear exciting and maybe even a little heroic to ordinary folk at the grassroots. The evidence on such initiatives indicates that, when they work reasonably well, they can generate appreciation and sometimes even some excitement in the popular mind. To say this is not to

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<sup>11</sup> Ascher, *Scheming for the Poor...*, p. 311.

<sup>12</sup> G. Hawthorn, “The Promise of ‘Civil Society’ in the South” in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds.) *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001), p. 281.

suggest that significant investments of public and donor funds need not and should not be made in these initiatives. Substantial spending on them is thoroughly justified, where required and where fiscally possible. But these initiatives do not threaten to bankrupt governments in straitened circumstances.

### *Resistance to Political Reforms*

Reforms always encounter political resistance. This is the last over-arching theme. Some of that resistance comes from outside government, from prosperous or hierarchically-minded elements in society. To counter this, governments often seek to do two things that are examined later here in Part II – to attract support for political reforms from pro-poor groups within civil society, and to encourage competition among elites for the support of poorer groups. But much of the resistance to reforms comes from *within* government.

Some senior politicians are reluctant to part with powers that need to be devolved to lower levels. And even when they are inclined to yield powers, less exalted politicians on whom they may depend – typically legislators -- often resist because they fear that this will dilute their influence. We see this in virtually every country, even in industrialised democracies.

Bureaucrats at lower levels also tend to oppose such measures. They often seek to sabotage them by quietly refusing to comply. Some do so because reforms curtail their authority and, they believe, their status and job satisfaction. Others resist because reforms threaten their capacity to wield power arbitrarily and, thereby, to extract rents. Since prosperous interests are better able to offer bribes, the arbitrary use of power tends strongly to reinforce existing hierarchies and injustices.

When such abuses occur at higher levels in political systems, they can be checked by separating powers between executive, legislative and judicial branches of governments. At the local level, our main concern here, such elaborate institutional arrangements are (usually rightly) deemed to be unworkable. Other steps need to be taken there.

Arbitrary acts at and near the local level – from which ordinary people suffer greatly, and the poor suffer most – of course occur in systems that have not been democratised. But they are also common in systems that have undergone democratisation, by way of elected local councils or some other method. They take three forms.

- A local leader (often but not always elected), or an elite coterie around a leader, may capture and abuse power.
- Low-level bureaucrats may retain much or all of the dominance that they have traditionally exercised, arbitrarily.



- Collusion between leaders (elected or otherwise) and low-level bureaucrats may enable them – jointly -- to act arbitrarily.

Leaders at higher levels can tackle resistance in two main ways (as we shall see in greater detail in Part III) -- sticks and carrots. They need to be prepared to put pressure on political subordinates and bureaucrats who offer resistance. But the kinds of political reforms assessed here *do not represent a zero sum game*. Government actors usually have to part with some powers, but they also reap compensating benefits. This is true both of politicians and of bureaucrats at lower levels.

Politicians – again, typically legislators – often worry because elected councillors at lower levels, or people who gain influence through participatory devices, may erode their political dominance within their constituencies. Indeed, this often happens. But anxious politicians can also take heart from the opportunities that these reforms offer them to develop stronger, more dependable networks of support – if they are willing to turn these newly influential people into allies.

If they reach out to them with offers to help address their needs and to intercede on their behalf with higher authority, they can establish transactional ties to these people. This can be very helpful since a legislator's constituency usually contains many thousands of people. It is thus impossible for him or her to maintain satisfactory links to most constituents. Alliances with newly empowered intermediaries enable legislators to do this much more adequately. And since those intermediaries can serve as a small army of backers when they next seek re-election,<sup>13</sup> their long-term political prospects grow brighter.

Legislators also find that reforms which empower numerous people at lower levels also ease dangerous jealousies directed against them by political activists lower down – including activists in their own parties. When the only prize available is the legislator's job, he or she inevitably becomes a target of resentment. But when many new posts on elected councils or in other spheres are created through political reforms, ambitious people at lower levels suddenly have prizes that they can win without displacing the legislator. This too can enhance the latter's chances of long-term political survival.

Political reforms offer useful compensations not just for politicians but for bureaucrats at lower levels. Even as the latter lose some of their old powers, they tend to be *empowered* in new ways as a result of reforms. They often find that when elected local councils are created, the amount of information reaching them from people at the grassroots increases massively – as ordinary people bring their concerns and demands to the attention of councillors who pass the word on to bureaucrats. The latter realise for the first time how poorly

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<sup>13</sup> See for example, J. Manor, "Small-time Political 'Fixers' in Indian States: 'Towel over Armpit'", *Asian Survey* (September-October, 2000).

informed, and thus comparatively disempowered, they were before. They also receive warnings of problems (incipient droughts, floods, and outbreaks of disease in remote localities) sooner than before – soon enough to respond in time to prevent them from becoming full-scale disasters. This enables them to preserve people’s livelihoods and save lives. Their job satisfaction increases as a result. These things tend to ease their resentments at the loss of certain powers, so that over time, it often becomes less necessary to press them to behave more responsively.

Such advantages, plus pressure from above, sometimes persuade low-level bureaucrats to support or at least to acquiesce in political reforms. But even when they do so, another problem often arises. Those who attempt to become more accessible and responsive struggle to understand how to avoid actions that unintentionally alienate ordinary people. As one Ugandan observer noted, “they don’t know how to do it”.

After a lifetime of issuing orders, being authoritative and acquiring what Indian civil servants call ‘the habit of command’, they find it hard to become good listeners and open-hearted accommodators. They often hold meetings in their well-appointed offices – settings that intimidate ordinary people (and even some civil society activists) who are drawn into discussions. They tend to conduct meetings along conventional lines. The minutes of previous meetings are gone through and agreed, and then agendas (which government actors have often largely set) are waded through. The concerns of ordinary people and their representatives may only be raised at the end of long discussions under ‘any other business’, by which time those people feel still more intimidated and marginalised. These problems may sound trivial, but they can do significant damage. There are, as we shall see in Part III, ways of addressing this problem.

Finally, it is worth stressing that it is harder to persuade state actors to behave more responsively in some circumstances than in others -- see Box 4. Governments introducing reforms in the teeth of these conditions need to be aware of the unusual difficulties that they will encounter.

*Box 4: Political Reform is Especially Difficult in Certain Sectors*

It is especially difficult to persuade state actors who operate in certain sectors to behave more responsively, and to pursue political reforms that make policy processes more open. Four (sometimes overlapping) types of sectors pose especially serious problems.

- *When government employees in a particular sector have traditionally acted as adversaries of many local residents:* The political reforms discussed here require public employees to become more open, accommodative and responsive to ordinary people. In some sectors, this means that they must make a *complete about-face* from their previous roles. For example, forest guards have long acted like gamekeepers, pursuing and arresting (often poor) local residents who gather forest products for food, fodder or fuel. It is far harder for them to become accommodative than it is for teachers or health professionals whose roles and self-images have always (theoretically, and in many cases, actually) been as concerned carers.
- *When governments derive substantial tax revenues from a sector:* Certain sectors – forestry and mining are examples – yield substantial revenues to governments. These days, when most governments are extremely short of funds, it is especially difficult for them to part with such revenues. They therefore (understandably) feel reluctant to turn those revenues over to local councils or communities. This can impede the development of new, cooperative relations with people at the grassroots in such sectors.
- *When a sector yields substantial profits:* In some sectors – forestry is again the classic case – substantial, sometimes vast profits are made from the extraction and sale of certain products (for example, from logging). Those profits may be made by private entrepreneurs, by politicians and by bureaucrats, or by all of these groups working in concert. In such sectors, there is inevitably a reluctance to share even some controls with local residents.
- *When the management of a sector is technologically and/or technocratically complex:* Certain sectors are more complicated to manage than are others. It is, for example, far more difficult to manage watersheds (where attention must be paid to ground water levels, well construction, the characteristics of catchment areas, soil erosion, etc.) than grasslands.<sup>1</sup> Government employees are much more reluctant to turn complicated sectors over to local representatives – whom they see as under-educated and unsophisticated.

Part III contains further comments on ways of tackling resistance to political reforms, but let us now consider the specific issues identified in Part I.

### *Devolution to Elected Multi-Purpose Councils*

Certain conditions enhance the possibility that democratic decentralisation will produce change for the better. Some of these are *essential* prerequisites, and others are merely *helpful* but not essential. We need to distinguish between the two.

Some analysts claim that the list of essential prerequisites is quite long. We hear, from various sources, that it is necessary to have prior land reform, a strong middle class, a vibrant civil society, a free press, prior experience of democracy, high literacy, etc. Empirical evidence indicates that most of these things are *helpful* – although a strong middle class, while helpful in some ways, may crowd out disadvantaged groups. But none of them is *essential*.

There is clear evidence from Bangladesh between 1985 and 1992, and more crucially from Mozambique in recent years, to indicate that decentralised systems and other similar initiatives can work tolerably well in the absence of these ‘helpful’ things. In Mozambique, *not a single item* in the list above of alleged prerequisites is present, and yet a decentralised system has produced significant improvements over the previous, exceedingly centralised system<sup>14</sup> -- see Box 5.

#### ***Box 5: Reforms Can Produce Gains Even in Inhospitable Conditions: Democratic Decentralisation in Mozambique***

The government in Mozambique recently began an experiment with democratic decentralisation in roughly one-third of the country’s municipalities (*municípios*). It did so amid conditions that were distinctly unpromising.

Literacy rates and other human development indicators were very low. Mozambique – both under Portuguese rule and since independence – had previously experienced only highly centralised rule. The population had very little experience of elections, and no experience of electing local councils. The middle class in most municipalities was miniscule. Civil society was weak. Per capita incomes were among the lowest on earth.

And yet, the experiment had yielded important gains. For the first time, the preferences of local residents influenced decisions about which development projects to pursue and how to implement them. The positive popular response enabled municipal councils to obtain revenues from the imposition of fees

<sup>14</sup> For evidence on Bangladesh, see Crook and Manor, *Democratisation and Decentralisation...*, chapter three.

which people had been unwilling to pay before. This made it possible for the councils to undertake projects that made modest but significant contributions to local economic development. The opportunity to achieve such things drew respected local figures into politics who had remained aloof previously, when over-centralisation offered them few incentives. Their participation enabled the ruling party in Mozambique to attract new blood into its organisation which had grown dangerously complacent and stagnant. And the popularity of decentralisation earned the government and the ruling party greater popularity and legitimacy – which it badly needed. Civil society organisations -- which had been seriously underdeveloped -- engaged with these new, more responsive democratic institutions and the ensuing partnerships improved development outcomes.

In many developing countries, these changes would be seen as merely modest improvements. But in Mozambique, where government had earlier seemed very remote, overcentralised and unresponsive, their impact was quite dramatic.<sup>15</sup>

Analyses of democratic decentralisation have demonstrated that there are *only three essentials* for such systems to work well – and these findings also apply to some of the other initiatives assessed in this chapter.

- Adequate powers must be devolved to lower levels.
- Adequate resources (especially financial resources) must be devolved.
- Reliable mechanisms to ensure downward accountability must be created.

If any one of these three elements is *absent*, systems or initiatives will *fail*. If one or more are *weak*, then systems or initiatives will *perform poorly*.

Political leaders in developing countries often find it difficult to provide these three essentials. This is to some extent understandable. Tight budgetary constraints often make funds for devolution hard to find. In all countries, leaders' political subordinates and bureaucrats are reluctant to see funds and powers devolved. Those same people strongly prefer upward accountability (to them) over downward accountability (to ordinary people).

But senior leaders who give in to these pressures pay a price. They weaken or wreck decentralised institutions or other consultative initiatives which could produce developmental benefits and – not incidentally from their point of view -- enhance their government's popularity and legitimacy.

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<sup>15</sup> These comments are based on the doctoral research of Fidelx Kulipossa at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Democratic decentralisation does not necessarily benefit poor, socially excluded people. Prosperous groups may seize control of elected councils and exploit them for their own interests. Disadvantaged groups – which have less in the way of confidence, political skills, resources, organisational strength and contacts than their better off neighbours – commonly have great difficulty in asserting themselves. But we need to recognise that although they find it hard to gain influence within local arenas, they find it well nigh impossible beyond those arenas – at higher levels. They usually face even more intimidating impediments when it comes to reaching upward and outward. Their best chance of obtaining helpful responses from government usually lies at the grassroots.

Steps that governments can take to make elected local councils more likely to serve the interests of disadvantaged groups are discussed in Part III. But it is worth noting that fresh evidence has emerged from a number of developing countries to suggest that democratic decentralisation may be of more help to those groups than some observers initially concluded – for three main reasons. First, in many local arenas, the overwhelming majority of people are quite poor, so that the improvements in governance that decentralisation often generates tend to reach large numbers of poor people. Second – as we saw above -- over time, elites often feel compelled by electoral logic to compete for the (often numerous) votes of poor people, and to offer them significant benefits to achieve this. Finally, it has now become clearer that over time, disadvantaged groups tend to acquire the confidence, skills and organisational strength to begin to compete with prosperous interests who possess these things in abundance from the start.

#### *Creating Single-Purpose ‘User Committees’*

Let us begin with a critically important question. *How often do user committees qualify as political reforms that empower ordinary people?* On present evidence, the answer appears to be: *far less often than the promoters of user committees claim or believe.*

It is worth stressing that user committees – unlike multi-purpose local councils – have proliferated so rapidly in recent years mainly because donor agencies press governments in developing countries to create them. They have two great attractions for donors. They liberate the field staff of donor agencies from the onerous task of micro-managing development projects – that task is devolved onto user committees. And at least theoretically, user committees conform to donors’ desire to see the policy process become more open to bottom-up influence from ‘users, ‘stakeholders’, ‘consumers’ – from ordinary folk.

The theory is admirable, but difficulties often arise in practice because governments in less developed countries tend to see user committees mainly as a requirement that they have to meet to obtain donor funds. They are thus less committed to seeing them work as genuine political reforms than they were when (usually without donor pressure) they created multi-purpose local councils. They therefore often tend merely to go through the motions required by the donors.

Four problems with user committees are especially troubling.

- The methods used to select members of user committees raise doubts about their capacity to represent ordinary people – not only the poor, but the non-poor as well – at the local level. In many cases, members are appointed from above by lower-level bureaucrats and politicians. It appears that, more often, they are elected. But the processes used in these elections tend to be less reliably democratic than those used to elect members of local councils – for example, voting is less secret. Lower-level bureaucrats often have considerable discretion over who takes seats on these committees. Where this is true, it creates an invidious situation. User committee members are supposed to exert influence over such bureaucrats and to render them downwardly accountable. But if they owe their places on the committees to these very people, this is unlikely.
- If these dubious selection procedures prevent the non-poor at the grassroots from exercising influence, they make it even less likely that poor and socially excluded groups will be able to do so. Lower-level bureaucrats who manipulate the selection process are often inclined to favour the more ‘knowledgeable’ and ‘respected’ members of local communities – that is, elites.
- User committees are often woefully short of power. They are seldom short of funds -- the current enthusiasm for them among donors usually sees to that. But they often lack discretionary power over the design or even the implementation of government policies and programmes. When that is true, they become mere conduits for government and donor funds. If they cannot adapt policies to distinctive local conditions, or bring local preferences to bear, then they can achieve next to nothing.
- Finally, there is often considerable dissonance between single-sector user committees and elected, multi-purpose local councils. This is a complex matter, but in brief, they often exist at slightly different levels, the jurisdictional boundaries between them are unclear, and damaging problems result. Above all, differences in their levels of funding create major difficulties. It is not uncommon to find, cheek by jowl in the same locality, a multi-purpose local council which has far too little money to perform the tasks assigned to it (*unfunded* mandates) and single-purpose user committees that have far more

funds than they can manage effectively (*excessively funded* mandates). Either problem is a recipe for trouble, and when they exist alongside one another, the results can be destructive to both sets of institutions – and to local development.

The news about user committees is not, however, all bad. Some governments have made serious efforts to ensure that user committees are selected by genuinely democratic means and that they have adequate powers. In political systems that are substantially closed, their introduction – even when they work imperfectly – can have a potent and constructive psychological impact since it serves as an important early step towards prying such systems open.<sup>16</sup> And, as we shall see in Part III, there are ways to enhance the creative promise of user committees.

### *Other Devices to Promote Bottom-Up Participation and Empowerment*

An extensive menu of devices exists which governments may use to enhance bottom-up participation and downward accountability. Some have only been adopted in a small number of countries, and it is sometimes difficult to make some work well. But each offers enough promise to justify their inclusion here.<sup>17</sup> A number of them – especially the first three in the list below -- are often linked to elected local councils. Several might be – but seldom are – linked to user committees. Some entail partnerships between governments and civil society organisations (a topic which is discussed further below), but they are sometimes deployed on their own.

1. Mass local-level meetings to deliberate on development issues Many decentralised systems require elected members of local councils to hold public meetings open to all adult residents at regular intervals – usually every few months. These are supposed to give ordinary people an opportunity to voice their concerns and preferences – and in some cases to register formal judgements on elected councils' actions and plans. The record of these devices is disappointing. Elected officials dislike such meetings since they often face criticism and even censure. They therefore often fail to publicise or even to hold them, or they hold them at times when most local residents cannot attend, or they structure agendas in ways that prevent citizens from influencing important decisions. Local residents naturally tend to lose interest in whatever meetings are held, since little of importance happens at them, and attendance wanes. This widely used device therefore usually (there are exceptions) has limited impact.

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<sup>16</sup> This is apparent, for example, from communications from UNDP and UNCDF personnel who have worked in Vietnam.

<sup>17</sup> This discussion draws heavily on A.M. Goetz and J. Gaventa, *Bringing Citizens Voice and Client Focus into Service Delivery*, Working Paper 138, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, July, 2001.



2. Direct democracy at the local level In a tiny number of cases – the most notable being the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh -- high-level politicians who have become concerned about unresponsive local councils have transferred decision-making powers from councils to the kinds of local mass meetings described just above. In so doing, they have attempted to switch from *representative* democracy to *direct* democracy. It is too early to say how this approach will work in practice – the Madhya Pradesh experiment commenced only in early 2001 -- but there are reasons to worry. Elected local councillors are reluctant to cede power to mass meetings. They will often seek to go through the motions, but to retain their former powers by informal means. Some council leaders may actually find it easier to capture inordinate powers in mass meetings than when they face other elected councillors. Monitoring, in a huge number of widely dispersed localities, may be beyond the capacity of governments. And even where power is genuinely transferred to mass meetings, there are doubts about whether they can effectively make decisions on a wide array of issues. Representative institutions may be better equipped to do that. So direct democracy appears unlikely to provide an adequate check on the arbitrary use of power.

3. Incorporating pro-poor civil society organisations into decentralised systems Another approach is to give a role within decentralised systems to civil society organisations that seek to assist poor, socially excluded groups. This has had considerable success in, for example, the Philippines (see Box 6). The main problem here is that most governments are reluctant to grant civic associations the kind of legitimacy which this entails – not least because their representatives are unelected. But the efficacy of this option might persuade governments to overcome their reluctance

***Box 6: The Formal Incorporation of Civil Society Organisations into Local Councils – The Philippines***

Civil society organisations – including many grassroots people’s associations and pro-poor organisations – have been *formally* integrated into the strong system of democratic decentralisation in the Philippines. These organisations and the disadvantaged groups whom they represent have been *very substantially empowered* thanks to decisions to assign them a *diversity of important roles* in the system.

Two seats are reserved for civil society organisations on committees to oversee the selection of contractors bidding to undertake public works. They are also represented on regional development councils that make key decisions on development policy and the autonomy of local bodies. They make up not less than 25 percent of the members of special advisory bodies to local councils (local health boards, peace and order councils, law enforcement boards, etc.) which propose annual budgetary allocations, and advise on personnel issues, and operations reviews. Civic associations also have seats on local legislative

bodies at three levels in the decentralised system, and on project monitoring and evaluation committees at all three levels.

The actual working of these arrangements is not problem free, but leading analysts of the system have concluded that they have “presented non-governmental organizations and people’s organizations with an immense opportunity to increase the scale and impact of their participation in politics”.<sup>18</sup>

4. Instruments to permit action to secure citizens’ rights Rights that have been extended in theory to disadvantaged groups often fail to be realised in practice. One way to make their realisation more likely is to provide mechanisms that enable those groups (or their allies) to petition governments when the latter fail to deliver. The petitioning can occur in courts, or before ombudspersons or special commissions. Such devices not only give poor, socially excluded groups some hope of better treatment, they also sometimes provide opportunities to mobilise these groups round rights issues.

5. Devices to improve access to information and services Some governments have established ‘single-window’ offices quite near the local level to which ordinary people can turn to access basic government services (like the issuing of permits, certificates and deeds) where their prices are clearly listed. This can help curtail the demands for bribes for these services by government employees. In other cases, wages rates payable by government contractors to poor people who help to build public works (and sometimes the full lists of persons who are to be paid) must be listed openly at the local level. This can curtail underpayments and the inflation of muster roles by corrupt contractors and officials. These devices, which operate at the local level, have greater impact than nationwide ‘freedom of information’ acts, although such acts can provide public interest lawyers (working with poor people) with opportunities to file successful suits.

6. Exercises in participatory auditing Another way to elicit information about how money is used – and to disseminate it among poorer people and indeed the non-poor – is to mount public hearings at which the actual spending of government funds within a local arena is revealed and discussed by ordinary people. This is sometimes done by civil society organisations, but it can also be initiated by governments, or by both together. This enables those at the receiving end of public services to see whether funds supposedly committed to services were actually spent, were stolen, or were used for inappropriate purposes. When irregularities are revealed in these exercises – and in the processes described in the previous item – it tends to have a powerful galvanising effect upon ordinary people.

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<sup>18</sup> L.C. Angeles and F.A. Magno, “The Philippines: Decentralization, Local Governments and Citizen Action” in P. Oxhorn, J. Tulchin and A. Selee (eds.) *Decentralisation, Civil Society and Democratic Governance: Comparative Perspectives from Latin America, Africa and Asia* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, forthcoming 2003).

### 7. Initiatives to change the ethos and behaviour of government employees

Some governments have sought to persuade low-level employees to behave more helpfully and responsively towards local residents. Two main approaches have been adopted here. The first, which is quite widespread, entails training in participatory methods for appraisal, monitoring, etc. The second, which has been pioneered in an impoverished region of Brazil, entails government publicity campaigns to emphasise the vitally important roles that health workers, teachers and others play, plus awards (that are again publicised) to individuals and local units that succeed in these tasks (see Box 7). The aim here is to generate high morale among low-level government employees, and popular expectations and appreciation for whatever good work they do. Both sets of devices have considerable promise.

#### ***Box 7: Publicity and Incentives to Inspire Government Employees***

In the late 1980s, the government in the Brazilian state of Ceara – an impoverished, badly underdeveloped region which had suffered severely from rent-seeking and patronage politics – adopted a new approach to development. It recruited a large number of new employees from among people with very limited skills and trained them to deliver based services – perhaps most crucially in the health sector. It paid special attention to inspiring a sense of *commitment* in these employees. This issue has received far too little attention from development specialists who expect state failure, but it has long loomed large in the literature on increasing productivity in the private sector.

The government sought to promote inspiration in several ways. It provided recruits to the basic health care cadre with training well in advance of anything they could have hoped for previously, so that they felt that their status had been raised substantially. It mounted a major publicity campaign that stressed the vital importance of the employees' work among ordinary folk. This strengthened their sense of pursuing a 'calling' and their *esprit de corps*. It had them all wear tee shirts identifying them as health practitioners, and as local resident saw them moving from house to house on their rounds, they concluded that the publicity was matched by meaningful action.

Most of these employees lived within the communities where they worked, so that local bonds of trust and popular appreciation contributed still further to their commitment. The state government cleverly hired women for the great majority of new posts, in the knowledge that the gatekeepers between households and the health services were almost always women.

The government's publicity campaign was further reinforced by prizes that the government gave – and again publicised – for high achievement. The practitioners responded with a willingness to take on a wider range of tasks than were strictly required of them. And their sense of mission, and the

expectations of ordinary people that they would act responsibly (which exerted subtle pressure upon them), substantially curtailed any inclination that they may have felt to engage in rent-seeking.

The results of all of this were impressive. A spectacular reduction in infant deaths was achieved in a region that had had a very poor record in this vein. Vaccination rates for dangerous diseases trebled. Health care coverage across the state's counties expanded dramatically.<sup>19</sup>

This case is well known among analysts of development, but it has received far less attention from governments in developing countries than it deserves.

8. Incentives and sanctions for government employees Many governments have introduced performance assessments and performance-related pay in connection with reforms in the public sector that have been inspired by neo-liberal approaches. These can be adapted to cover responsiveness to citizens, with emphasis upon poor, traditionally excluded groups. They can also be coupled with the morale-building publicity campaigns noted just above. It is sometimes difficult to achieve these things, given the weakness of bureaucracies in some developing countries, but they have promise. It is very important that performance targets and quite specific penalties for failures to perform be clearly set out.

9. Exercises in participatory planning The participatory methods mentioned above can also be used to involve ordinary people (and their preferences) in the planning of local development projects. Given the reluctance of local leaders (elected or unelected) to take these exercises seriously, publicity campaigns in advance of such exercises are often helpful. So are energetic campaigns by ruling parties and government bureaucracies to mobilise people to take part – such as have occurred in the Indian state of Kerala, where the campaign was linked to local councils.

10. Joint management with civil society organisations of development programmes Governments which have limited administrative capacity to deliver goods and services, or governments whose leaders suspect that their employees are not administering programmes properly, may find it useful to draw civil society organisations that are active at the grassroots in as partners. Those organisations sometimes enjoy greater legitimacy than do governments – especially where the government's management of, say, common property resources is hotly disputed by local residents, or where recent severe conflicts

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<sup>19</sup> J. Tendler, *Good Government in the Tropics* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1997).

have caused people in some regions and localities to see a government as their adversary.

We shall return to these devices in Part III, but the reference to civil society in the last comment above reminds us of the utility of links between reforming governments and civic organisations. Let us consider this further.

### *Enlisting Support from Sections of Civil Society*

We saw in Part I that it is important for governments which are committed to the Millennium Development Goals, and which may need political support from the poor, to seek help from pro-poor organisations within civil society. They do so in part because those organisations can help to make political reforms sustainable, and to ensure that poor and excluded groups benefit from such reforms. But it is not always easy for governments to do this.

Many senior government figures have reservations about civil society. Some believe that it has less legitimacy than governments – especially if the latter are elected, but even if they are not. Some also worry that if they allow civil society to acquire strength, elements within it will become adversaries.

But leaders who have overcome their hesitations and encouraged pro-poor civil society organisations have usually discovered that their governments' legitimacy in the eyes of people at the grassroots is enhanced as a result. This is especially important after a spell of severe conflict that has persuaded large numbers of people that their government is a hostile force, or after years of unresponsive or even brutish behaviour by governments. But even governments that have behaved more positively often face serious problems of popular apathy, alienation and even cynicism.

When a government adopts constructive postures towards pro-poor civic associations, it usually helps to persuade ordinary folk – including the poor -- that government is at least a somewhat benign force. This message can be driven home with great effect when, in ways noted below, such associations help to enhance the positive impact at the local level of governments' political reforms and other development policies. Central to all of this is the fact – which perceptive political leaders grasp – that pro-poor civil society organisations are often far more capable of achieving certain crucial things than any state actor can be. They are thus immensely valuable allies.

This will become clearer if we examine different types of activities undertaken by pro-poor civil society organisations -- or by organisations consisting of poor, excluded groups themselves.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The discussion that follows again draws upon Goetz and Gaventa, *Bringing Citizens' Voice...*; and upon the Ford Foundation's 'Civil Society and Governance' project in 22 countries, coordinated by the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

1. Disseminating information among disadvantaged groups about political and policy processes and public affairs more generally – to raise their awareness

This is sometimes done through the media – especially radio or television, since many poor people are illiterate (see for example Box 8). It can also be done through direct contact at the local level, as when pro-poor civil society organisations in a number of countries place details of government poverty initiatives and other policies into the hands of local dwellers, so that they know of opportunities available to them. In countries where the media are state-owned, the first requires the active support of government actors. The second can profit mightily from state assistance – as when political actors provide civil society organisations with detailed information on programmes and policies -- but mere tolerance from government is all that is necessary there.

***Box 8: A Radio Soap Opera about Democratic Decentralisation***

In the mid-1990s, scholars working in a civil society organisation to support democratic decentralisation in Karnataka state, India, persuaded the government-controlled station of All India Radio in the city of Mysore to broadcast a soap opera to inform ordinary people about the workings of elected local councils. The academics drew on their studies of the councils to write the scripts and the radio station invited popular actors to play the parts of various stock characters in what became a popular 26-episode series.

The characters were quirky and human enough to entertain listeners, and there was no shortage of humour in the scripts. But the broadcasts also informed listeners both about the problems faced by local councillors and their constituents and about the powers, resources and achievements (real and potential) of the councils. They also showed how ordinary folk – including women and the poor – could exercise some influence over elected representatives and thus the policy process. The soap opera had such success that the Prime Minister's Office in New Delhi is considering the replication of this experiment across much of India.

2. Participatory processes at the grassroots to generate basic information Well established techniques for participatory appraisal – plus surveys and focus groups – can yield an understanding of the problems, concerns and preferences of poor and excluded groups. When such information is then fed into policy processes, it can assist sympathetic governments in designing and implementing policies that address the needs of those groups.

3. Citizen-based monitoring and evaluation The same methods can also be used to enable poor, excluded groups to assess government initiatives as they impinge upon their localities. One way of doing this is to develop 'report

cards' on the performance of urban governments (see Box 9) – and similar efforts are used in rural areas in several developing countries.

**Box 9: A 'Report Card' on Public Services in Calcutta**

The Public Affairs Centre – an independent non-profit organisation in Bangalore, India – worked with local partners to undertake a 'report card' on service delivery in the city of Calcutta. It conducted surveys among 3,309 non-poor households and 537 poor households in six carefully selected sections of the city.

Discussions with focus groups preceded the development of the questionnaire, so that local residents' perceptions of the problems that they faced could influence its content. Among other things, this enabled investigators to learn which services were seen by the non-poor and the poor as most essential. Non-poor households were asked about eight different public services (telephones, electricity, government hospitals, water supply, corporation tax, ration depots, the post office and the police). Poor households were asked about 13 – which included all except taxation listed above plus street lighting, the Metro railway, transport more generally, public sector banks, and sewage services.

The results are immensely enlightening. It is clear that levels of satisfaction with various services varied greatly among both sets of respondents. The 'report card' also extracted insights into levels of satisfaction with three *dimensions* of various services: the behaviour of government employees, the speed with which matters were processed, and the information provided by government employees. Further evidence was gathered on the details of individuals' interactions with various agencies, including demands for bribes.

This 'report card' provides a great mass of information to guide municipal authorities in their efforts to improve services – indeed, at least one Indian municipality *commissioned* a 'report card' exercise. This information also enables ordinary people "to use the results to demand systemic improvements and change".<sup>21</sup>

4. Social auditing of government spending Civil society organisations can also conduct public hearings at the local level at which information on government outlays on local development projects – especially but not only employment-generation schemes – are revealed and then assessed by the disadvantaged groups which they are supposed to help. Such exercises enable members of these groups to determine whether they received funds allotted to

<sup>21</sup> S. Paul and A. Iyer, *A Report Card on Public Services in Calcutta*, Working Paper 118 (Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore, 1997). The quotation is from p. 20.

them and whether projects were actually implemented. This can generate pressure against corrupt activities by low-level bureaucrats, politicians and contractors – and reinforce efforts by higher-level state actors to curb these malpractices. In Bolivia, for example, such mechanisms (in the form of vigilance committees) have been legally incorporated into the local government system.

5. Lobbying state actors to influence planning and the design and implementation of development programmes Civil society organisations often reach out to bureaucrats and elected officials at both high and low levels in attempts to inject greater bottom-up input into policy processes. They also seek to enable poorer individuals and groups to lobby with state actors – by encouraging contacting, bridge-building, petitioning and demonstrations of discontent or support. Examples can be found in a diversity of countries – a coalition of social movements in Nicaragua, a loose farmers network in Thailand, a nationwide coalition of fisherfolk in the Philippines. Such efforts promote horizontal integration among civic associations within dispersed localities, and vertical integration between local associations and higher-level non-governmental organisations.

6. Seeking access to justice for poor, excluded groups Some civil society organisations attempt to help people from poor and socially excluded groups gain access to legal processes which might help to secure their rights or end injustices. Two kinds of related activities occur here. First, some associations initially seek to explain to poor people that courts or adjudicators like ombudspersons exist and might actually assist them – which is sometimes a novel idea to illiterate, repressed people. Such people’s encounters with government actors have often been bruising, so that they take some convincing that an arm of government might right wrongs – especially when those wrongs have been committed by other government agencies. Poor people understandably see the courts and other tribunals as elements of an undifferentiated thing called ‘government’, and it must be explained that these bodies have sufficient independence of the executive to render independent judgement – provided of course that in a specific country they really are that independent. Civil society organisations then attempt to provide poor people with basic legal literacy, so that they are capable of perceiving when resort to law may be justified, and how to proceed when it is. Second, public interest law specialists – sometimes grouped in associations that are distinct from the first type – provide legal advice and representation to disadvantaged people with grievances.

All of these efforts by pro-poor civil society organisations can assist reformist governments that are pursuing the Millennium Development Goals, on two broad fronts. They provide direct help to disadvantaged groups at the local level whom such governments wish to reach – by developing their skills,



confidence and organisational strength, and by fostering collective engagement with state actors and with poor and pro-poor organisations in other localities and at higher levels. They also enhance the likelihood that political reforms will succeed. Pro-poor organisations can enhance the reach and effectiveness of reforms. They do so by informing poor people at the grassroots of the existence of policies and processes which low-level bureaucrats may be reluctant to reveal or incapable of publicising effectively. They might, for example, inform local residents of a government order that official wage rates on public works projects be made known, to curtail under-payment by corrupt officials and contractors, or of the amounts of development funds transferred by central government to local officials or councils for development.

Pro-poor organisations (often working with local councillors) are also better equipped than are state actors to demonstrate how local residents may benefit from government initiatives in terms that ordinary folk can understand. They can for example explain the utility of attending and speaking out at public meetings convened by local councillors, of taking advantage of programmes for new schools, or inoculations against dangerous diseases (see Box 10).

***Box 10: Civil Society Organisations and Democratic Decentralisation  
Can Increase the Uptake on Vitaly Important Health Services***

When elected councils were created at the local level in the Indian state of Karnataka in 1987, officials in the health ministry were in for a pleasant surprise. For years, health professionals at the grassroots had struggled to persuade mothers in villages to bring their children to clinics for post-natal check-ups and inoculations. Mothers had kept away because they and their children were frightened by the intrusive procedures – not least the sight of needles used for vaccinations. When the councils were established, other villagers – the neighbours of young mothers – took seats on council sub-committees for women’s and child welfare. Health professionals asked for help from the councillors and local civil society organisations in persuading mothers to bring their children for post-natal care. The councillors and civic activists then explained the benefits of such care in ways that village women could understand – in ways that were beyond the capacity of health professionals (who in any case were intimidating strangers and not neighbours). As a result, far more mothers began accessing these services, many illnesses were prevented and lives were saved. Officials in the health ministry swiftly became enthusiasts for democratic decentralisation and civil society.

It is thus *in the interests* of governments that undertake these initiatives to lend support to pro-poor civil society organisations. They can do so as part of their *overall* strategies, by urging politicians and bureaucrats at all levels – especially lower levels -- to be open and responsive in their dealings with such

organisations. When this happens, partnerships can develop between governments and civil society organisations that enhance the influence and creativity of governments – even in settings that appear unpromising (see Box 11). More specific actions in this vein are set out in Part III.

***Box 11: Indonesia: A Newly Elected Local Council and Pro-Poor Civic Associations Reinforce One Another***

In 1999, in the town of Surakarta central Java, marginalised groups linked their various civil society organisations – 20 in all – into a “solidarity” confederation. It consists of associations of pedicab drivers, hawkers, sex workers, parking attendants, the disabled, domestic workers, and others. They claim that it represents as many as 20,000 local residents.

It has lobbied persistently with the newly created democratic local council to get pro-poor regulations passed. Their links to the party that rules in the council have produced results. For example, hawkers’ rights are now more secure, and parking attendants are now better protected against abuse from those to whom they issue tickets. The confederation has developed ties to non-governmental organisations that offer technical advice on local measures that can enhance the security and well being of various disadvantaged groups. It uses this to draw up draft regulations which are often enacted by the council. It also organises programmes on civic education for poor, marginalised people who belong to its constituent associations, so that they develop the confidence and skills to make the most of the new regulations and to press for further action by the authorities.<sup>22</sup>

Democratic decentralisation and civil society have thus strengthened one another. The creation of an elected local council has opened up new opportunities for associations of disadvantaged people, and persuaded those people to join and work within their associations. And those civic groups have reached out to larger non-governmental organisations for help, and have used it to feed the local council with ideas that can have a significant pro-poor impact – which in turn inspires further effort from the confederation.

*Encouraging Elite Competition for the Support of Poor and Excluded Groups*

Competition that develops among elites for the political support of these groups can do more to include and empower them than many of the other things assessed in this chapter. And it can assist them even when other initiatives fail or are not attempted – although, as we shall see, those initiatives tend to catalyse elite competition. There is also clear evidence that elite

<sup>22</sup> H. Antlov, “Not Enough Politics! Power, Participation and the New Democratic Polity in Indonesia” in E. Aspinall and G. Fealy (eds.) *Local Power and Politics in Indonesia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, forthcoming 2003).

competition can assist substantially in achieving the Millennium Development Goals – see Box 12.

***Box 12: Elite Competition for the Support of Poor People Can Help to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals***

Sri Lanka has long been well known for its high scores on the Human Development Index despite comparatively low per capita incomes. It outperforms numerous more wealthy countries. Some commentators have attributed this to the influence that left-of-centre parties have had in the island's politics. Those parties certainly made a contribution, but Sri Lanka had made great strides *well before* parties of the left achieved influence there at the election of 1956. The main explanation lies in elite competition for the support of poorer voters.

From 1931 onwards – first under British rule, and then as a sovereign nation after independence in 1948 -- Sri Lanka had a national legislature elected by universal suffrage. Legislators selected ministers who headed government departments such as health, education, local government, agriculture and lands. The men who became ministers were all elitists, and most were rather conservative in their politics – only one in the years before 1956 described himself as a social democrat. But since they were bound together only very loosely in a political organisation until well into the 1950s, they tended to compete with one another for popularity. The best way for a minister to achieve popularity was to ensure that his ministry delivered extensive benefits to ordinary people. So despite their elitism, major efforts were made to eradicate diseases like malaria (a major scourge in the island), to promote mass education, to settle impoverished peasants on plots of uncultivated land, etc. The result, well before left-of-centre parties achieved power in 1956, was substantial progress on most aspects of what we now call the Human Development Index.<sup>23</sup>

But many governments in developing countries find it difficult to do some of the things that encourage elite competition. In one-party (or no-party) systems, or in multi-party systems where one party dominates, ruling parties are not surprisingly reluctant to provide opportunities for opposition parties. And in a more competitive system where the ruling party is seriously challenged by one or more opposition parties, it may again be exceedingly reluctant.

Many ruling parties have, however, recognised that to empower poorer groups at the grassroots, it is necessary to take calculated political risks by

<sup>23</sup> See for example, W.H.Wriggins, *Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1969) and J. Manor, *The Expedient Utopian: Bandaranaike and Ceylon* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989) chapters four to six.

opening spaces that opposition parties may occupy.<sup>24</sup> If for example powers and funds are devolved onto local councils, some of which opposition parties may control, three other things happen that appeal to ruling parties. (i) The ruling parties which open these arenas up tend to get the credit for this decision, so that their legitimacy and popularity increase – even in localities that elect other parties to run the local councils. (ii) By creating many new elected posts at the local level, or by introducing other devices to promote more bottom-up participation, ruling parties create opportunities for *their own* supporters at the grassroots. This eases potentially troublesome alienation and apathy among them, and makes it possible to bring new blood into party organisations that may have grown stagnant. (iii) Greater competition within local arenas enhances the likelihood that elites there will seek political support from disadvantaged groups – which can reinforce other pro-poor initiatives by senior leaders of ruling parties.

Another issue often has little to do with the question of opening up spaces at lower levels. Senior leaders who undertake pro-poor initiatives from the national level -- and who seek to construct pro-poor coalitions, sometimes by reaching out to progressive social movements<sup>25</sup> -- often trigger efforts by at least some opposition parties to follow suit and appeal to the poor. Those parties feel compelled to do this, lest the ruling party attract huge electoral support from the poor. After the sweeping victory of President Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva in Brazil, who drew huge support from poorer voters, it has become unthinkable for opposition parties to ignore the poor.

Inter-party competition for support among disadvantaged groups tends to breed similar competition at the local level between elites or leaders who may have only loose links to political parties. Indeed, such competition between elites or leaders, or between factions within political parties, is often more important at lower levels than inter-party competition. Whatever form the competition takes, it tends strongly to facilitate the inclusion and empowerment of disadvantaged groups.

This kind of competition inevitably implies an increase in political conflict at lower levels – although it is often moderated by the constraints of democratic institutions. Such competition also implies an increase in political pressure from below, which will place officials (and possibly prosperous groups that are allies of governments) at lower levels under greater pressure. These things frighten some senior leaders, but many recognise that they are crucial to the their efforts to assist poor people. Only through such contestation can old

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<sup>24</sup> M. Grindle, *Audacious Reforms: Institutional Innovation in Latin America and Africa* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> It should be stressed that some social movements are hostile to open politics and to disadvantaged groups, and that in some developing countries, social movements of any substance are impossible to find. But it is often possible for ruling parties to forge links with *progressive* social movements which possess considerable strength – especially in much of Latin America and parts of Asia, but not only there.

hierarchies – within society and at lower levels of government -- be challenged in ways that will bring the Millennium Development Goals within reach. Some technocrats invariably find this a horribly untidy business, but that is what more open, democratic government is like.

### **PART III: FACILITATING POLITICAL REFORMS**

What can governments do to increase the likelihood that reforms to make themselves more open, accountable and responsive – and helpful to poor, excluded groups – will succeed? This is an important question because initiatives that fail can make things worse.

When they are introduced, nearly all of these reforms trigger increased participation by ordinary people – including disadvantaged groups -- who see an opportunity to exercise more influence over processes that affect their well being. But increased participation *on its own* – without greater downward accountability of government actors to people at the local level or their representatives -- is insufficient. Indeed, if participation meets no response from state actors, it can pose a problem.

If ordinary people find that what at first appears to be an opportunity for greater influence turns out, in practice, to be a cosmetic exercise – if they gain little or no new leverage – then they will feel conned and betrayed. Their increased participation will soon lead to increased cynicism, alienation and anger towards government and all its works – and in many countries, there is plenty of that about already. On the other hand, *successful* reforms consistently reduce cynicism, enhance governments' popularity and legitimacy, and open the way to greater synergy<sup>26</sup> between state and society. So how can governments enhance the chances of success?

They can take a number of actions that impinge directly on the local level. But there is also much that they can do at higher levels in their political systems which will, indirectly, make a difference in local arenas. So the discussion that follows is not confined to interventions at the grassroots.

#### *Easing Fiscal Constraints*

Governments can do little to free themselves from the severe fiscal constraints that are one of the defining features of developing countries today. But such is the enthusiasm among international donor agencies for reforms to enhance openness, accountability and responsiveness that governments which pursue these objectives are likely to receive increased aid. There are more important reasons to undertake political reform – greater legitimacy for

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<sup>26</sup> For a crucially important study that has received far too little attention, see P. Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy", *World Development* (June, 1996) pp. 1119-32.

reforming governments, better developmental outcomes, progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. But for many governments, increased aid is no trivial matter.

### *Tackling Resistance within Governments to Political Reforms*

Political leaders can expect resistance to reforms that are intended to make government more open and to empower poorer groups. We have seen that, at lower levels in political systems, it nearly always comes from politicians and especially bureaucrats. This problem can be addressed in two main ways – with ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’.

*‘Sticks’, Disincentives:* Senior government figures need to be willing to put pressure on politicians and bureaucrats at lower levels to discourage resistance. This is not as difficult as it may at first appear. Leaders at the apex of power routinely use disincentives in their dealings with subordinate politicians. And in many developing countries, leaning on minor bureaucrats – who are usually the main problem – is not a novel idea. It has often been done before, during campaigns for public sector reform inspired by neo-liberal thinking. A great many senior leaders regard low-level bureaucrats more as adversaries than as natural allies.

Once political reforms begin to draw poorer groups and civic associations at lower levels into democratic and participatory processes, senior leaders often find that they become valuable allies in pressing for compliance with those reforms. If for example elected members of decentralised councils acquire some disciplinary powers over lower-level bureaucrats, they can be relied upon to use them to persuade or compel the latter to behave more responsively.

*‘Carrots’, Incentives:* As we have seen, the process of political reform is not a zero-sum game. Politicians and bureaucrats at lower levels have to part with certain powers, but they also make some compensatory gains. They receive far more information from below than before, which unexpectedly empowers them. It arrives more quickly – enabling them to tackle potential problems that might mushroom into disasters early enough to prevent that. They discover that when ordinary people and civil society organisations at the local level acquire a stake in political and policy processes, they become less cynical about government and more willing to work helpfully with low-level officials – and to maintain development projects because they conform to local preferences. They find that elected local councillors and civil society activists become something other than inveterate adversaries. Those people can – among other things -- explain the logic of government programmes to ordinary people in terms that they understand, so that the uptake on those programmes increases and they have a greater chance of success. This enables government employees to get things done which were impossible before political reform. All of this enhances their job satisfaction.

Senior leaders can enhance that satisfaction further by publicising the vitally important roles that minor government servants play, and by offering them awards for good performance and other incentives. The approach adopted in northeast Brazil – described in Box 7 above -- provides the classic example. Lower-level employees find that ordinary people recognise and applaud their work. This raises the morale of those employees and in response, they often become more committed to public service and more supportive of political reform. (When they under-perform, the increased public awareness also makes it more likely that they will feel the pressure of popular discontent.)

### *Devolution to Elected Multi-Purpose Councils*

Two questions loom large here. First, what can governments do to help elected local councils operate effectively? Second, how can governments maximise the chances that these councils will work for the benefit of poor, excluded groups? Let us consider these questions in sequence.

So many governments in developing countries have experimented with democratic decentralisation that they need no urging to try it. But in a great many cases, certain specific actions can help elected councils to operate more effectively.

Local councils need substantial decision-making *powers*, so that they can adapt development policies to distinctive local conditions and inject popular preferences into the development process. Many governments have failed to grant enough of these, and some have clawed powers back after initially bestowing them. Where governments have been generous – in the Philippines, Bolivia and a handful of Indian states for example – impressive achievements have been possible. The political and policy processes have become more transparent, accountable, and responsive. Development projects have become more sustainable. Absenteeism and the overall amount of money diverted via corruption have sometimes declined – see Boxes 2 and 13. Information flows between governments and society have increased substantially – in both directions. Early warnings against potential disasters emerge more readily. The legitimacy of government is enhanced, and popular apathy and alienation are reduced. Governments that want to see these gains made need to empower local councils.

**Box 13: *Democratic Decentralisation Increases Transparency and Can Reduce the Overall Amount of Money Illicitly Diverted***

The local council chairman was exasperated. In the good old days, before they created elected local councils, he could skim off much more money than he could now that so many more people could see what was going on.

He explained to a visitor how things had worked just a few years before. Once a year when the documents came down from the government listing development spending for the next twelve months, he and another important politician would sit down behind closed doors with three bureaucrats up in the sub-district office. They would slice off about 40% of the total and divide it up among themselves. They would then present the remaining 60% or so to the people as 100% of the budget.

The arrangement was nearly foolproof. Theoretically, someone in the sub-district to go to the capital, investigate the details of the budget and deduce that grand theft had occurred. But in reality, no one in this rural area had the access to do this, so the scam worked beautifully. You could make real money in those days.

But when elected local councils were created, hundreds of people in the sub-district – all the councillors in all the villages -- had easy access to information about the full budget. If he tried to pocket a large amount, the group opposed to him on his council would immediately cry foul. He and many other councillors could make small amounts by selling little bits of influence, but it was small change compared to the good old days.

People complained because so many more councillors were now involved in corruption. But when you added it all up, the overall amount being stolen was far less. Maybe 5% of the budget was diverted now, instead of 40% before – all because everyone could *see* what was happening. It was very nice being chairman of his local council, but in financial terms, it cost him dearly.<sup>27</sup>

It is also essential that they provide them with adequate *financial resources*. Councils can raise some of these locally – provided they are given significant revenue raising powers. But most of their funds usually need to be devolved from above. This does not require new spending, but rather the transfer of control or at least significant discretion over existing spending. (If that method is used it does not risk fiscal irresponsibility, as some argue. Nor does it make councils hopelessly dependent on higher authority, as others claim – as long as they have some powers to decide how to use the funds.) And yet, many governments have devolved less than adequate funds and revenue raising

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<sup>27</sup> Interview, Mandya District, India, 26 March 1993.



powers, which means that only some of the gains noted just above can be made.

Apart from these essential actions, certain other steps can improve the workings of local councils. Governments can press elected councillors hard to conduct mass meetings at the local level regularly, and to allow them to be genuinely participatory. Since it is hard to monitor this in many scattered localities, governments can seek the help of civil society organisations that work to build the capacity of local residents to interact effectively with local councillors and low-level bureaucrats, and to sensitise the latter to respond. They can also give elected councils influence over user committees and link councils with other mechanisms discussed in Part II to promote bottom-up participation.

Governments can also encourage and support official associations of leaders of elected councils at *all* lower levels where they exist. Such associations have two virtues. They enable council leaders to share insights about solutions to problems that they face in common, and about approaches that yielded developmental successes – which might otherwise remain unknown beyond isolated arenas. This helps in ‘scaling up’, in replicating successful innovations across wide areas. Second, such associations can provide council leaders with greater self-confidence and a powerful voice in the corridors of power. Given the reluctance of many government actors in every country to see decentralised councils empowered, this is crucially important.

Finally, governments also need to be aware of dangers posed to the effectiveness of elected local councils from an unexpected source -- social funds, a device widely used to channel substantial sums into development. Social funds are explicitly intended to provide the poor with material resources, and they succeed at this much of the time. But in numerous countries, they often undermine elected local councils and other bottom-up participatory mechanisms.

This happens when they have no connection to local councils that are badly under-funded. The existence of well resourced social funds can persuade governments that enough money is reaching the local level that adequate funding for local councils is unnecessary. And when local residents receive resources through social funds, their understandable tendency to disregard financially crippled local councils and other bottom-up mechanisms intensifies. So even as social funds ease the *material deprivation* of poor people, they may impede their *empowerment*.<sup>28</sup> It makes more sense to give elected local bodies influence over social funds – a useful way to ease their financial problems, while getting resources to poor people *and* contributing to their empowerment.

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<sup>28</sup> These problems became apparent at a two-day conference at the World Bank in June 2002. I am especially grateful to Leonardo Romeo of the United Nations Capital Development Fund for insights on this issue.

This has lately become clear to the World Bank, the main creator of social funds. Its principal report on the subject acknowledges that “there is a danger of... actually weakening district [and, we might add, local] councils by preventing elected representatives from being held accountable for local decisions”, and that “few projects...have given significant responsibilities and decision making power to local governments”. It adds that “social funds that work directly with communities [bypassing local councils] diminish a local government’s accountability to the population and inhibit its budgeting function...”. The report also recognises that even “newly created local councils in difficult conditions” can deal successfully with resources from social funds.<sup>29</sup> For this reason, social funds have focused more often on links to local councils since 1996 than before.<sup>30</sup> But the problem remains serious, especially in certain regions.<sup>31</sup>

Let us now turn to the second question. What steps can governments take to maximise the chances that local councils will work to the benefit of disadvantaged groups? Extra funds can be channelled to councils in localities or sub-regions that are especially impoverished, to address poverty and exclusion that arise from inequalities *between* locations – something that democratic decentralisation is good at.

Tackling poverty and exclusion that arise from inequalities *within* localities is more difficult – and it is usually the main problem. Funds and development programmes can be earmarked for the poor, although this does not always prevent prosperous interests from diverting them. Governments can support (or at least tolerate) efforts by pro-poor civil society organisations to enhance the capacity of disadvantaged groups to engage effectively with local councils. In a few cases – the Philippines, for example – such organisations have even been given formal roles within decentralised institutions (see Box 6 above). In a larger number of cases, government officials have fed those organisations detailed information on programmes from which poorer people can benefit and on spending that is scheduled for specific localities. This makes it possible for civic associations (i) to inform local residents of promising programmes and (ii) to help them to make use of information – for example, to detect diversions of funds intended for their locality. Governments can also encourage competition among local elites for the political support of poorer voters.

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<sup>29</sup> World Bank Operations Evaluation Department, *Social Funds: Assessing Effectiveness* (Washington, The World Bank, 2002) pp. 39-40.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Table 4.1, p. 32

<sup>31</sup> Social funds have tended to work with local councils more often in Latin America and southern and eastern Europe and Central Asia (and to a lesser degree in Africa) than in the Middle East and in East and Southeast Asia where democratic decentralisation has made less headway than in other regions. Interview with two World Bank officials involved in evaluating social funds, Washington, 17 July 2002.

Finally, seats on local councils can be reserved for members of poor, socially excluded groups. This is often done for women, but it is more difficult to give poorer groups representation since they do not fall into a clearly recognisable social category – except in South Asia where caste makes this possible. Reservations thus have serious limitations. Where they are provided for women, it is crucial that those who obtain seats on local councils be *elected* and not *nominated*. If they are nominated – usually by senior male leaders in the council, on whom they then depend – old patriarchal systems of control that facilitate the arbitrary use of power will be not undermined but *reinforced*. This is apparent from, *inter alia*, the Bangladeshi system that existed between 1987 and 1992. The limited utility of reservations makes it all the more important that governments encourage pro-poor civil society organisations to play a significant roles in decentralised systems.

### *Creating Single-Purpose User Committees*

User committees can be part of the solution to excessively centralised, top-down government. Or – if they are manipulated in ways that strengthen upward accountability and the cooptation of local interests – they can worsen the problem.

Governments that are interested in becoming more open and responsive and in empowering disadvantaged groups can take several steps to turn user committees to these purposes. At higher levels in their systems, they can curb the inclination of many senior ministers and bureaucrats to adopt two damaging strategies. These people sometimes prefer to pack user committees with pliable non-officials who will tamely permit bureaucrats to continue with top-down dominance. And they often deny user committee members – however they are chosen – any significant influence over policy processes. Both of these strategies entail a deception -- user committees give the *appearance* of openness and consultation without delivering anything of substance. This is bound to inspire cynicism among ordinary people.

Even if they overcome these problems at higher levels, senior government figures must – as so often here – press bureaucrats at lower levels to comply with their aims. The latter tend strongly to manipulate often less-than-secret election procedures (if any are used) to place pliable people on such committees. Once members take their seats, bureaucrats seek to coopt them and deny them influence. Effective surveillance against such practices is often comparatively easy with user committees because committee members provide a ready source of information on non-compliance by junior bureaucrats. But those at higher levels of government must seek this information, systematically.

One other measure will help. If, as is often the case, elected multi-purpose councils exist alongside user committees, the two sets of institutions can be *integrated* – in ways that give local residents or elected members of councils

significant influence over user committee decisions. The precise arrangements vary. In some places, user committees have been made sub-committees of local councils. In others, elected councillors have been given powerful roles on user committees, or those committees' decisions require approval from public meetings open to all local residents.

Whatever form the integration takes, it yields several benefits. Since multi-purpose councils are usually elected by more reliable democratic processes than user committees, it compensates for shortcomings in processes employed to select members of the latter. Since user committees are often well funded by donors, it eases the financial problems that many local councils face. Since multi-purpose councils often enhance the coordination of development work across individual sectors, it helps to ensure that projects in one sector resonate with those in others. And yet, since user committees continue to possess something of a separate identity from local councils, it still provides ordinary folk with multiple channels through which to exercise influence and seek responses. Constructive links between the two types of institutions have been established – with beneficial results -- in, for example, Tanzania and the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka.

It is still possible, of course, that user committees will be captured by prosperous interests so that poor and excluded groups gain little. But the initiatives to provide the latter with leverage, suggested in the previous section on multi-purpose councils, can make a difference here as well.

#### *Other Devices to Promote Bottom-Up Participation and Empowerment*

A diversity of other devices can help to make governance more open, accountable and responsive – and helpful to poor, excluded groups.

1. Mass local-level meetings to deliberate on development issues These devices – which are often linked to elected local councils -- have had only limited impact, mainly because councillors seek to dilute or avoid them. Governments can urge low-level bureaucrats to ensure that genuine meetings occur, and they can seek help from civil society organisations to support this. But it is, logistically, very hard to penetrate into so many remote arenas and produce results. Governments might therefore seek to reinforce these devices by undertaking consultations by other means – for example, through exercises in participatory appraisal, and surveys or focus groups that fix mainly on poorer, socially excluded groups.

2. Direct democracy at the local level This has been attempted in only a tiny number of cases, and there are serious doubts about whether it will prove effective. It is unrealistic to expect many governments to go over to direct democracy and, until clear evidence emerges of its success, it is probably wise to postpone such decisions.

### 3. Incorporating pro-poor civil society organisations into decentralised systems

This device is highly promising. Indeed, despite some governments' hesitations about civil society, it could produce greater gains than most of the other items in this list. Governments may stop short of the kind of *formal* incorporation that has occurred in the Philippines, but even a less intimate but still genuine link between elected councils and civic associations would yield major benefits.

### 4. Instruments to permit action to secure citizens' rights

These devices – to enable ordinary people to petition tribunals when rights promised them are not realised -- are again highly promising. They are also comparatively easy to introduce. And they follow logically from most governments' commitments under various rights covenants. The difficulty is in making the devices work. Two things can facilitate that: official publicity campaigns to make people aware of these instruments, and government encouragement to civic associations (especially but not only teams of public interest lawyers) to assist ordinary folk in understanding and accessing them. In countries where the legal concept of *locus standi* is in use – which, when narrowly defined, permits only persons who have suffered injury to file petitions – the concept should be extended, as has happened in South Africa and India. That would enable public interest lawyers to act on behalf of very poor people who are often inhibited.

### 5. Devices to improve access to information and services

These have been used in numerous countries, and they can have a potent impact at the grassroots. They enable governments to give clear signals that they are serious about tackling corruption at the local level and empowering poor people. If they are to be accessed on a significant scale by local residents, governments need to encourage civil society organisations to work towards that end.

### 6. Exercises in participatory auditing

Such exercises – public meetings at which spending on government projects is revealed and assessed by ordinary people -- can also have a dramatic impact within local arenas when local residents discover discrepancies between official accounts and what has actually been spent. Governments often leave this to civil society organisations, although an official policy of at least tolerating such exercises is quite helpful. But governments that proactively organise them, and invite civic associations to assist, produce greater benefits for disadvantaged groups -- and reap greater political support from them as a consequence.

### 7. Initiatives to change the ethos and behaviour of government employees

Efforts to encourage lower-level government employees to behave more responsively again have substantial promise. Many governments have provided these officials with training in participatory methods, which is quite helpful. Few have adopted the even more promising approach pioneered in

northeast Brazil (see Box 7 above) – publicity campaigns to emphasise the value of work by employees charged with delivering services like education and health care, coupled with awards for high achievement. This latter device, which is only just becoming known in many countries, is patently feasible even in impoverished areas and has few political drawbacks.

8. Incentives and sanctions for government employees The use of performance targets, performance-related pay, and sanctions for poor performance can produce useful results. In many countries, this would not be a major innovation, but rather an extension of practices adopted under neo-liberal models – with greater emphasis on the needs of the poor. It is thus relatively easy to introduce. It is, however, crucial to specify – very precisely and clearly – both performance targets and the penalties that will follow if they are not met. If these are left vague, this strategy may yield little.

9. Exercises in participatory planning These are already widely used, but they tend to be half-hearted and ineffective. Governments can enhance their impact by publicising their determination to make them real, by enlisting help from pro-poor civil society organisations, and – if ruling parties have organisational strength – by efforts to mobilise people at the grassroots.

10. Joint management with civil society organisations of development programmes This promising option is sometimes difficult for governments to pursue. They may distrust civil society organisations, and feel reluctant to cede some of the responsibility for the management of development programmes to them. But the often substantial improvements in the efficacy of such programmes and in the uptake on them by ordinary people will produce major benefits – for poor people and for governments’ standing in their estimation. It is crucial, however, that governments *avoid the strong temptation to use this device to coopt and control civic associations.*

#### *Enlisting Support from Sections of Civil Society*

The number of references in the previous section to the need for help from civil society organisations indicates that those organisations can serve as exceedingly valuable allies of reforming governments – on several fronts. Such organisations, especially those that consist in part of non-poor members, can help to develop broad social coalitions whose support for pro-poor initiatives is usually essential to success. They can help to press lower-level bureaucrats who may resist reforms to comply with them. They can also reinforce publicity campaigns by governments to build morale and a sense of mission among low-level employees engaged in sectors like health and education. And in interactions with junior bureaucrats who seek to act more responsively but who unwittingly behave in ways that alienate ordinary people, civil society organisations can sensitise them.

They can also reinforce governments' efforts to reach out to poor, excluded groups in several specific ways discussed in Part II. Governments can respond by lending support in the following areas.

- They can encourage state-owned media to assist civic associations to disseminate information that can be of help to poorer groups at the grassroots. The radio station that broadcast an informative soap opera on the workings of local government (noted in Box 8 above) was state-owned. And nearer the local level in several countries, governments have fed detailed information to civic associations that seek to transmit it directly to poor, excluded groups.
- They can welcome and make use of information from below -- on the problems and preferences of the poor -- generated by civil society organisations.
- They can respond to information that such organisations develop out of participatory exercises to monitor and evaluate government performance. Indeed, they can actively seek such information -- as one Indian municipality did when it commissioned a 'report card' exercise on its delivery of services (for an example of this type of exercise, see Box 8 above).
- They can facilitate and respond to civic associations' independent social audits. Or (again) they can actively seek to promote such activities, as the Philippines government has done by incorporating them into its system of democratic decentralisation (see Box 6 above). They can welcome and respond to lobbying by poor or pro-poor organisations at lower and higher levels in their political systems.
- They can press lower-level bureaucrats and politicians to act responsively when poor people or civil society organisations representing them seek to lobby them.
- They can assist civic associations' efforts to promote access to justice -- in various ways. They can encourage courts and ombudspersons to welcome initiatives from such groups, or even to reach out to them by delivering rulings that admit even crudely written messages from poor people as official petitions -- as India's Supreme Court has done. They can attempt to sensitise the police who may be drawn into cases to behave sympathetically. They can show appreciation for the efforts of civic associations and public interest lawyers that seek to provide access to justice. Or they may go further, by creating legal aid funds to assist poor people with the costs of proceedings -- or even by appointing public advocates to serve them (although in many cases, this task is better left to independent public interest lawyers). They can also, where it is relevant, broaden the concept of *locus standi* -- to enable public interest lawyers to represent poor people who are injured parties.

***Box 14: Several of These Actions Can Be Pursued Simultaneously***

In the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, the government has sought to pursue several of these approaches at once, in informal partnership with a network of pro-poor civil society organisations. The network, which includes numerous local-level civic associations, has been organised by a state-level organisation called Samarthan. Its activists and those of associations allied to it concentrate their efforts on women and low caste and ‘tribal’ groups in urban centres and villages. They have persuaded the government to provide them with details of official development programmes in a wide range of sectors, and make this available to disadvantaged people in three ways. They publish a free newspaper in the local vernacular setting out the details of government programmes, the amounts of funds available under each in each locality, and the procedures to be followed to obtain them. They have established information centres in a wide range of localities, at which the same information is available – and can be explained by activists. And activists proactively contact disadvantaged groups, to acquaint them with this information and to build their self confidence, skills and organisational strength.

Activists also serve as intermediaries between those groups and nearby government officials, to help local residents to access the benefits from development programmes. And they support associations of chairpersons of elected councils – partly to strengthen these associations, and partly to persuade council leaders to respond to requests from disadvantaged groups for a fair share of government resources.

The state government has sought to facilitate these efforts. It sees the political utility of cultivating disadvantaged groups because they vote in huge numbers – their support enabled it to become one of the few state governments in recent times to be re-elected in 1998. It also recognises that government programmes yield better, more sustainable results if local people participate in them. It therefore presses lower-level officials to provide information and to respond to overtures from disadvantaged groups and from civil society activists working with them. All of this has provided poor, excluded groups at the grassroots with substantial gains over the last eight years.<sup>32</sup>

There are certain spheres in which governments can do relatively little to assist pro-poor civil society organisations, and others in which they may do unintended damage, so that the best approach is to leave things alone.

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<sup>32</sup> These comments are based on an extended field visit to two districts of the state, in the company of Samarthan activists, in April, 2002.



They can do little to help in one crucial area – efforts by large pro-poor non-governmental organisations to connect with civil society organisations at intermediate and local levels. Senior government officials can press civil servants at those levels to deal sympathetically with civic associations when they are approached for information or help. They can (as only some governments do) welcome donor funding of organisations making such efforts. But the main responsibility for the vertical integration of civil society organisations lies with those organisations themselves.

Governments are best advised to keep clear of direct involvement in a number of areas. Two are especially important. The first is micro-finance. There are examples of governments successfully developing their own micro-lending programmes, or providing funds for civil society programmes. But in most cases, government involvement creates difficulties. Civil servants at lower levels tend to manipulate such initiatives in efforts to coopt and control civic associations working in this field – sometimes with encouragement from higher authority, but often in defiance of it. And those civil servants (perhaps in league with intermediate-level politicians such as legislators) sometimes siphon off funds from micro-finance programmes. Even when these wilfully destructive activities do not occur, government involvement often brings delays, excessive paperwork and other problems. To succeed, micro-finance initiatives require sensitive, delicate handling of small groups of poor people at the local level – and civil society activists tend to be far more capable of this than government employees.

A second area is training – training for members of elected local councils, of user committees, or of lower-level bureaucrats or ordinary people who are involved with these institutions and with other devices to promote bottom-up input into development. Civil society organisations have often developed imaginative, participatory training programmes for use among these varied groups. Governments often seek to replicate and greatly extend these programmes by incorporating them into the curricula of their training academies. Unfortunately, these efforts often founder because the academies are too wooden and unimaginative in their methods, or because governments are more concerned with the numbers of people who pass through such programmes than with their quality.

Finally, when governments contract out service delivery to civil society organisations – which is just one type of partnership with such organisations – they need to be sensitive to the possibility that such arrangements can do damage. Contracting out often improves the effectiveness of service delivery, but can entail three potentially serious problems.

- It can divide civil society by creating resentment between those organisations that are awarded contracts and those that are not. This can undermine the unity of civil society and its capacity to perform

many important tasks -- especially in countries where it is rather weak and fragmented, but not only there.

- Those civic associations that receive contracts may feel compelled to cut back on advocacy and lobbying on behalf of disadvantaged groups, lest those activities jeopardise existing or future contracts with governments. Governments need to demonstrate that they welcome continuing efforts by civil society organisations in those other spheres.
- Some governments give civil society organisations that become contracted partners little or no power to adapt service delivery to the distinctive conditions and people's preferences in varied localities. This curtails creativity and may prevent services from meeting the needs of ordinary people in specific localities. When this happens, it causes popular resentment that can undermine the credibility of both government and civil society organisations. Governments need to empower those organisations to make adjustments that can enhance the local relevance of services.

### *Encouraging Elite Competition for the Support of Poor and Excluded Groups*

This goal must be pursued *indirectly*, by creating conditions that encourage elites to seek and compete for that support. Our main concern here is competition at or just above the local level. But higher levels also deserve attention because greater competition there tends to catalyse similar changes lower down.

Several steps may be taken to encourage this. Those that are most obvious have to do with relations between ruling parties and the opposition. Governments that have placed restrictions on opposition parties can ease them, in order to inspire multi-party competition. (They are often reluctant to do so, but such actions are likely to be widely popular.) More often, ruling parties that have sought by illiberal means to dominate institutions at lower levels – for example by packing user committees with loyalists through appointment from above, or by seeking to coopt civil society organisations – can open processes up to election from below.

But most of the more promising steps to be taken have little explicit connection to postures towards opposition parties. Elite competition for the support of disadvantaged groups at the grassroots tends strongly to increase when many of the reforms discussed in this chapter are introduced.

There are two strands to this, and reforming governments need to be aware of both. First, when ruling parties introduce pro-poor policies, it quickly becomes apparent to opposition parties that the poor may swing behind ruling parties at subsequent elections. They therefore feel compelled to respond with pro-poor proposals of their own. The ensuing bidding wars can yield major

benefits to the poor. Second, when initiatives create opportunities at the local level for ordinary people to exercise influence, *local* leaders and elites often seek to seize them. But when elections or mass meetings within localities determine who holds key posts or what decisions get taken, local leaders and elites often feel driven to cultivate support from disadvantaged groups – because they possess numerical strength. And over time, poorer people acquire the confidence, skills and organisational strength to operate more effectively in their dealings with local leaders and elites – and even to throw up alternative leaders of their own.

Open, participatory politics at the local level thus offer poor and excluded groups considerable promise. They also offer governments that reach out to these groups significant opportunities to cultivate their support. Those governments need to bear this in mind when – inevitably – some of the implications of more open politics cause them dismay.

More open politics imply increasingly vibrant political contestation at the grassroots. Reforming governments need to be willing to live with that – since hierarchies and inequalities are unlikely to be challenged in the absence of such contestation. But they often find this difficult – where, for example, they are acutely anxious about maintaining public order, or where social tensions run high.

They also find it hard to tolerate the untidiness and unpredictability that come with more open politics. These things stand in sharp contrast to the orderly and more predictable processes which technocrats foresee when they craft elegant blueprints for development programs. When ordinary people or their representatives – whom technocrats often regard as unsophisticated and irrational -- are given decision-making powers, they often introduce priorities that differ from technocrats' intentions. Local councils may devise long-term plans that resonate with technocrats' grand policies -- but then, after a time, wish to change them when new issues unexpectedly become urgent. This sort of thing should be welcome to higher-ups in governments, but they may be tempted to react against such untidiness. They need to steel themselves to tolerate these things because more open, participatory politics offer major benefits – to disadvantaged groups, to the pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals, and (not incidentally) *to ruling parties*.

### *Pro-Poor Coalition Building and Elite Perceptions*

Since the support of broad coalitions involving non-poor groups is almost always essential to the success of pro-poor initiatives, governments need to pay attention to perceptions of poverty among elites and other non-poor groups,<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A recent research project on elite perceptions of poverty and poor people involved researchers from Brazil, Bangladesh, the Netherlands, the Philippines, India, Norway and Britain. Its initial findings are set out in the *IDS Bulletin*, volume 30, number 2 (April, 1999).

and to try to change them when they impede pro-poor coalition building and initiatives.

Some of those perceptions lend themselves to these things. For example, in many developing countries it is widely agreed that in this information age, future prosperity depends on a strong education system. Governments can stress this while mounting efforts to deliver basic education to all citizens – a policy from which the poor will gain disproportionately.

Other perceptions are less helpful. Elites often underestimate the breadth and depth of poverty in their countries – the classic example is a failure to recognise *rural* poverty as a serious problem, but there are others. Governments can tackle this by publicising evidence on the seriousness and the extent of poverty. Elites sometimes believe (wrongly) that poverty does not threaten them. Governments can again provide information to show that (for example) certain communicable diseases like tuberculosis – which are bred by poverty – pose real threats to *all* social groups. And since elites often refuse to support pro-poor policies because they doubt governments' capacity to perform key tasks, improvements in governments' overall performance can make elite perceptions more amenable.

### *Measuring the Impact of Political Reforms*

Those who invest their funds and their hopes in political reforms often ask, quite legitimately, whether their impact on ordinary people, especially the poor, can be measured. Most of the studies that might help us to respond to this question suffer from serious shortcomings.

Macro-level measurements of change within entire countries have long been made by institutions such as Freedom House and Transparency International, but they do not consult ordinary people (never mind the poor) and their findings are too general and undisaggregated to help us much. Other exercises have tended to be rather economistic – focusing on budgeting processes, financial flows, procurement and (non-social) auditing procedures, governments' pay and employment practices, the implementation of civil service laws, etc. These are interesting, but again, they tell us little or nothing about the impact of policies on ordinary folk and are often based on consultations with government employees rather than those whom they govern.<sup>34</sup>

Our concern here is with the impact of political reforms at the *local* level, and that is harder to measure – both within and especially across countries. It

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<sup>34</sup> For examples, see appendices 2, 5 and 6 of S. Knack, M. Kugler and N. Manning, *Second Generation Indicators* --a report funded by the UK's DFID for a World Bank initiative on quantitative indicators of governance – (London, 2001). A slightly more useful study is summarised in appendix 4 of that document, dealing with governance in the Balkans, but it reveals only a few fragments of information from ordinary people.

also requires different methods which get at the perceptions of ordinary people in a locality and, more specifically, of poorer and socially excluded groups.

Very few studies have gone down this road. Witness, for example, a recent analysis of 60 evaluations of development projects in the ‘governance’ field. Of these, only one-half paid any attention to the local level. Only 8 consulted local residents – 3 through public opinion surveys, 4 through focus groups, and *only one* through questionnaires that targetted potential beneficiaries.<sup>35</sup>

It is also important that we recognise the serious problems that attend the use of logical framework approach, which is very popular among international development agencies, in assessing the impact of political reforms. This is not the place to examine these problems in detail. But it is worth noting that this approach makes it very difficult or even impossible to attribute causality, and it often places an excessive emphasis on quantitative data when (as we shall see below) some crucial changes can only be understood by way of qualitative analysis. The log frame approach also offers us little or nothing that can help to understand the political contexts and dynamics within which local actors operate. And by assuming that progress will occur, it tends to not pay attention to the possibility that reforms may generate some negative results.<sup>36</sup>

A few studies – by scholars and civil society organisations -- have provided more reliable analyses of the views of local residents on the impact of political reforms.<sup>37</sup> The most dependable of these have used survey methods to consult representative samples of residents in a locality -- plus poorer, socially excluded people there. Since political reforms have usually been undertaken fairly recently, it is usually possible to ask respondents very simple, clear and above all *specific* questions about how government institutions functioned *before* and *after* a reform came into being. (Vague questions which only elicit a “general feeling” about the impact of reforms are of little use.<sup>38</sup>) Questions also need to be *neutral*, so that respondents can provide insights into damaging outcomes. It is usually possible to discern patterns in responses that indicate whether and how much specific changes for the better have occurred. (Such surveys have sometimes been – and ought to be -- supplemented with semi-structured interviews with local residents who are especially well informed

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<sup>35</sup> G. Crawford with I. Kearton, *Evaluating Democracy and Governance Assistance* (Centre for Development Studies, University of Leeds, 2002) pp. 65 and 67.

<sup>36</sup> See in this connection, *ibid.*, pp. 63 and 75-6; Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Danida, *Evaluation of Danish Support to Promotion of Human Right and Democratization 1990-1998*, volume 1, *Synthesis Report* (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Copenhagen, 2000) p. 66; and M. Schacter, *Sector Wide Approaches, Accountability and CIDA: Issues and Recommendations* (CIDA, Ottawa, 2001).

See for example, S. Paul, *Strengthening Public Accountability: New Approaches and Mechanisms* (Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore, n.d.) and the summary of the Centre’s work on the internet at [www.pacindia.org](http://www.pacindia.org); the approach of CIET, an international group of social scientists and epidemiologists, which is partially revealed under ‘the evidence base’ on the ‘Pakistan’ page of its website, [www.ciet.org](http://www.ciet.org); and Crook and Manor, *Democracy and Decentralisation...*

<sup>38</sup> Crawford with Kearton, *Evaluating Democracy and...*, p. 69.

about the political context, local power dynamics and the political and policy processes – lawyers, journalists, school teachers, civil society association leaders, etc.)

Surveys are, however, expensive – so investigators sometimes use carefully chosen focus groups and/or participatory appraisal approaches that can also be revealing – although they are seldom as reliable as sizable surveys. It is important, when these two approaches are used, to conduct *separate* exercises with (i) a representative sample of local residents, and (ii) poor, socially excluded residents -- because when the latter are included in a representative group, they tend to be intimidated and to remain rather quiet. Discussions with focus groups prior to surveys can help investigators to decide what questions to raise during survey exercises.

Here are just a few examples of important questions about the outcomes of political reforms -- to which surveys (and those other methods) can yield reliable answers. (Some of the questions in this list can be broken down into multiple questions.)

The first set of questions can be usefully put to *all* local residents.

- Has the number of government development projects increased or decreased since the reform occurred? (When local institutions or groups are empowered to decide how to use development funds, they often choose many small projects which local residents prefer rather than a few large projects which higher authorities prefer. This helps measure ‘responsiveness’ by getting at the *quantity* of responses.)
- Have government projects and actions conformed more, or less, to your preferences than before? (This helps measure ‘responsiveness’ by getting at the *quality* of responses -- with ‘quality’ being assessed in terms of the extent to which responses conform to local preferences.)
- Has absenteeism among the government’s local health and education professionals increased, declined or remained the same? (Absenteeism is a severe problem in many countries.)
- Have you become better or less well informed about the amount of development funds that are supposed to be spent in your locality?

The following set of questions is especially important among poor, socially excluded respondents. It is important to put the crucial second question in the list above to such respondents.

- Have you become better or less well informed about the wages paid to labourers on public works projects, and about the full lists of people who were supposedly employed?
- Have you become better or less well informed about the official lists of beneficiaries from development projects?

- Have you become better or less well informed about the number and content of government projects/programmes that are supposed to reach your locality?
- Have you benefited less or more than before from government projects/programmes (especially from things like water and sanitation projects, electrification, etc., which sometimes only reach areas of a locality inhabited by the non-poor)?
- Have political leaders in and near the locality reached out to you less often or more often, and with less or more to offer you?
- Are they competing for your support less or more than before?
- Have you been able to influence decisions about local affairs less or more than before?
- Have you or people like you contacted politicians and government officials less often or more often than before?
- When contacted, have they been less or more helpful than before?
- Do you participate in collective activities with people like you less often or more often than before?
- Have organisations in which you participate come into being since the reform was introduced? Have existing organisations become weaker or stronger, and less or more active since the reform was introduced?
- Have civil society organisations outside your locality established or broken off ties to organisations in which you participate?

When responses indicate important changes, investigators can follow up with subsidiary questions to elicit specific details.<sup>39</sup>

The questions above enable us to quantify and measure many important aspects of the impact of political reforms. However, three words of caution are in order here. First, we need to recognise that some important potential impacts are exceedingly difficult – and in some cases *impossible* -- to measure. For example, we can use the second list of questions just above to get at and measure changes in poor people’s awareness, levels of participation, contacts with power holders, influence, and organisational strength. But we cannot measure changes in their self-confidence and political skills – both of which are crucial. We *can* gain insight into those things through *qualitative* studies – mainly through semi-structured interviews -- but they defy attempts at *quantification*. We need to resist the temptation to dismiss such things for this reason – they are too important.

Second, some important changes in the policy process cannot be reliably assessed by putting questions to ordinary or to poor, excluded people. If for example we want to know whether the uptake on ante- and post-natal care for

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<sup>39</sup> For other useful examples of questions for surveys, see any of the ‘report cards’ published on service delivery in Indian municipalities by the Public Affairs Centre in Bangalore, India. For example, see Annexure 3 in S.Paul and A.Iyer, *A Report Card on Public Services in Calcutta*, Working Paper 118 (Public Affairs Centre, Bangalore, 1997).

mothers and children has increased, or whether early warnings of potential disasters like floods or outbreaks of disease reach government employees, it is better to ask those employees and ‘well informed people’ noted above. The same is true if we want to know whether competitive bidding for contracts to undertake building projects is more common, and so it goes on.

Finally, people’s responses to questions in one particular area – the impact of more open government on corruption -- may be unreliable. If a political reform increases the *transparency* of the flow of government funds, corrupt acts become more visible. As that happens, people may conclude that corruption has increased *even when greater transparency causes the overall amount of money stolen to decline* -- because those inclined to such acts fear discovery and thus engage in no corrupt acts or seek to steal only small amounts. So to understand the impact of political reform on corruption, we need to seek evidence from other sources.

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This chapter has focused not on state failure – the preoccupation of much recent analysis – but on state potential, and the promise of political reforms. It is clear from events on the ground in many developing countries that reforms can make government more open, accountable and responsive – even in countries like Mozambique, Bangladesh and Indonesia where state capacity is limited and conditions are difficult. Reforms can improve the quality of life of ordinary people and of disadvantaged groups among them. More importantly, reforms can enhance their capacity *to improve their own lives*.

Consider just a few examples. Political reforms can help to ensure that the things which governments deliver conform to popular preferences, by giving local residents some influence over the political and policy processes. That in turn can persuade ordinary folk to become more active in injecting their views and their knowledge of local conditions into those processes, and in maintaining public facilities. This yields better and more sustainable developmental outcomes. Reforms can help to reduce absenteeism by government employees in crucial sectors such as health and education, and to reduce the overall amount of corruption. They can increase the uptake on critically important government services. When reforms inspire disadvantaged groups to engage in public affairs, their confidence, skills, connections, organisational strength – and thus their capacity to influence their own destinies – grow.

All of these things yield political benefits *for governments* that undertake reforms. Information flows between governments and people at the local level increase in both directions. The constructive potential of governments increases when the energies of civil society organisations and ordinary people are drawn into the development process. And (not incidentally in the eyes of



political leaders) reforms also enhance governments' legitimacy and popularity – no mean achievement in this era of fiscal constraints.

Indeed, the political reforms discussed here can help senior political leaders to fulfil most of their fondest wishes. If we ask what these are, the answers usually go something like this.

- I want to govern authoritatively.
- I want to remain in power for as long as possible (which these days usually means 'I want to be re-elected').
- I want to maximise my influence and overcome resistance at all levels -- all the way down through the political system and society to the grassroots.
- I need political allies at all levels within government, and a social base among groups with formidable numerical strength.
- I want to avoid being personally threatened – now and in the future.
- I want to deliver something meaningful to people, despite excruciating fiscal constraints.
- I want to be respected now and remembered later for adventurous accomplishments.

Political reforms resonate with all of these aspirations.

An earlier generation of development specialists recognised the need to pursue not just economic growth, but also redistribution. They reached this conclusion both because it was the just thing to do and because, without redistribution, the inequalities that often came with growth bred threats to growth itself. The arguments here for democratisation with inclusion are similar. Without inclusion, the political inequities that characterise many democratised systems can imperil democratisation. And once again, it is the just thing to do.

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