

Overcoming the Obstacles to Decentralization in Asia

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There are four objectives of decentralization: democracy, empowerment, efficiency and development. The major problem in decentralization is not so much whether to decentralize or not—but rather how to implement it. Varied experiences of several Asian countries imply that the fundamental obstacles are rooted in the difference of viewpoints regarding (a) redistribution of incomes, (b) economic stabilization, and (c) efficiency and resources allocation. What is the most desirable way to allocate different functions to different levels of government? The problem is not one of deciding which level of government will be in charge of which local public service. The challenge is to determine how the different levels of government could and should cooperate. Decentralization is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end, i.e., the improvement of people's quality of life.

Background

Decentralization is increasingly being pursued in several Asian countries signifying a region-wide trend of democratization and participatory governance. For example, Sri Lanka adopted the 13th Amendment to the Constitution and the Provincial Councils Act in 1987, thereby making local government a devolved subject. The 1988 Local Autonomy Act of South Korea laid down a list of 57 functions of local governments and led to the election of mayors of cities, executive heads of districts, and members of local assemblies. In the Philippines, the current Constitution (of 1987) reinforces local autonomy and this has been further strengthened by the passage of the Local Government Code in 1991. In India, the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts of 1992 constitute major steps in strengthening local governments. In Thailand, the new Constitution adopted in 1997 gives Thai local governments increased powers, signaling a dramatic shift from centralism towards decentralization and local autonomy. The 1999 Local Self-Government Act of Nepal provides for the devolution of powers, responsibilities and resources to local governments, including powers to collect and use taxes. In Indonesia, the government passed two laws in 1999 that are designed to transfer certain

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major public sector responsibilities from the central government to local authorities. And most recently in Vietnam, the central government granted in 2001 special powers to the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City to manage the city's local economic development.

However, the implementation of these decentralization initiatives has been met with major obstacles. While these initiatives are being pursued under different governmental structures, local cultures, and circumstances, the overall experience so far has generally been difficult. The existing situation in some countries may be summarized as follows:

- Sri Lanka – Implementation of decentralization measures to strengthen local governments is faced with serious challenges, foremost among which is the continuing reluctance of central government policymakers to release control over decisionmaking and finances even though they may realize that participation in government at the local level is crucial if development programs are to match local needs with available resources (Slater 1997). According to several Sri Lanka public administration experts, local government in Sri Lanka is still not recognized as a level of governance and is treated as a subject like Rural Development or Cooperatives. Thus, the result is that the functional domain of local authorities is limited and Sri Lankan local governments remain outside of the mainstream of socioeconomic development.
- Philippines – Occupying the center stage in the difficulties confronting decentralization is the issue of fiscal autonomy. While sources of local financial resources have widened significantly under the Local Government Code's enactment, which increased the share of local governments of the Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA), the experience of many local authorities, especially at the provincial and municipal levels, has shown that the IRA has been unable to cover the costs of devolved functions (Brillantes 1999). Furthermore, central government agencies continue to receive and control larger financial allocation from the national budget.
- India – The overall evidence indicates that decentralization has not advanced beyond the creation of democratically elected bodies at the level of "panchayats" (local councils) and municipalities, and no worthwhile decentralization of powers and responsibilities has occurred. The expenditure responsibilities of these local bodies are ambiguous, and they do not have revenue-raising powers to meet such expenditure responsibilities. Transfers from the State Governments for meeting the revenue gap of local governments (which account for anywhere between 15 to 95 percent) are ad hoc and discretionary, and often even distortionary. The situation is

further aggravated by the absence of a proper local finance database (Mathur 2000).

- Thailand – Experience with decentralization since promulgation of the 1997 Constitution and the Local Government Act of 1999 has been problematic, perhaps because it is recent. The system for local government administration, especially the delineation of powers, duties and responsibilities between local government bodies and central government agencies is very much a “work in progress.” There are a number of existing laws concerning local administration that need to be repealed or modified to support the provisions of the new Constitution (Vorathanyakit 1999).

A major problem is that there are too many Tambon (town) Administrative Organizations being created over a very short period of time, and these are often very small to effectively support participatory governance or delivery of services and functions legally assigned to them.

In analyzing the difficulties being encountered by decentralization initiatives in these countries, there is a general tendency to oversimplify the issue and to discuss policy formulation and the provision of public services in the same vein. On one hand, decisionmakers in central government tend to be unwilling to give up their powers, citing that local authorities do not possess the capacity to take over devolved functions and responsibilities. On the other hand, local authorities claim that they are capable of assuming these responsibilities if the corresponding authority and resources are given to them. In this rather oversimplified debate, the benefits of a decentralized and participatory policymaking process are undermined by difficulties in implementing development policies and programs especially under conditions of severely limited resources which exist in many Asian developing countries.

Centralization vs. Decentralization

Why decentralize? Support for decentralization comes from a number of sources. Decentralization from national to local government levels is said to enhance the ability of governments to respond to a wide variety of local needs among different regions and localities; it is said to improve the efficiency of response since local governments are closer to the expression of need or demand; it is said to enhance the willingness of people to pay taxes and fees for the services they obtain locally; and it is said to increase accountability and transparency, since locally administered functions are more “visible” than functions administered by central or remote regions. A significant argument behind decentralization is that the closer government gets to the local level, or the “grassroots,” the more it is democratic and representative of “the people.”

All these arguments can be summed up in four basic objectives of decentralization: democracy, empowerment, efficiency, and development. However, the obstacle to decentralization is not so much as whether to decentralize or not, but rather *how* to implement it. The experiences of several Asian countries suggest that the major obstacles are rooted in the difference of viewpoints regarding (1) redistribution of incomes, (2) economic stabilization, and (3) efficiency and resources allocation.

Redistribution of Income

Most developing country governments in Asia have adopted national policies for the redistribution of incomes among individuals as well as jurisdictions (or regions). These are based upon Constitutional mandates on the distribution of equity. The mechanisms for implementing these policies are mainly through taxation and the national budget. Because decentralization measures can adversely affect the distribution of equity, a significant number of people strongly believe that the redistribution of income should remain a responsibility of the central government. The two main reasons cited are:

- Attempts by local government to redress income disparities are likely to be unfair. The poor in well-off regions will fare better than the poor in more deprived regions; and
- Decentralized redistribution is self-defeating. If a jurisdiction adopts policies to redistribute income, imposing high taxes on the rich and giving high benefits to the poor, the rich will tend to leave for more lightly taxed areas while the poor tend to move in from areas that offer lower benefits.

This reasoning appears to be behind the difficulties being encountered by decentralization initiatives in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Philippines where central governments believe they must have the responsibility for income redistribution programs and thus must control a large share of taxes and public expenditures. However, centralization is not a sufficient condition for redistribution, but rather one of the several necessary conditions. Experience in other countries nevertheless indicates that decentralization makes it more difficult to pursue redistribution policies. This is probably why the central government in India is hesitant in granting taxing powers to municipal authorities and in clarifying their expenditure responsibilities. Similarly in the Philippines, the central government agencies' share from the national budget has even increased after the adoption of the Local Government Code (Brillantes 1999).

The argument for central government to retain responsibility for income redistribution is further supported by political realities which view regional disparities to be undesirable and thus need to be reduced or eliminated through the movements of goods, capital and labor. The goal seems to be that because poor people are poor anywhere, they should be aided irrespective of their place of residence. Obviously, a decentralized system is likely to be less effective in reducing interjurisdictional disparities than a centralized system. In a decentralized system, the local jurisdiction would collect all taxes and undertake all expenditures on behalf of its residents. By contrast, a centralized system would redistribute income from richer areas to poorer ones, even under regressive tax and expenditure systems.

This argument seems to be one of the major reasons for the reluctance of the government of Sri Lanka to grant local authorities sufficient fiscal powers. While such authorities have been granted a wide range of functions, they remain constrained by a lack of adequate funds, and whatever funds they have access to are primarily just enough to cover personnel needs and other recurrent expenditures. Most capital projects are undertaken by Provincial Councils or central government agencies which operate in parallel with the local authorities (Slater 1997). Sri Lankan central government policymakers argue that only through national budgets can regional disparities be reduced because any reduction in the importance of national budgets relative to those at the subnational level reduces the impact of national policies designed to correct regional inequities.

A similar argument exists in Thailand where there is concern about the destructive competition among jurisdictions eager to attract investment. The central government is wary that subnational governments (provinces and municipalities) might compete with each other to attract enterprises by lowering tax rates or providing subsidies. If all local governments offer enterprises identical advantages, spatial patterns will not be modified, but the balance between the public and private sectors will swing away from an equilibrium considered to be optimal. The greater the degree of decentralization, the greater the potential for misallocation. Therefore, the Thai government, while increasing the percentage share of municipal governments in the national budget, regulates regional competition through the provincial governments which are basically extensions of central government.

Economic Stabilization

One of the major obstacles to decentralization across most Asian developing countries is the view that a decentralized system makes macroeconomic policies more difficult to implement. For example, the Fiscal Reform of 1994 in China is aimed at clarifying fiscal responsibilities and

separating central and local systems so as to strengthen macroeconomic control at the center. All countries in Asia have macroeconomic policies, and the two main instruments for these are monetary policy and fiscal policy. The latter involves control over the amount and structure of taxes and expenditures and the management of the budget. It is a very powerful instrument for stabilizing the economy. It is an instrument that only the central government can manipulate, because local authorities have few or no incentives to undertake economic stabilization policies.

The impact that a particular local (or regional) government could have on national demand and on prices is negligible. Even if any regional government had that much influence (such as in the case of the "mega" cities like Colombo, Manila, Mumbai, Bangkok, and Jakarta), most of the impact would be outside of its jurisdiction because subnational economies are much more "open" than national ones and sustain greater leakages to other regions as a result of overspending or underspending. Moreover, a regional government would have to pay the full political cost of an economic stabilization policy (such as increasing taxes) that would bring it only partial benefits. As a result, local and regional governments will likely never provide enough economic stabilization, leaving central governments to take care of it.

Efficiency and Allocation of Resources

In Asian developing countries, as elsewhere, the case for centralization is largely based on efficiency. Advocates of decentralization claim that decentralization enables the matching of supply and demand. The theory is that residents of different jurisdictions have different tastes and preferences, and a decentralized system will make it possible to give these residents what they want, will better match demand, and therefore increase welfare. However, in most Asian developing countries, these assumptions are very difficult to meet and also focus entirely on demand efficiency, ignoring supply efficiency.

Decentralization supporters believe that the main difference between various local or regional jurisdictions is in their respective tastes and preferences. But the contrary view is that the main differences are in income, whether household income or potential tax income. This view argues that the differences in household income explain differences in tastes. In resolving this conflict, it would be more productive not to focus on the fine differences in preferences between jurisdictions but rather to satisfy basic needs.

Furthermore, decentralization proponents believe that the taxpayers/voters of each jurisdiction will express their preferences in their votes. However, in most Asian developing countries, the behavior of voters does not reflect this view. Local elections are usually decided on the basis of personal,

ethnic, religious or political party loyalties. People vote for a mayor whom they know, a member of their group, or a party they like. In the Philippines, for example, many elected local officials are former movie actors or actresses and television personalities. The platform on which local elections are decided is often vague and unrealistic. The policy and/or program menus offered for choice by candidates are often different from the electorate's actual preferences.

Related to this belief is that with decentralization, locally elected mayors will satisfy local preferences. But often the electoral mandate is vague or inconsistent, or both. Opponents of decentralization argue that even if elected officials wanted to fulfill it, they cannot, because of a gross mismatch between available resources and promised expenditures. Also, officials often lack incentives to keep their promises, and most know that their reelection will not depend much on their local performance. For instance, a mayor who has a feel for the preferences of the electorate and tries to respond to them may well be ousted because he or she belongs to a party whose national policies have become unpopular.

Even if mayors wanted to satisfy the preferences of the electorate and had enough resources to do so, they are constrained by their relatively short terms of office, such as one year in some cities in India and up to three years in the Philippines. In a number of Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and India, elected officials are also constrained by the local bureaucracy over which they may not have full control. In these cases, an elected official is merely a principal who gives orders to a local bureaucrat, his agent. The difficulties associated with this principal-agent relationship cannot be underestimated. In many Asian developing counties, local bureaucracies are often unresponsive, poorly motivated and underqualified, and have good reasons to pursue their own agenda rather than those of their principal's.

Another contentious issue is the argument by proponents of decentralization that welfare gains are enhanced by decentralization because supply will better match demand. There seems to be a basic assumption here that supply itself is always efficient. Opponents of decentralization, however, do not accept this reasoning, arguing that the real issue is whether local provision is more cost-effective than national provision. In reality, neither one is totally effective, but advocates of centralism believe decentralization affects productive efficiency.

One of the factors cited, of course, is that providing a given local service may entail economies of scale. There is the prevailing view that there are few local public services for which economies of scale imply nationwide supply. For most local public services, the provision in a given city is independent of the provision in other cities. Another, and perhaps more compelling reason is that economies of scope might exist and that central bureaucracies may be

more efficient providers than local jurisdictions. Experience in Asia indicates that central bureaucracies operate closer (than local bureaucracies) to technical production considerations. This can be attributed to the fact that central government bureaucracies tend to attract more qualified people, not so much because they offer higher salaries, but because they offer better careers, with a greater diversity of tasks, more possibilities of promotion, less political intervention, a wider view of issues, and the fact that central government offices are often in the largest capital cities which offer the widest array of attractions.

Another concern that impacts on efficiency is the fear that decentralization might be accompanied by more corruption. If corruption is more widespread at the local than at the national level, then decentralization automatically increases the overall level of corruption. Some people view this as not necessarily being bad in terms of redistribution, because the "benefits" of decentralized corruption are probably better distributed than the "benefits" of centralized corruption. But it would increase the costs in terms of allocative efficiency, because it leads to the supply of services for which the level of kickbacks is higher rather than that where there is real demand.

While corruption is hard to assess and measure, anti-decentralization proponents believe it is likely to be more prevalent at the local than the national level. One reason cited is that there are more opportunities for corruption at the local level where local politicians and bureaucrats are more subject to pressing demands from local interest groups (whose money and votes count) in matters such as the grant of permits or contracts. Another reason is the fact that national bureaucrats, at least in some countries such as India and Thailand, are moved from place to place and never stay very long in the same location which makes it more difficult for them to establish unethical relationships with local interest groups. At the same time, monitoring and auditing are usually better developed at the national than at the local level. The pressure of the media is also a greater disincentive at the national than at the local level.

Redefining the Arena for Debate

Because decentralization has many dimensions and can apply to many forms of government interventions, some of these dimensions are more appropriate or desirable than others. Against the backdrop of the difficulties currently constraining decentralization initiatives in Asia, it would be helpful to explore some of these dimension, particularly the treatment of: (1) taxes and expenditures; (2) geographical areas; (3) sectors; (4) different functions; and (5) provision of services.

The Treatment of Taxes and Expenditures

In the assignment of taxes and expenditures, the reasons for decentralizing expenditures are independent from those in favor of decentralizing taxes. There is no reason why the two processes should lead to similar results. According to this theory, many public expenditures lend themselves to decentralization. In contrast, very few taxes lend themselves to decentralization. Local or regional governments are therefore unlikely to have enough tax money to finance their expenditures, and transfers from the national government will be necessary. Transfers such as the Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA) in the Philippines should not be considered as an unavoidable evil. They can be used to control some of the dangers of decentralization, particularly for distribution and stabilization, and should be seen as an important component of any decentralization program.

The area of transfers is very promising for policy improvements in many Asian countries where existing transfer systems are often crude. They have often evolved as products of administrative convenience or of political pressures, and can in many cases be easily amended at low technical and even political costs. However, designing a "good" transfer system is a delicate task, because the features that are desirable to reach certain objectives are not desirable to reach other equally worthy objectives. Trade-offs must be identified and compromises reached. The experience of the Philippines with the IRA system since its establishment in 1992 provides some useful lessons in this regard.

The Treatment of Geographical Areas

In discussing decentralization, geography should not be ignored. Decentralization in India cannot be discussed with the same concepts and words as decentralization in Thailand. Decentralization to Philippines cities cannot be treated just like decentralization to Sri Lankan villages. Population size matters. Decentralization is more likely to be warranted in a heavily populated country, where secondary subnational jurisdictions are bigger than small countries. The same is true of geographical size. In a large country such as India or Indonesia, particularly if communications are difficult, decentralization is more desirable than in a small country like, say, Fiji.

The same appears to be true also of levels of development. Experience in other countries suggests that decentralization, as conventionally measured, tends to increase with income levels. Such experience suggests that decentralization is more likely to be successful in middle- and high- income countries. It also suggests that large cities should be treated differently from smaller jurisdictions even if they have the same legal status, because they are more able to benefit from decentralization.

In geographically differentiated decentralization, the key concept is critical mass. For decentralized units to be efficient and achieve the potential benefits of decentralization, they must be sufficiently large in terms of population, activities and income. This is the issue that has been raised in Thailand where a very large number of Tambon (town) Administrative Organizations have been created under the Decentralization Act of 1999. Most of these local units are too small to achieve any level of efficiency. While efficiency can be increased by personnel training and institution building, decentralizing taxes and even expenditures to small and weak local governments is unlikely to be successful.

The concept of critical mass also applies to central governments. Decentralization that shrinks them below a certain quantitative and qualitative level will be difficult to implement. This level is, of course, different from the level required for efficient local governments, because the functions to be performed by central governments are different. This differentiation implies that the powers transferred from central to local governments should not jeopardize the efficiency of central government, and these powers should be transferred to local governments that have the critical mass required to use them efficiently.

The Treatment of Sectors

Public services or sectors have different characteristics which directly influence their adoptability to decentralization. The three characteristics that are particularly relevant are: the "externality" of the service, its "chargeability," and its "technicity."

The **externality** of a service refers to the quantity and types of external effects and geographic spillovers associated with the service. Some infrastructure services, such as highways and transportation or power production, matter very much outside the area in which the infrastructure is located or where the service is provided. This is the case with most "network" infrastructure investments, as opposed to "point" infrastructure sites, although a small network (such as a water distribution system) resembles point infrastructure. The smaller the externality of a service, the easier it is to decentralize, while services with wide network effects or spillovers are not easy to decentralize.

The **chargeability** of a service refers to the ease with which the service can be financed by charges, as opposed to taxes. Some services can and should be sold—that is, financed by charges or fees, rather than provided "free" of charge (that is, financed by taxes). Water or power can easily be charged to consumers; urban public transport is more difficult to finance solely by fees; and it is extremely difficult to make people pay for garbage collection.

Technological progress, however, constantly extends the domain of chargeability. The ability to charge users also has a social dimension. Some services, such as education, which could technically be funded by user charges, are often financed by taxes, at least in part, either because they are considered public goods or because there are social benefits associated with the service. The greater the ability to charge for a service, the easier it is to decentralize it.

The **technicity** of a service refers to the degree of technical and managerial expertise required to provide the service. Garbage collection is much easier to provide than disposal of toxic wastes. The lower the technicity of a service, the easier it is to decentralize because the economies of scale and scope associated with its provision, which are difficult to reap in the case of multiple providers, will be less important, and therefore the potential production efficiency losses will be minimal. The externality, chargeability, and technicity of local public services can be estimated to determine which of these are most favorable to decentralization. This exercise can indicate that some services are more easily devolved to local authorities than others, and why.

The Treatment of Different Functions

Providing local public service is a complex task that encompasses many different activities—from selecting the appropriate investment and supervising its construction, to operating, regulating and maintaining the system, and finally to monitoring and auditing its performance. Not all of these functions are required for every type of service, and many of these tasks are not interdependent. For a given public service in a given geographical context, the desirable degree of decentralization will differ from one function to another.

The choice of investments has a technical dimension (what design or technology should be selected?), a geographic dimension (where should the investment be located?), an institutional dimension (what agency should be in charge of it?), and a social dimension (who should benefit from it?). It is through the exercise of this last function where the detailed, first-hand knowledge of local realities can best be applied. This is also where the election control mechanism can be expected to play a role. On the other hand, the design of infrastructure investments is usually highly technical and often marked by important economies of scale. Local governments in Asia often cannot easily perform this function. It must either be contracted out to private firms or remain a central government responsibility.

The construction of infrastructure, especially major ones such as water reservoirs, waste disposal facilities and expressways, is increasingly being

viewed as a task that governments, local or central, should not undertake directly. This function should be contracted out to the private sector in most cases. Government will nevertheless always have a role in this area, either in building the facility if no one can be found to undertake the project, or in contracting out and supervising the construction. In either case, experience shows that this aspect is better conducted by the central government. In reality, divorcing the construction of the facility from the choice of investment is not easy, but the decentralization of the former is generally seen as more dangerous than the decentralization of the latter. However, for smaller infrastructure projects such as markets, slaughterhouses and bus terminals, the experience of the Philippines with the Build-Operate-Transfer law, which allows local governments to partner with the private sector for both investment, construction and operation of certain types of infrastructure, shows that such arrangements are workable.

The operation and regulation of the facility is often the most important function in the provision of the service. The setting of prices and fees is an activity that lends itself easily to decentralization. It cannot easily be performed by the central government, which often does not have the appropriate information or incentive. Similarly, maintenance can and should be decentralized. In certain cases it should even be privatized. The supervisory agency can be the central government, particularly when the authorities are providing financing. But it can also be the local government which will again have a comparative advantage in terms of information and incentive. Finally, monitoring and auditing are functions best suited for the central government, which has the expertise, the independence, and the performance objectives that make monitoring useful.

Conclusion

What is the most desirable way to allocate different functions to different levels of government in Asian developing countries? The problem is not one of deciding which level of government will be in charge of a specific local public service. For many, if not most, types of infrastructure and services, two or three levels of government will have to be involved as each level of government will have different, but equally legitimate, interests.

Consider primary education, for example. One can argue that it should be decentralized to local governments because the needs and the specifics of local pupils are likely to differ from community to community. But one can also argue that primary education should be a regional responsibility because of economies of scale (in the design of curricula or the recruitment of teachers, for instance), and because purely local financing will lead to inequalities in the operation of schools. One can also argue that the central government has an interest in the education of all its citizens. All three arguments are strong

and convincing. They suggest that central, regional and local levels of government must simultaneously be involved in providing the service.

The challenge, therefore, is to determine how the different levels of government could and should cooperate. Many instruments are available: subsidies, mandates, guidelines, constraints, floors and ceilings, coordination mechanisms, contracts between various levels of government, and so on. These instruments should be studied and compared because some mechanisms work, while others do not in certain circumstances and under different conditions.

As shown by experience, decentralization is not easily accepted by many in Asian central governments. Perhaps it is because its costs are easier to identify than its benefits. It must be recognized that decentralization refers to both a state and a process. The problem is that the virtues and the dangers of decentralization are often discussed simultaneously for both concepts. The benefits of citizen empowerment in defining local priorities, for instance, cannot be measured in the same vein as production efficiency. Doing so leads to confusion which is dangerous, because what is desirable in a given country at a certain point in time is a function of the present state of decentralization and the speed at which it has been reached. It is influenced very much by the country's culture, history, level of development and political stability. In the ultimate analysis, decentralization is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end—that is, the improvement of people's quality of life.

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