

Appropriate for whom?

Challenging the Discourse on Decentralisation—Lessons from Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Much of the global discourse on decentralised resource management is couched in terms of good governance, democratic accountability and economic efficiency. These are heady goals. Nevertheless the meanings attached to such goals have successfully worked their way through into national policy development and programme implementation during the 1990s. One of their abiding manifestations is in the concept of Integrated Water Resources Management. Examining this policy in detail, the authors argue that the reality of political complexity and messy institutional processes ensures that governance 'may not be good', nor the result more 'efficient' and, in general, lead to a more accountable local environment for resource management. Rather, assumptions need to be challenged and better scrutiny adopted of the workings of new institutions to ensure that they function to the benefit of a broad constituency, not simply local power-brokers. Case studies and analysis in the paper draw on recent research conducted in Zimbabwe.

The conceptual ground

Concepts of decentralised government and decision-making have been around for decades, if not centuries. Whilst much of the current discourse can be traced back to disillusionment with centralised development planning in the 1970s, as early as the 1950s the core concepts of decentralisation policy were emerging at the United Nations, particularly in the context of newly-independent states. In 1956 a study approved by the UN General Assembly on the problems of decentralisation¹ dwelled on the concepts of participation and local authority "...for social and economic development" (UNA, 1962, 1). Subsequently the concepts and meanings of decentralisation have become diffuse, but as a catch-all term 'decentralisation' has become mainstream development speak.

Whilst much is made of the distinction between the political decentralisation of power (devolution) and the notion of 'de-concentration' (Rondinelli 1981; Mawhood, 1983), both remain political in terms of outcomes and, by some, are regarded as complex 'political devices' (Mawhood, 1993). For the UN the functionality of the 'device' so-called was of its contribution to achieving stability in the 'newly-independent' countries, where, the report stated, "Arrangements for field administration and local government are likely to reflect political, security and revenue concerns as well as concerns for administrative efficiency of technical services and values attributable to devolution to local authorities" (UN, 1962, 4).

In recent years a firmer notion of democratic decentralisation has been championed and now forms the dominant strand of decentralisation discourse. This regards decentralisation as an 'empowering process' for local communities through the mechanism of self-government (Rothchild, 1994), and places processes of decentralisation within the 'popular and democratic' notion of participatory government; contrasted with more centralised and 'top-down' systems of (presumably) undemocratic government (Uphoff, 1980). This form of 'incentive building' at a local level can, it is argued, reduce the activity of the state and competition for resources and provide the political space for entry by a broader, more pluralist, set of political actors (Rothchild, 1994, 3).

Nevertheless, there are counter arguments that the concept of democratic decentralisation can be a device that simply excuses centralised government of failure. In the case of Tanzania, for instance, Slater argues that the experience of decentralisation "provided a cloak for increasing state control whilst also safeguarding the power of central government", and allowed government responsibility for implementation failure to be blurred (Slater, 1989, 515). In another vein, the process may in fact allow centralised ruling parties to strengthen their position through party control at local levels (Conyers, 1983, 101).

Efficiency of process is a core concept in democratic decentralisation discourse, with voters, political champions and service providers linked through a political process in which belief and confidence in political governance are bartered for promises on service delivery. This concept of a political economy of local

¹ The report (Annex I, Terminology) defined 'decentralisation' as "...the transfer of authority on a geographic basis, whether by deconcentration (i.e. delegation of authority to field units of the same department or level of government), or by devolution of authority to local government units or special statutory bodies." (UN, 1962, 88).

resource development (see, for instance Rondinelli, et al, 1989, 59) seeks linkage between public choice theory to "help in determining the feasibility of deregulation and privatisation and in changing the rules for renewable resource use" (ibid.) and a public administration and finance theory. Under the latter it is believed that the provision of some public goods is more economically efficient when a large number of local institutions are involved (Ostram, et al, 1961) cited in Rondinelli (et al, 1989).

Underlying assumptions abound about rational choice decision making, political transparency and pursuit of 'individual self interest' (Moore, 1989). The broader, more structurally relevant issues of authority, culture, perceptions and meanings, as well as class and power, are frequently left out of the picture Slater (1989), leaving what is often a messy, complex local environment appearing benign and 'receptive' to competitive, decentralised political systems.

Decentralisation in the southern Africa context²

In southern Africa the discourse on decentralisation has been closely linked to issues of local-level resource management. Many donor and country initiatives have focused on community-based natural resource management, local government capacity building and on re-empowering 'traditional authorities'. Some have aimed to improve livelihoods and natural resource use and sustainability in the process, but frequently there is a lack of coordination between initiatives. The result can be overlap, confusion, ambiguity and high transactions costs for those who are expected to participate—and once they do participate, significant barriers to successful participation and influence over the decision making process within the new institutions.

A recent project—Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa³—identified two distinct trends in discourse on decentralisation: 1) the process of structural adjustment and its frequent corollary of public sector retrenchment; 2) the emphasis on local forms of governance and the rise of participatory approaches to development. Whilst variants exist either as distinct constructions of, or complex interrelationships between, the following: political or democratic decentralisation; deconcentration or administrative decentralisation; delegation; devolution; fiscal decentralisation; privatisation; and participatory local governance, the practice has been that policy broadly reflects three dominant discourses, with concomitant institutional forms:

- Democratic decentralisation—government at the local level creating opportunities for competitive local electoral politics, and within this competition an enhanced local voice and improved responsiveness. Multi-purpose elected councils, with tax raising powers are the result.
- Decentralisation for efficient service delivery—moving the control over, and delivery of, services to the local level—is assumed to result in improved efficiency. It may also allow for user-pay schemes for certain resources and therefore local-level cost recovery. User committees may oversee the management of such services.
- Project based/sector focused committees—local management and control over resources—is seen as the key to success of community-based resource management initiatives. Committee structures overseeing such activities are the key organisational mechanism.

The Mawhood (1983) definition of decentralisation covers the existence of bodies separated by law from the national centre, in which local representatives are given formal power to decide on a range of public matters, a political base in the locality, not the nation, a limited area of authority, but entrenched right to make decisions on areas within their jurisdiction, and local authorities commanding resources that may be spent and invested at their own discretion. Major problems with such views include the extensive range of assumptions which may include: that elections to posts are free and fair, and, through competition by elites for posts, a local competitive politics will emerge; that money and resources will be available from the central state, or from local taxation, that alternative sites of 'traditional' or 'customary' authority will erode over time in favour of a new democratic politics at the local level, that approvals for expenditures, plans and other initiatives occur at the local level, not at the centre, and that confidence and capacity for exercising voice at the local level emerges through participation in democratic bodies (councils, committees etc.).

The argument runs that if natural resources are managed at the local level, either by communities or by local government, then they will be looked after better, and more efficiently, resulting in improved opportunities

² This section borrows from the SLSA briefing paper on Decentralisation and Livelihoods in Southern Africa. See <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/env/SLSA/sapubs.html>

³ Led by the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

for sustainable livelihoods. Systems of accountability are more effective and transparent as a result, and local leadership can make effective demands on the central state. Such decentralised arrangements thus allow more community participation and therefore the voices of people are more likely to be heard in policy decisions. Resource users as 'participants' can express claims and demands to officials and institutional bodies, informally or through, plans, contracts, etc. In effect a model of responsive governance and service delivery is presumed, with strong links to accountability, representation and democratic empowerment in which the social and political environment is benign, the actors are rational decision-makers according to goals and objectives set in policy and the outcomes are fairly distributed.

Key factors in new decentralised systems are 'responsive' local authorities (efficient, informed, goal-seeking) comprising local councillors and other forms of elected officials, greater scrutiny of process (either electoral—votes mean 'good' or vote-seeking behaviour—or executive decision making) and perhaps local judicial processes. All this, of course, implies a model of democracy, accountability and, crucially, legitimacy both premised on (and drawn from) largely western-liberal social and political traditions that have formed over hundreds of years and include various levels of scrutiny and checks and balances to ensure that rules are adhered to and, increasingly, individuals are assisted in making their claims. Even so, there are still frequent inefficiencies, instances of corruption, nepotism and a large degree of political apathy within these 'competitive' political arenas.

Decentralisation in Zimbabwe

Shortly after Independence with the Prime Ministerial decree of 1984, a new decentralised system was installed in Zimbabwe to parallel the party cell structure established during the liberation war. Village, ward and district committees became the basis for planning and administration of development and were superimposed on a system of 'traditional' authority, involving chiefs and headmen. This 'tradition' had been highly shaped by colonial intervention, and many such authorities had collaborated with the Rhodesian regime, making them illegitimate in the eyes of the new government and party officials. Conflicts between these two authority structures were widespread and often incapacitated the new structures, which, despite the promises of government, received neither much devolved power nor resources, and failed in many instances to establish their legitimacy. In the latter part of the 1990s, the VIDCOs⁴ were being actively abandoned to be replaced by, or existed in parallel with, a hybrid form of administration that brought the 'traditional authorities' back in.

Democratic decentralisation has been attempted in Zimbabwe with the establishment of elected unitary Rural District Councils (following the 1988 Rural District Councils Act) to which a permanent transfer of functions and authority from central government was supposed to have taken place. However this process has been stridently criticised as a process of phoney decentralisation producing RDCs lacking in power and resources with unfunded mandates. In practice this process has been largely instrumental in facilitating central government control of the rural majority of the country's population and has been characterised as an exercise geared more towards attracting money from donors.

However in the field of natural resources management Zimbabwe is held up as more of a decentralisation 'success'. Local resource-user committees have mushroomed and the CAMPFIRE programme for devolving the management and revenue from safari hunting and ecotourism has become internationally renowned and lavishly funded. There has also been considerable movement in expanding the scope of decentralised water resources management. In 1998 the new Water Act ushered in a catchment-based system replacing the largely commercial farming-dominated River Boards. The new system was based on the concept of integrated water resource management and devolved responsibility for management decision-making (principally the issuing of permits and fee collection) to lower, sub-catchment levels.

Although the establishment of these institutions was delayed by emerging donor-government problems, by 2000 in at least two basins, the Save and Mazowe, catchment councils were up and running. Embedded in the IWRM discourse is the notion of broad-based user participation—including previously disadvantaged communal and small-scale, predominantly African farmers. The actual functioning of the institutions in recent years has been affected by existing and new political-economic faultlines at a local level, which serve to challenge many of the ideals of user-based decision making and pro-poor empowerment embedded in this decentralisation discourse.

⁴ Village Development Committees.

Since the emergence of a challenge to ZANU(PF)'s authority from a credible opposition party there has been an ongoing process of party politicisation with decentralised institutions – from RDCs to water point committees – having to show strong support for ZANU(PF). In the case of the new water management institution there is a close linkage between water demand, the efficient collection of tariffs sufficient to cover institutional overheads and the major changes in land-use taking place at a local level. The revenue bases of these institutions—formerly mainly commercial farmers—are being replaced by a complex array of ‘newly-emerging’ water users including fast-track land settlers.

Negotiating institutional complexity

Decentralisation, in practice made up of differing and multiple processes in which are engaged a variety of actors, is far from the singular process envisaged in many of the reform processes. Simple ‘transfer of power’ notions embedded in the standard literature are caught up in geographical and power-related complexities. In Zimbabwe the recent establishment of water catchment institutions, defined by hydrological boundaries which cut across existing administrative and political boundaries, raises a number of problems of institutional access and overlap of responsibilities between decentralised institutions. Sub-catchment hydrological boundaries were overlain on political and administrative boundaries established when the villages, wards, districts and provinces were carved out under the local government decentralisation process. When Rural District Councils (RDCs) were formed, they became the focal administrative points where stakeholders met and discussed district development issues. In addition, complaints and problems were channelled through village and ward councillors to this forum, particularly by communal people. The decentralisation process surrounding water reforms shifted their focal point to catchment and sub-catchment councils, and the vehicle for channelling water-related issues became the stakeholder representatives who comprise the sub-catchment council.

Thus, the parallel processes of decentralisation, one in local government and the other in natural resources, in this case, water sector, created parallel institutions with parallel channels for communicating developmental issues. Water issues are currently being reported to the sub-catchment council either individually or through the less-known stakeholder representatives. The fact that stakeholder representatives are not well known by the constituencies they purport to represent is illustrated by the representative of a farmers’ cooperative who stated that:

We as Chinyaduma Farmers’ Coop don’t know what is happening at Budzi [Sub-Catchment Council], ...we are forced to pay for water ...we don’t know why we are paying... we want to use water in Chako Dam to irrigate our tea but we don’t know what to do to get the water. I’m told that we should apply to Budzi, that’s why I came here [Budzi SCC offices] to be get an explanation...We are not refusing to pay because there is nothing for free these days, but what we want to know is why we are paying and how can one small-scale farmer get involved (SLSA Research Paper 14: 27).⁵

In short, these small-scale farmers indicate a lack of knowledge of their representative on the sub-catchment council and the process of getting involved in water management. This reflects local inefficiencies in institutional development and the general problem of communication in rural—often remote—areas. The institutional complexity and messiness created by parallel process of decentralisation presenting a complex environment for new stakeholders to engage with was aptly described by a rural district official in Chimanimani who noted that:

People are not aware of where to go with their water queries...naturally most people come to the rural district council because it is their local authority...We constantly tell people that water issues in some parts of Chimanimani—from the Skyline Junction, town area, Rusitu, Ndima to the surrounding areas—report to Budzi sub-catchment council which is in Chipinge district. The other parts, Nyanyadzi and Cashel areas report to different sub-catchment councils. You see, it’s complicated (SLSA Research Paper 14: 39).⁶

Put differently, people who were used to reporting to their district council now report water issues to a sub-catchment council which may not be in their ‘district’ or area. This institutional division makes both reporting

⁵ Interview with official Budzi Sub Catchment Council Offices, 2 April 2002.

⁶ Interview with CEO Chimanimani RDC, 19 February 2002.

and participation problematic. Some areas of these catchment areas might be important hydrologically—for instance in terms of upstream catchment—but remote logistically and therefore difficult to elicit participation from.

PARTICIPATION

As well as the institutional complexity and the emergence of overlapping and competing interests involved in institutional responsibility, there has also been discernible complexity in the roles and functions of participants in many of the new institutions. The nature of participation has changed substantially and the expectations of the types of participation has brought with it competing demands and challenges. In some cases the outcomes appear to stack the benefits of participation against 'new stakeholders', particularly when high transaction costs are taken into account. One local chief who participated in a new catchment management process in Zimbabwe outlined his experience:

At first we were not given any money for bus fares. We went to attend the meetings when we have our own business to do in town. We pushed for transport allowances, and then we were recently given Z\$500. ... This money is not even adequate for transport, so what about food? Do I have to travel from my home to starve in the name of sub-catchment council meeting? No! ... This is the main reason why people from Chimanimani, particularly myself, do not attend these meetings (*SLSA Research Paper* 14: 40).

Forced to travel long distances to report water issues in unfamiliar institutional environments leaves, by default almost, participation and representation to stakeholders who are situated near the sub-catchment council office (or able to afford the costs of access). Even when the remoter and poorer stakeholders are able to make the necessary journey, poor reverse flows of information on new 'procedures' can often mean that they arrive at catchment council offices without the right documentation.

Not surprisingly, the whole philosophy behind participation has changed substantially. The new politics of inclusiveness—at least as stated formally—has encouraged participation at the grassroots in water management. During the colonial era, there existed legal and administrative frameworks governing ownership, access, control and use of water which favoured narrow sectional interests, mainly commercial farming and mining. With regards to water, the 1976 Water Act, institutionalised through legal changes the effective denial of the right of communal and small-scale farmers to water, characterised in particular by the tying together of land and water rights through the legalisation of riparian rights. Direct denial of access to water was evident in the colonial government's concerted effort at establishing legislation that alienated Africans from fertile land, close to water sources, and their physical resettlement on Native Reserves. Native Reserves, later called communal areas, where Africans were resettled, often had poor water sources and low and erratic rainfall.

New forms of participation emerging under processes of decentralisation are throwing up complex political challenges, including the relative roles and powers of informal as opposed to formal systems of authority. Whilst the assigned roles under new legislation and institutional structures might suggest an orderly picture of responsibility, action-led tasking and overall co-ordination, the reality is that roles are flexible and their nature and success in practice depends greatly on the individuals who assume them. In the recent political turbulence in Zimbabwe the wider roles expected of traditional leaders have sometimes led to conflict with formal systems of authority if, in practice, their 'authority' does not match external expectations (see *SLSA Research Paper* 3). Thus, in some areas, *sabhuku* (traditional leaders) who are not politically connected to the ruling party have been sidelined in the process of local-level resource development. Water committee members call for meetings instead of the *sabhuku*, and rule enforcement is undertaken by caretakers and councillors. Whilst their valuable role in community mobilisation may be stated in policy, this may be compromised by political allegiances elsewhere. One such situation was revealed by a key informant *sabhuku* who was contesting the authority of the ruling party in the new political arena:

I have been campaigning for a different candidate for ZANU(PF) primary elections with the Councillor. It has been like that for many years. ... Unfortunately, the candidate that I have been rallying behind continually lost to the Councillor's candidate. Since it has been viewed as a crime, I have been excluded in all those issues. The Councillor says to the people, 'it's me who sourced [money] for the boreholes', so they work with him more closely than myself. I have nothing to do with it (*SLSA Research Paper* 15: 15).

This has implications for access to new institutions by precisely those stakeholders supposedly addressed by sectoral reforms. It also poses key questions for parallel 'decentralised' institutions together within broader development activities in natural resource management (including environmental protection, water quality protection, etc).

In Chipinge District, a disjunction exists between local authority power and ZINWA processes of resources management. The former perceives the establishment of tariff collection by the latter as a form of 'virtual taxation' of the local people (who are, after all, the constituents for local councillors). Implicit in the Council's concerns is a reticence to be associated too closely with new policies and institutions perceived as extractive at a local level. Of particular concern is the centralised destination of local revenue-raising activities. Future coherence—and cooperation—between the two decentralised institutions will be essential, not least in ensuring that RDCs act to enforce compliance by water users who refuse to pay the new levies. At present there are evident problems in RDCs assuming this role given the linkage between permit issue and current land claims (against which permits are granted). RDCs are responsible for authorising land claims in the 'new land settlements' established under the fast-track land reform. Emerging is an increasingly complex pattern of decentralised institutions and patterns of authority and power in rural Zimbabwe.

For local communities in such districts of Zimbabwe and elsewhere in southern Africa, this environment of increasingly multiple decentralisation represents a major challenge for access to key livelihood resources. Understanding the maze and marking out effective routes within it in order to achieve major livelihoods goals requires levels of knowledge, decision making capacity and access to key resources including time, transport options and political patronage networks. In many cases these resources are already in short supply.

Accountability, authority and legitimacy

In Zimbabwe, a common source of competition and conflict over authority at local levels – particularly over the governance of natural resources – is that between new local government players and 'traditional' authorities. This is illustrated by the conflict between traditional leaders in Chimanimani and the Budzi Sub-Catchment Council (SCC). Traditional leaders, and their respective communities, argue that the Chief is the custodian of traditional water sources and rivers and performs traditional ceremonies to appease the water spirits, while Budzi SCC argues that all water is State water and the SCC is the custodian of water on behalf of the State. The conflict has threatened the legitimacy of the SCC, as it has come to be represented by some as an extension of the colonial institutions that sought to override and discard people's customs and beliefs.

Many new 'local' authorities cover wide areas of dispersed rural populations, with the administrative centre often a great distance from where people live. Frequently those consulted are in physical proximity to the local authority and/or sub-catchment council. This process narrows the range of participants and helps to establish an entrenched 'elite participants' group, who, through the distribution of benefits, may become more powerful—particularly as the demand for participation increases. Other individuals may claim or receive a right to participate, but fail to or are unable to take an active role either by default (due to language in some cases) or the physical problems of reaching the required site for participation, as the Budzi sub-catchment council showed earlier. One Chief in Chipinge District argued that the time and cost in attending catchment council meetings (which he was expected to attend) was not met by the Z\$500 allowance paid to attendees: "What is better, to come to Budzi using the inadequate transport allowance or to stay at home and cultivate your fields?", he asked.

Party politicisation is obviously particularly marked in Zimbabwe at present – most evidently in the sudden emergence of decentralised committee-based structures in the new resettlement areas. This has parallels with the decentralised village and ward committee structures of the 1980s. But the crucial difference is that, whereas previously the committees were meant to separate politics from planning and administration there is now no such pretence. Positions of authority – and indeed land in these resettlement areas – are only allocated to those not associated with the opposition party, the MDC. Local elites – particularly ruling party ZANU(PF) supporting war veterans – claim a greater right to land and even (in the case of Tsovani irrigation scheme) water, on the basis of their liberation war credentials and party affiliation⁷.

Clearly this has little to do with Zimbabwe's supposed democratic decentralisation policies. At best RDCs have been left out of the decision-making loop and at worst they have been actively closed down by war

⁷ Source Chaumba and Mtisi (2002)

veterans and youth militias accusing them of opposition party sympathies. But even decentralised resource user groups – such as water point committees – in Zimbabwe are now heavily politicised with, for example, supporters of opposition councillor candidates excluded from membership⁸.

On the positive side, despite the limitations, demand-led service delivery can be enhanced through the creation of localised political channels for expression. In Zimbabwe, the demand-led delivery of water in sub-catchment councils has witnessed an improved and efficient delivery of water to irrigation schemes that use 'agreement water' as they demand ZINWA to deliver water in a timely and efficient manner. This has seen members of Chibwe Irrigation Scheme receiving an adequate supply of water, which is largely attributed to the success of the winter crop.

However, there may be a heavy price to pay if demands are not reciprocated by delivery and, as the case studies show, enhanced capacity for articulation and channelling of demands has not necessarily led to better quality service. Growing alliances and localised interest groups can assist in channelling and amplifying demands. However, the nature that these groups take may be inherently exclusionary (e.g. in the form of the National War Veterans Associations in Zimbabwe) if affiliation is an overtly political process.

On the negative side, decentralised management over resources may be susceptible to changes in 'interest and involvement' in local management institutions by key individuals (usually from richer households) who help to cement and finance community initiatives. An example of this came from Zimbabwe, where the increasing capture and control of private household boreholes in some communities removed key members of management structures responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of communal boreholes. The fickle nature of such management structures creates an additional level of vulnerability and uncertainty for poor households at a local level.

Conclusions

The drive to reform water policy in southern Africa, and specifically, in Zimbabwe, is linked to complex purposes. These include global narratives on managing water under perceived conditions of scarcity, better ways of achieving efficient management structures and the creation of viable community management and financing mechanisms. However, such 'sector-centric' purposes are overlain by broader political dynamics that have emerged from the tangled political histories of many southern African countries and which have included the exploitation and subordination of large sections of the population.

Within such environments the process of institutional development of decentralised resource management has often been unable to recognise these complex political environments and to respond to them adequately. Resource governance and the mediation of competing and often vitriolic grievances and past denial of access to resources often do not sit comfortably together. For more effective and sustainable approaches there needs to be more coherence and greater connection between resource governance institutions such as catchment councils and sub-catchment councils more and the institutions of broader governance, including rural district councils in Zimbabwe, through which political expression is channelled.

This kind of 'political connectivity' is likely to strengthen the resource management process and assist policy implemented to improve access for the poor in this aim—certainly insofar as this will help to make more transparent and to challenge local elite control of access to resources. In the case of water supply as well as water resource development processes in Zimbabwe, this entails the empowering of local authorities within the catchment management decision-making process through increasing their role—and stake—in the water management and their capacity to influence decisions.

One possible vehicle might be to seek ways of using some of the locally-generated revenues for specific resource development measures at a local level. Otherwise the process of charging for water remains an extractive one taking money from local areas to central state coffers. This in itself can be a source of confusion and local-level resentment. Local development financed locally could also serve the secondary purpose of providing revenues to cross-subsidise water supply developments for more deprived areas within districts, or catchment protection in newly-farmed areas. However, at a more fundamental level, increasing local ward-level involvement in the catchment councils could also help to facilitate links between the repositories of local knowledge over resources—including the indigenous and competing narratives of

⁸ Source Mtisi and Nicol (2002).

meaning on the resource—and higher order decision making and resource development processes where local knowledge is often misheard or not heard at all.

The second major challenge is to create the means within these new institutional structures with which to understand 'grey areas' domestic water in livelihoods activities. If payments for water are envisaged under the new structures then who decides and by which criteria what is 'commercial' (paid for) as opposed to domestic (free) use? Bringing greater local knowledge into decision making can help in understanding this complex areas. It can also help to encourage new stakeholders and decision makers to make more informed choices on how to implement policy and, indeed, how to feedback to a national level the strengths or weaknesses in policy impact. At a broader level, these shifts towards greater coherence between discrete forms of decentralised institution would help to increase the feedback loop to national policy makers and encourage more flexible and dynamic policy processes.

Nevertheless, one major outstanding issue, particularly at the local level, will remain the challenges and competition that remains between formally decentralised structures and those informal systems of authority and governance that already exist at the local level. This is an historic tension in policy on decentralisation, and one that frequently helps to undermine the objective goals of decentralisation policy. Combining both systems of authority in new institutions may precipitate greater coherence in decision making or, at the very least, help to address local community and household-level issues more effectively to policy makers. But the real challenge here remains a political one. The tension between real, devolved authority and the policy that purports to devolve will continue to be fought out locally. In the case of Zimbabwe, there are real processes of decentralised governance underway, but in current circumstances highly disparate forms of authority, both formal and informal. For the future success of local resource management the institutional environment needs both to be flexible enough to incorporate these different forms of authority but also robust enough to ensure that the communication and debate that precedes decision making within these institutions can take place fairly and with access to the best locally-available information.

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