Conceptualizing Institutionalised Decentralisation: Implications for Competing Theories in Development

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ABSTRACT: *The paper engages pluralistic literature to identify various concepts that have shaped decentralisation thinking and practice in development in the last two decades. This paper takes the view that the state should decentralize power and authority to lower level institutions and also consider the socio-political perspectives that will make local government responsive. Decentralization reforms were primarily driven by international development agencies, which associate decentralization with rolling back of the state, the extension of bureaucratic control, and the marketisation of social services (World Bank, 1997; 1993). However, critics argue that the technocratic approach inadequately considers context specificities, over simplifies complex reality and downplay local politics (Corbridge, 2008; Slater, 2002). The inadequate conceptualization of human agency, power relations and context specificities in decentralization approach advocated by the international development agencies stimulated the authors to draw insights from social theory and the emerging post-institutional perspective to provide a better understanding of decentralisation practice. The paper discovers that the actions of the individuals and their participation in local government structures are mediated through social relations and other diverse institutional arrangements which are shaped by context. In terms of contribution to knowledge, the paper takes decentralisation beyond just the role and responsibilities of local government structures to include broader institutions and processes that organise the collective life of society (see:Brinkerhoff, 2007; Bierschenk and Oliver de Sardan, 2003). This knowledge broadens our understanding of institutionalised decentralisation discourse as a multi-dimensional concept which encapsulates both bureaucratic and socio-culturally embedded institutional governance practices at the local level.*

KEYWORDS: *Governance, Development, Institutions, Power, Authority, Participation, Poverty*

I.   INTRODUCTION

This paper explores diverse literature to identify the various concepts that have shaped decentralisation thinking and practice in development since the 1990s to the present. Since these key concepts underlying decentralisation are highly varied in terms of the goals to be achieved, the paper draws on various core notions and concepts to tease out the link between the economic and non-economic factors that shape decentralisation at the local level. Specifically, the paper provides a thumbnail sketch of decentralisation to illuminate how decentralisation theory and policy inadequately apply the concepts of agency, institutions and authority in development practice.

To gain further insights on the process of how the mechanisms for decentralisation play out in practice, the paper further explores the varied theories and perspectives that underpin contemporary thinking and practice about the concept. Drawing on the limitations of the efficiency and equity perspectives on decentralisation, the authors argue that the democratic decentralisation approach inadequately offer transformational possibilities both on the part of the poor and their social organisation due to the uncritical understanding of the link between agency, institutions and structure.

The inadequate conceptualisation of human agency, power relations and context specificities in decentralisation approach lead the authors to draw insights from social theory and the emerging post-institutional perspective to provide a better understanding of decentralisation practice. The authors argue further in that the actions of the individuals and their participation in local government structures are mediated through social relations and other diverse institutional arrangements which are shaped by context.

Finally, based on the gaps indentified in the literature, the paper offers an alternative perspective to decentralisation that will complement the practice of institutional decentralisation in reality. Specifically, the next section provides a historical background on decentralisation to reveal how the concept has changed over time before highlighting the different schools of thought that shape debates around the concept in theory and in practice.

1.2 The Temporal Dynamics of Decentralisation

Decentralisation in the early years of its introduction in mainstream development in the 1970s was more often associated with inefficiency of government (Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007; World Bank, 2000; 1999). Earlier decentralisation reforms were conceived narrowly as the disaggregation of the central states power and authority to sub national units of administration, local governments, or other agents of the state. Such a conception portrayed the state as both inefficient and as the same government (ibid). Hence, many decentralisation reforms during this period presented the concept as the remedy to the inefficiencies of the central state (World Bank, 1990). For example, the World Bank in 1992, sought to use decentralisation as a mechanism to strengthen public sector management, promote rules and institutions to provide a predictable and transparent framework for public and private business, and promote accountability for economic and financial performance (ibid).

Decentralisation was also advocated as a way of reducing the role of the central state in general, so as to make government more responsive and efficient (Smoke, 2003; World Bank, 2002a; Mahwood, 1993). Countries that implemented decentralisation reforms in the 1970s and 1980s, focused on deconcentrating hierarchical government structures and bureaucracies to sun-national units as a result of the many failures of the central state. The policy and practice of decentralisation during this period was to accelerate development, break bureaucratic bottlenecks arising from centralised government planning and management, and participate more effectively in a more globalising economy (Smoke, 2003).

Latter forms of decentralisation policies, beginning in the mid-1980s, widened the concept to include political power sharing, democratisation, and market liberalisation as a result of the concerns arising over the ineffectiveness of the central state to promote economic and social improvement. Later, during the early 1990s, the discourse around decentralisation widened to embrace not only government but also other societal institutions, including the private sector and civil associations (ibid).

Decentralisation reforms were primarily driven by international development agencies, which associated decentralisation with rolling back of the state, the extension of bureaucratic control, and the marketisation of social services (World Bank, 1997; 1993). Debates on the policy and practice of decentralisation within this period shifted from the proper allocation of responsibilities within government to how strongly the state should intervene in economic activities, and the appropriate roles of government, the private sector, and civil society in the development process.

However, in the late 1990s, thinking about decentralisation focused on the broader perspectives of governance due to the recognition of the complex institutions shaping people's lives (World Bank, 2001a, 2001b). The concepts and practices of decentralisation now placed emphasis not only on the transfer of authority within government but also on the sharing of power, authority, and responsibilities among broader governance institutions. Latter forms of decentralisation policy in late 1990s placed more emphasis on local forms of democratic governance that widened spaces for citizen involvement that were also shaped by the ideals of the good governance agenda to reduce poverty. Three primary forms of decentralisation namely, devolution, deconcentration and delegation were pursued by most countries that had decentralised although other forms of decentralisation in the form of privatisation and partnership were also found in the discourse of decentralisation (Work, 2002). However, this study places more emphasis on devolution as a form of decentralisation that transfers power and authority to elected local governments that are both independent of central government control and democratically elected (Crawford, 2008; Ribot, 2002a). Devolution may also be about local government elections and the control of public life by elected politicians (Ribot, 2004; Blair, 2000).

The form and content of decentralisation approaches implemented in mainstream development have mostly been shaped by prevailing debates in development policy and practice. Contemporary critical thoughts about decentralisation centre on mechanisms to improve citizens engagement, and governance processes, and on further strengthening decentralised institutions. Within much of the debates, decentralisation is presented as a statist project of social transformation (Corbridge, 2008). The debates focus on establishing the appropriate strategy for addressing concerns about the inefficient state and, its relations to citizens, or society in general. Based on such structural-functional assumptions of state-citizen relations, two main schools of thought are mostly evident within the decentralisation literature.

The theoretical positions are reflected in either the free-market economists' or those who are both anti-state'and anti-market'(Bardhan, 2002). In general, both schools of thought concentrate on the appropriate mechanisms to promote more direct citizen engagement in the processes of governance and the role of the state

in addressing the needs of society. While the free-market economists' draw more on technocratic principles to address the inefficiencies of the central state, the latter group advocates for a representative democracy that is supplemented with a vibrant and participatory civil society (Bardhan, 2002; Heller, 2001).

The technocratic view is informed by the idea that experts have the ability to either design robust local level institutions or fix the deficiencies of inefficient institutions in order to enable the state govern society (World Bank, 2001). Viewed From this perspective, decentralisation is thought of as a technocratic activity due to its adherence to bureaucratic principles of public administration, fiscal and instrumental rational planning to achieve structural transformation. This view stresses the importance of getting local government institutions right for development outcomes to be efficient, accountable and responsive (Ribot, 2004). Central to the technocratic approach is the tendency to initiate governance reforms from above and to insulate decision-makers from politics (World Bank, 2001). The state's organisations and staff are expected to act impersonally to achieve functional ends through the application of instrumental rational techniques (Corbridge, 2008). To achieve these functional objectives of the state, certain technical procedures framed in the discourse of good governance are adopted in order for state institutions to function more efficiently, address the needs of society and finally transform it. The priority of the technocratic school is to get the institutions right to foster good governance. Critics argue that the technocratic approach inadequately considers context specificities, over simplifies complex reality and downplay local politics (Corbridge, 2008; Slater, 2002).

The other extreme position on decentralisation, what Bardhan (2002) terms anarchocommunitarians , are in opposition to the dominant role accorded to the state and the market in mainstream development thinking and practice. A lot of emphasis is placed on civil society and all forms of association rather than on the institutions of the state. The view advocate for the deepening of democracy by placing emphasis on formal representative institutions supplemented by an active civil society. The main thrust of this approach to decentralisation is the rejection of the overly centralised and elite-controlled character of the state and the market in favour of empowering local actors with their forms of organisations (ibid). These theorists advocate for local actors including the marginalised and oppressed to be mobilised, preferably through the activities of social movements to challenge the hegemonic state and its associated elites. One of their arguments is that, local actors have the capacity to know and express their interest to shape the outcome of development through active mobilisation (ibid).

The two approaches discussed above converge around the mainstream view that *state*-society relations in general can be fixed and transformed through mechanisms of decentralisation (Bardhan, 2002). Both approaches emphasise some form of modernism that, suggests that state society's relation can be transformed either through conscious design of the institutions of the state or through the mobilisation and the subsequent empowerment of the poor and marginalized around their local forms of organisation to manage their affairs (Slater, 1989; Scott, 1998).

This paper takes the view that the state should decentralise power and authority to lower levels institutions and also consider the socio-politcal perspectives that will make local government responsive. However, the belief of the technocratic approach that, participation in governance can be engineered through appropriate institutional designs is rejected. This is because formal local government structures, which are created by the state, tend to neglect the differentiated nature of the community and the structural factors that shape community participation. Similarly, the claim by the that, increase associationalism and democracy from below can increase participation is also inadequate, because the various structural and contextual factors that shape individual participation in governance at the local level are not considered.

This paper argues that it is important for the state to develop and simplify techniques in order to implement its development programmes, for monitoring and evaluation purposes, but how do such rational techniques permit the incorporation of complex, illegible local practices that local people want and need to run their lives (Corbridge, 2008; Slater, 1989). Therefore, considering the occurrence of the practice of decentralisation in ordinary social arenas at the community level, this paper advocate that decentralisation policy and practice must move beyond the functionalist perspective of state-society relations. The mechanisms for decentralisation should envisage neither the state nor society as positioned outside each other but, in reality they are but closely knit with one another (Corbridge, 2008). Furthermore, both the state and society should not be conceived as distinct monolithic entities, immune from power and politics, but rather as complex and diverse, consisting of various actors and institutions. Perhaps, decentralisation could be seen more as a —social interface where various entities with different interest and agency behave politically to pursue their interest (Long, 2003).

Following on from the inadequate conception of state-society relationship in the decentralisation discourse is the problematic conception of individuals and their relations to the state (Corbridge, 2008). Decentralisation policy focuses on incentives for behavioural change (Ribot, 2002a). The justification for such an argument is made around the assumption that mechanisms for decentralisation provides the incentives for state officials of the bureaucracy to work with local representatives, whiles local people are supposed to actively participate in the affairs of their locality and subsequently hold their representatives accountable (ibid).. Rather than relying on an idealised notion of decentralisation, the next section interrogates the core concepts that shape decentralisation thinking and practice in mainstream development.

1.3 Questioning Institutionalised Decentralisation
This section problematises the diverse core notions and concepts that underpin the institutional approach to decentralisation in mainstream development thinking. In questioning the approach to institutional decentralisation, emphasis will be placed on the conceptions of human agency, institutions and social structure to understand how these concepts play out in the practice of decentralisation at the community level.

Decentralisation has become identified with the promotion of efficiency and the enhancement of public services, as well as with support for more transparent and accountable forms of government (Larson and Ribot, 2004). Decentralising power and authority to local governments is likely to lead to improvement in decision making which is essential for promoting democracy and good governance. Proponents of decentralisation, notably international donor agencies claim that, the democratic content of decentralisation has the potential to make local governments more responsive to local citizen's needs, bring about greater participation in public decision-making and improve efficiency, equity and development (World Bank, 2006, 2002; UNDP, 2002). The claim in these assertions is that decentralising power to communities or local representatives, has the potential to make development outcomes equitable and sustainable, resulting in improved systems of accountability that are more effective and transparent. This will also enable local leadership to make effective demands on the central state (World Bank, 2001). Furthermore, decentralised arrangements allow for more community participation and therefore the voices of people are more likely to be heard in collective decisions.

Mainstream views on decentralisation that seek to involve common people in the public decision-making processes to make development outcomes efficient, equitable and sustainable are welcome. However, these views as found in the discourse on decentralisation inadequately provide insights beyond the economic and political aspects of decentralisation (Johnson, 2001). The dominance of efficiency and effectiveness in the policy discourse on decentralisation also accounts for the decline in the social thinking around the concept (ibid). This is as a result of the neoliberal state reform that advocates for a reduction in state-driven social policies and the privatisation of services (Peet, 2003). For example, decentralisation reforms since the 1980s have considered state social welfare and utility expenditure as an unproductive government expense (World Bank, 2000a). While there are arguments to support privatisation as a form of decentralisation on fiscal grounds, concerns over its impacts on poorer consumers exist.

Decentralisation as a mechanism for local governance extends beyond just the role and responsibilities of local government structures to include broader institutions and processes that organise the collective life of society (Brinkerhoff, 2007; Bierschenk and Oliver de Sardan, 2003). The decentralisation literature says little about the role to be played by non-state actors to make local governments work in transparent and accountable ways. For example, Aryee (2008) highlights how Ghana's local government framework mentions the Unit Committees (UC) as the lowest local government unit, but yet makes no attempt to provide guidelines for community participation beyond the district level. Therefore, interrogating some of the theoretical concepts that underpin institutionalised decentralisation will broaden our understanding on the extent to which the introduction of new institutional arrangements leads to social transformation.

We begin by understanding institutionalised decentralisation as the—administrative bodies, systems and mechanisms, both local and intergovernmental organisations, which help to manage and support decentralisation (Smoke, 2003: 10). This includes the mechanisms that link formal government bodies to other key local government actors such traditional authorities and Non-governmental authorities and civil society (Parker, 1995). These institutional arrangements then become the key architecture on which decentralisation is built and are mostly concerned with defining which formal institutions are to be involved in a decentralisation program, and the development of an appropriate legal framework that defines the relationships between different institutions within a particular locality. Institutional decentralisation has —elements of politics (who benefits), organisational theory (structural changes) and bureaucratic reorientation, that is changes in roles, attitudes and behaviour orientation (ibid).

Though the institutional dimensions of decentralisation at the local level may be complex and varied, Parker (1995) identifies a set of discernable conditions that will make institutional decentralisation work within a particular locality. First Parker identifies the importance of a legal framework that defines the local government structures, how they are to be constituted, and how they relate to other institutions. In Ghana, the local Government Act 462, 1993 provides the legal framework that underpins the process of decentralisation and has put in place sub-district structures to shape local governance. Secondly, an active civil society is advocated as very important in shaping the outcomes of decentralisation. Social capital is used here to refer to the level of associational life and the different forms of institutions that can participate in decentralisation. Parker writes that in Ghana there is a variety of - well developed political, moral and legal institutions and possess identities that have been encouraged through associational life (Parker, 1995: 33). Thirdly, local capacity is needed to undertake the role and functions that are devolved to the decentralised structures. Finally, there needed to be in place an effective system of accountability. The absence of a well defined system of accountability that sanctions individuals and institutions that fail to carry out their functions appropriately may affect the legitimacy and authority of institutions devolved as a result of decentralisation.

In theory, devolving power from central government to lower levels in an administrative and territorial hierarchy as a result of decentralisation is to foster representative, accountable local government that is better able to discern and respond to local needs and aspirations. Institutional forms of decentralisation through representation offer local actors the power and capability to participate and shape the processes and outcomes of public decision-making (Blair 2000; World Bank, 2000). At the same time citizens are considered to be capable of effectively demanding accountability from their representatives (Ribot, 2002a, 2005; World Bank, 2000).

To date, a poor understanding of the institutional arrangements that make decentralisation and local governance work has impeded practical efforts in decentralisation and local governance. The process of decentralisation in any particular locality can only be understood against the background of the distinct socio-economic conditions, political process, history and cultural context of the area. We shall now highlight the three inadequacies of the institutionalised approach to decentralisation that this study seeks to interrogate.

First, mainstream views assume that confidence and capacity for exercising voice at the local level emerges through participation in democratic bodies implemented at the community level through decentralisation (World Bank, 1997, 2006). This assumption inherent in the institutional arrangements for implementing decentralisation takes individual participation for granted without considering the pre-existing social context within which agency is exercised. It is problematic to simply assume that individual involvement in local governance institutions will lead directly to empowerment and efficiency in local governance. The empirical literature on decentralisation reveals that more participation did not automatically lead to empowerment and responsive policies (Crawford, 2009; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001). Evidence suggests that already poor and marginalised citizens encounter difficulties in having their voices included and heard to at the community level (SLSA Team, 2003). Similarly, the implementation of local level governance institutions within the community takes little account of the unequal ability of individuals to exercise rights, and the effects of wider social structures on them (Cleaver and Toner, 2006; Hickey and Bracking, 2005; Agrawal, 2005). More so, the objectives of accountability, transparency and legitimacy found in the discourse of decentralisation are more tied to the state and its reforms without much focus on state-citizenship relations (Corbridge et. al., 2005). Cheema and Rondinelli (2007) mention that the relationship between decentralisation and citizen participation is conditioned by a complex political, historical, social and economic factors that differ among localities. In community interactions, individual participation or involvement are shaped by diverse and dynamic factors such as the social position of the individual within the social structure and social relations (Cleaver, 2007, 2009; Toner, 2008; Wong, 2008; Mason, 2000). Public participation in decentralised arrangements may benefit only those who are economically and socially better off due to the relative difference in power among the various actors (Agrawal and Gupta, 2005). Individual actions and choices are also shaped by relational and contextual factors that guide appropriate and expected actions under certain circumstances (Cleaver, 2005). Some authors argue that decentralisation reforms are merely cosmetic because they fail to adequately engage with the existing patterns of inequalities (ibid).

Secondly, the literature on decentralisation has given little attention to the relationship between existing community-level institutions and local government structures (Benjamin, 2008).The blueprint approach to institutionalised decentralisation pays insufficient attention to the diverse and multiple mechanisms that govern numerous interactions within the context of a particular locality (Benjamin, 2008; Mosse, 2003; Benjaminsen and Lund, 2002; Metha et. al., 1999, 2001). There are plural institutions within the community with different shades of formality and transparency that shapes participation at the community level (Toner, 2008 Meinzen-

Dick, R. S., and Pradhan, R. 2002). Yet, the approach to decentralisation suggests the desirability of new robust and sustainable local government structures to replace weak and ineffective ones (Olowu and Wunsch, 2004). The assumption is that efficient local organisations can be consciously designed to make governance arrangements optimal (Ostrom, 1992). New local government structures implemented in the community may not necessarily be equitable and inclusive or preferred especially when such local government structures are mapped onto existing local institutions whose architecture is shaped by structural and social cleavages. The terms on which the poor engage with local government structures are thinly explored in the decentralisation literature (Benjamin, 2008).

Thirdly, how power and authority devolved to diverse stakeholders is enacted and legitimated in practice is little considered or put into real scrutiny in decentralisation reforms. The assumption in decentralisation and local government reforms is that social actors are ready and capable to exercise authority and shape collective activities once power has been formally devolved by the state to the locality (World Bank, 2001; 1997). The processual nature of authority and how it is enacted and legitimated through social practice including everyday encounters are thinly considered (Lund, 2006; Lentz, 2006). The reality of local government reforms reveals that having authority through legal instruments of the state does not constitute ability to exercise authority within the locality (Sikor and Lund, 2009; Ribot. 2009). The power devolved from the state to certain individuals need to be exercised alongside other existing important authority figures such as traditional authorities within the locality. This suggests that within a specific locality diverse authority figures negotiate, forge alliance and compete in their attempt to exert authority since power is socially constructed and reproduced through everyday interactions (Cleaver, 2000).

The above institutionalised decentralisation sketch reveals that, despite the celebratory accounts of decentralisation in the literature, empirical evidence suggests the prevalence of high inequality and poverty (Geiser and Rist, 2009; Crawford, 2008; Smoke, 2003; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Blair, 2000). There is some uncertainty about the outcomes of decentralisation, especially, on the -good governance'and the poverty reduction agenda (Crawford, 2009; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Blair, 2000). Critics suggest the existing framework for decentralisation inadequately embraces the complex dynamics of the poor and the various structural constraints that shape their engagement within their community (Geiser and Rist, 2009; Larson and Soto, 2008). For example, citizens are not able to participate on an equal footing, exercise voice in public discussions and access new local government structures (SLSA Team, 2003). Such outcomes of decentralisation reinforces the assertion in some parts of the literature on decentralisation that the approach fails to transform asymmetric power relations and structural inequalities in which the poor are embedded (Geiser and Rist, 2009; Larson and Soto, 2008; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001).

Other writers also suggest that, there are multiple institutions at the community level that shape both individual access to decision-making spaces and resources (Berry, 2009). These multiple institutions at the local level imply the diverse ways in which existing social structures of inequality and power relations shape the actions of people (Odgaard, 2002). The struggles and contestations that shape access to power and the distribution of resources at the local level are evaded. Rather, decentralisation policy and practice assumes a homogenous community, relegating social difference and politics to the back ground (Ribot and Larson, 2004; SLSA Team, 2003; WRI et al, 2003). Decentralisation and local government reforms need to consider the wider state–citizen relations, especially those involving issues such as the socio-political processes in wider society (Mosse, 2007).

1.4 Theoretical Perspectives that shape Decentralisation- New Institutional Economics and Public Choice Theory

A possible approach to understanding decentralisation and local governance is by considering the New Institutional Economics (NIE) and public choice theory which is dominant in much contemporary decentralisation thought and practice (Leach, Mearns et al., 1999). The NIE draws on economic logic to understand individual behaviour in and out of institutions. Furthermore, the NIE seeks to get the institutions right to shape individual action in collectively desirable ways (Harris et. al., 1995). Vatn (2005) clarifies the positions of the new and neo-institutionalists and acknowledges the presence of some confusion in the literature regarding use of the neo and new in institutional discourse. Eggertson (1990), for example, distinguishes between new (Williamson, 1985) and neo-institutionalism (North, 1990, Ostrom, 1990). In this thesis I use new institutionalism to cover both positions.

The rational choice and behavioural approaches inherent in the new institutionalism offer a framework to understand governance at both policy and community or everyday level. According to Mollinga (2001: 733),

the appeal for the new institutionalism to policy makers lies in its suitability for designing standardised policy prescriptions, and its exclusion, or rephrasing, of the issues of power and politics‖ while advocating the important role of local institutions in governance. Agrawal and Ribot, (1999) write that the NIE literature suggests that greater efficiency and equity in public decision making is possible through the process of internalising externalities, utilising all available information and better linking service deliveries to needs.

Relying on the work of some institutional theorists such as North (1990) and Ostrom (2005, 1990), we will demonstrate how the New Institutional Economics (NIE) and the Common Property Resource Theory (CPRT) fit well into the debate on decentralisation policy and prescriptions as both consider "institutions and behaviour" as key to reducing uncertainty (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990; Williamson, 1997). Though the two strands of the NIE have developed quite separately they are by no means unrelated (Bardhan, 1989: 1339). First both approaches are analysed from the point of view of self-interest individuals and their bounded rationality. The assumptions of individual utility maximisation tend to drive the overall approach of the NIE whether in discussions about individual or collective or institutional levels.

This section discusses the main arguments inherent in the two main strands of the new institutionalism by teasing out the underlying concepts to show how the new institutionalism theory explains decentralisation policy and thinking at different levels of state and community. Finally, I will draw on emerging post-institutionalist thinking to illuminate the inadequacies of the new institutional approaches to decentralisation that makes its pro-poor agenda doubtful in reality.

1.4.1 Transaction cost approach- institutions as 'rules of the game'

The NIE focus on transaction cost as an important factor underlying institutional change. The transaction cost approach provides ideas about the crafting of robust institutional arrangement to lower information, monitoring and enforcement cost. The idea underlying the transaction cost approach is that, within a large complex economy, as the network for interdependence widens, the impersonal exchange process gives considerable scope for all kinds of opportunistic behaviour and the cost of transacting can be very high (Ingram and Silverman, 2002). Transaction costs arise because of limited information, uncertainty about the future, and the prospect that individuals or organisations behave opportunistically in their interactions with others (Williamson, 1997). The transaction costs include the cost of information, negotiation, monitoring, coordination and enforcement of contracts (Bardhan, 1989).

The key argument of the transaction cost approach is that institutions evolve to lower transaction and information costs that arise as a result of impersonal contact in exchange (North, 1990). To reduce the cost of transactions, institutions are introduced to lower the cost of constantly monitoring the opportunistic behaviour of individuals leading to efficient outcomes in social exchange. Inherent in the transaction cost approach is the idea that decision-makers are rational and goal oriented, but because of the human cognitive and emotional architecture, they sometimes fail in important decisions (Jones, 1999). The pursuit of benefits is limited by individuals‘capacity to retain and process information resulting in individuals becoming boundedly rational. The cost of information leads to high transaction costs that result in the possibility of opportunism on the part of individuals. High information cost limits the ability of people to monitor the choices of others (Bates, 1995). The transaction cost approach treats actors as rational in the basic sense of making choices that further their interests, but distinguishes itself from neo-classical assumptions of rationality by attending to cognitive costs or mental models of decision making (Harris-White, 1995).

North (1990: 5) distinguishes between institutions and organisations by defining an organisation as a group of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives. For Uphoff (1986), an organisation constitutes the structures of organised and accepted rules. North (1990) writes that, when an organisation is conceptualised in this way it eventually becomes a subset of institutions. North‘s argument is that, organisations are characterised by their purposive origin and hierarchically organised roles. Institutions on the other hand, are structures and mechanisms of social order and cooperation governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given human collectivity (North, 1990). Purposively crafting organisations together to specifically undertake community management functions is termed as the institutional arrangement (Ostrom, 2005). The institutional arrangement constitutes the established policy and legal environment, the organisation, process, mechanisms and procedures for decision-making, negotiation and planning (Svendsen, 2005).

1.4.2 Common Property Resources Theory- institutions as 'rules in use'

Another strand of new institutionalism that takes its theoretical grounding from ‗game theory abounds in the Common Property Resources literature (CPR) (Ostrom, 1990, 1992; Bromley and Cernea, 1989; Wade, 1988). The CPR theory focuses on how rules can be consciously crafted for effective collective action (Ostrom,

1990). This was in response to earlier claims that collective-action problems will rarely only be overcome (Hardin, 1968; Olson, 1965).This approach epitomised in the work of Ostrom (2005) defines ―institutions as the prescriptions that humans use to organise all forms of repetitive behaviour and structured interactions including those within governments at all scales‖ (Ostrom, 2005: 3).

To use the game theoretic terms, institutions raise the benefits of cooperative solutions and the costs of defection for opportunistic individuals who seek to shirk their responsibility. The CPR approach looks for answers of how best to solve common dilemmas and other policy problems for self organising institutions. The approach focuses on the crafting of rules that shape positively individuals' private and collective interests through the design of appropriate institutional rules, sanctions and means of enforcement to ensure cooperation (Ostrom, 2005, 1990).

Inspired by institutional economics, the CPR literature is rule focused, normative, and driven by instrumental ambitions of crafting institutions for efficient management (Ostrom, 1992; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). It signifies the rights and duties of a group of individuals to one another with respect to a resource held together. The CPR approach prescribes a structured form of ownership arrangement within which resource users develops management rules, provide incentives and institute sanctions to ensure compliance (Schlager and Ostrom, 1992). Schlager and Ostrom highlight the importance of operational rights and collective-choice decisions in collective action. Operational rights specify who has the right to access the resource. Collective rights refer to management, exclusion and alienation rights. At the collective-choice level, the CPR literature advocate for the need for participation in governance so that decisions concerning the resource are deliberated upon by all stakeholders (Ostrom, 1992).

The CPR literature presents a formal framework for identifying the different types of rules that shape resource management practices. According to Ostrom and Ahn (2003: xiii) ―the economic and political performance of societies …depend on how the members of a community solve the problem of collective action‖. Hence the collective action approach advocates the setting up of governance institutions based on principles of cooperation that involves all community members in the crafting of rules to govern interactions at the village level. The CPR literature recommends, a set of guidelines, mostly referred to as the design principles for crafting robust self governing irrigation systems. I will now briefly highlight the main features of the design principles that have shaped the thinking around local governance mechanisms.

1.4.2.1 Design Principles
The design principles provide the conditions under which institutions involved in the decentralisation of formal institutions will work best (Ostrom and Sawyer, 2003; Ostrom, 1992). When social capital glues the community together, the CPR literature suggests that groups can achieve co-operation and co-ordination in a wide variety of settings especially through the -right'institutional arrangements or design (Baland and Platteau, 2000; Ostrom et al., 1994; Ostrom, 1990; Wade, 1988). The design principles approach to institutions for collective action advocates for the codification of rules backed up with authority systems to monitor and sanction free riders (Ostrom, 2005).

The claim is that, based on the right principles, robust institutions can be consciously designed to restructure individual incentives through the local structure of authority to ensure cooperation, making development outcomes efficient, sustainable and equitable over the long run (World Bank, 2003). According to Ostrom's (2005: 267) design principles, ―when the users of a resource design their own rules (design principle 3) that are enforced by local users or accountable to them (design principle 4) using graduated sanctions (design principle 5) that clearly define who has rights to withdraw from a well-defined resource (design principle 1) and where cost are effectively designed proportionate to benefits (design principle 2), collective action and monitoring problems tend to be solved in a reinforcing manner‖ (Ostrom' 2005: 267; emphasis in original). The operation of the above principles is strengthened by the three further design principles namely; conflict-resolution mechanisms, minimal recognition of rights and _nesting'of local institutions with other levels of decision-making and governance (ibid).

Despite the strong appeal and use of the design principles in mainstream development policy, the underlying principles are often focused on good governance separating public management from social life (Cleaver and Franks, 2005; Mosse, 1997). Institutional formation is presented simplistically as unambiguous and uncontested, yet in reality it is a long and complex process involving complex interactions, relationships, struggles over power, legitimacy and resources (Cleaver and Franks, 2005). Concerns have been raised about the CPR approach's uncritical engagement with issues of power and the underlying historical and political processes of the community (Mosse 1997). The next section discusses the limitations of the new institutional theory as applied in mainstream development.

2.5 The inadequacy of institutional theory

Decentralisation and local government reforms have benefitted from insights from new institutionalism. The NIE approaches suggest the conscious design of institutions based on certain design principles to govern behaviour, translating individualised rational acts into collective outcomes (Ostrom, 2005). However, the post-institutionalist' literature has identified some inadequacies within the mainstream decentralisation literature from a theoretical and policy viewpoint to include; the inadequate conceptions of human agency, the interplay of formal and socially embedded institutions, the inadequate understanding of the political and the community', the simple focus on the evolution of institutions and the desire to universalise, and the absence of the concept of social power (Metha, 2007; Cleaver and Franks, 2005; Johnson, 2004; Mosse, 2003; Benjaminsen and Lund, 2002; Mollinga, 2001; Metha et. al., 1999).

Institutional theory conceptualises individuals as rational whose motives and actions need to be shaped by rules and incentives (World Bank, 2003; Uphoff, 2000). However, explaining individual behaviour according to simple incentives is narrow and problematic (Wong, 2004, Cleaver, 2000; Kabeer, 2000; Mason, 2000). Individual behaviour needs to be understood within a broader complex set of motivations some of which are socially informed (Cleaver, 2004). Mason (2002) writes that the way we think, feel and reason are not necessary rational. Such emotional elements are perceived as "inside" the individual but they have consequences for the way we think. Thus, to fully understand individuals' actions and the motivations shaping decision-making process, we need to position individuals in a life world in which decisions are based on a broader reflection as much as on the immediate, context specific structure of incentives. However, such reflections differ among diverse individuals and do not turn the members of the community into a bounded, homogenous entity. A lot of factors such as wealth, political authority, ethnicity and age affect the position of people and their motivation to participate in local governance (ibid).

A major limitation of the mainstream institutional literature lies in its inadequate understanding of the relationship between bureaucratic institutions and socially embedded institutions and the normative privileging of the former over the latter in policy directives (Cleaver, 2002; Webster and Engberg-Perderson, 2002; Metha et. al., 1999). This is not to say that socially embedded institutions are necessarily better than bureaucratic institutions but as the two institutions, bureaucratic and socially embedded, interlink and are not necessarily easily distinguishable in practice (Cleaver, 2002; Metha et. al., 1999). The boundary between formal and informal institutions is blurred in reality and preference for one may blind the potential for the other. For Metha et. al., (1999), the assumed dichotomisation between bureaucratic and socially embedded institutions fails to recognise the messy middle ground between these two forms of institutional arrangements. They argue that, the messy middle is beset by —ambiguity and openness to divergent interpretations‖ (ibid: 16). Cleaver (2002: 3) rejects the separation of formal and informal institutions and uses the term bureaucratic' and socially- embedded' to distinguish these two institutions respectively.

There are multiple channels through which institutions can be accessed. Yet in decentralisation policy we see the normative privileging of bureaucratic over socially embedded institutions. Such privileging obscures the multiple ways in which various actors straddle the sphere of diverse institutions to access resources (Benjaminsen and Lund, 2002; Cleaver, 2002; Berry 1989). Bierschenk and Oliver de Sardan (2003) highlight the cumulative character of local institutions which make a distinction between traditional and modern or formal and informal as purely rhetorical devices. Understanding the interplay of both bureaucratic and socially embedded institutions and the underlying rules and norms reveal the way in which practices reflect the right way of doing things' (Metha et. al., 1999 :20) Related to the _formal-informal' divide, is the mainstream institutional literature privileging the local over the global, that brings into question the issue of scale and nestedness (Merrey, et al, 2005; Ostrom, 2005, Webster and Engberg-Pedersen, 2002). Critics call for the multi-layering of institutions so that local institutions are nested with institutions that operate at the meso and macro levels to offer social actors _more room to manoeuvre' (Ostrom, 2005). Local institutions, they argue, need to link the agenda of higher level institutions to provide individuals access to other flexible channels in which they can negotiate their concerns. However doubts are raised about the potential of these other spaces to provide equitable access and inclusiveness (Cornwall, 2002, 2004b). The over reliance on multiple local level institutions as the policy option for decentralisation raises the potential for social exclusion and the expansion of inequitable modes of decision making. Such multiple institutional arrangements may perpetuate the disadvantaged positions in which the poor find themselves (Wong, 2007 Cleaver, 2005).

Institutional theory has also been questioned based on its simplistic and unilinear evolutionary conceptions (Franks and Cleaver, 2005). Institutional crafting assumes institutions as conflict free, fixed, and unchanging where institutional viability is linked with fixed and formal structures. The evolutionist idea that

formal institutions can be deliberately crafted to meet some specific functional ends is questioned as unhelpfully narrow as it fails to recognise the complex and more diverse nature of institutional functioning (Franks and Cleaver, 2005; Benjaminsen and Lund, 2002; Cleaver, 2002). Simply focusing on crafting bureaucratic institutions to meet functional ends may either lead to arrangements that are not necessarily embedded in existing relations or practices (Cleaver 2000). Consciously crafting robust bureaucratic institutions fails to recognise the fluid and dynamic nature of institutions.

Institutions in reality are often ad hoc, partial and intermittent, and change over time and space (Cleaver, 2001). The assumption in the institutional theory that institutions can be specifically designed to represent all stakeholders has been questioned as being simplistic because power, inequalities, privilege and disadvantage are all features of institutional arrangements (Wong, 2007; Martin, 2004). The institutional design principles, assume that individuals equally participate in crafting rules (Ostrom, 1990). Rules of the game treat everyone equally, and all members of the group are assumed to be familiar with the rules (ibid).

However, in reality institutions do not equally benefit all who participate in them. Under conditions of asymmetric social relations, seemingly equitable institutional arrangements may lead to different outcomes for different people (Cleaver, 2005). People bring to bear their social positions and identity in shaping rules in use, since processes of rule crafting involves ongoing negotiation, imbued with power relations (Mosse, 2003). Therefore, focusing on rules overlooks the configuration of power relations and the modes, in which actors interpret, negotiate and apply rules (ibid). If institutions are conceived of as patterned social practice over time and what people do, then relations of power are always part of this patterning. New institutional designs and prescribed roles are therefore not independent of the relations of power and authority at play within a particular locality (Chalmers et al, 1997; Leach et al 1997).

2.9 Alternative Perspectives to Institutionalised Decentralisation
The practice of decentralisation as discussed in the literature review so far has revealed that decentralisation increases complexity by bringing new forms of power, authority and accountability to local settings already replete with traditional forms of organising. Similarly, decentralisation also exists within complex environments of contestation among social groups, perhaps between and across wealth, age, gender and ethnic cleavages. Therefore, the practice of decentralisation from the perspective of local governance should engage with local, social and economic complexity. In this paper, we seek to complement and add to the set of critiques above to improve the practice of decentralisation in three possible ways.

First, decentralisation reforms tends toward rationalism in which individuals are considered as active and strategic capable of acting to transform the existing structural inequalities in which they are embedded (Dwivedi, 2001). Such individual strategic acts, perceived as radical and transformative, inadequately capture the role of social structure in shaping human action (Wong, 2007; Cleaver, 2005, 2002; Webster and Engberg-Pederson, 2002). The rationale for this argument is that more often than not mainstream development approaches fail to adequately consider the complex motivations shaping individual actions and behaviour and the unconscious motivation of several acts. The dividing line between the desire to undertake such purposeful acts and the capability to perform such acts within a society in which relations are inextricably linked is thinly explored.

Significant to this is the role of structural constraints and power relations in shaping popular agency. In reality, local communities may are dynamic and internally differentiated, and the priorities and claims of social actors positioned differently in power relations may be highly contested.These factors point to the importance of diverse institutions operating at the micro level, which influence control over community management activities. Therefore, understanding the complexity of interactions shaped by rules, procedures, and enactments occurring in everyday social life illuminates the dynamic relationship between agency and social structure (Giddens, 1984).

Secondly, decentralisation policy and practice advocate for the transfer of meaningful powers to a local government structures (Ribot, 2004). Robust local organisations are considered critical to effective governance in decentralisation policy and practice. The process involves crafting robust bureaucratic organisations and drawing on it to make local governance efficient and equitable. In reality, the process of institutional crafting is a messy and contested practice' (Metha et al., 1999: 7). Drawing on post-institutional thinking, we argue that institutions in decentralisation policy and practice should be seen as regularised patterns of behaviour between individuals and groups in society (Mearns, 1995: 103), rather than as local government structures that enlist the participation of stakeholders for efficiency purposes. There are multiple and overlapping institutional arrangements, some visible others opaque, which are often consciously or unconsciously drawn upon by people to shape their

numerous day-to-day social interactions (Benjaminsen and Lund, 2002; Cleaver, 2000). Martin (2004) argues that ―institutions have a legitimating ideology that proclaims the rightness and necessity of their arrangements, practices, and social relations . We advocate for an approach to decentralisation that views local government structures as flexible, partial and evolving. Such a dynamic view of local government structures allows for complexity, for the social and historical factors of the locality to be taken into consideration in the policy and practice of decentralisation (Mosse, 2003).

Finally, the narrow definition of the political and the uncritical application of power within the decentralisation literature is of much concern (Hickey, 2006; Williams, et. al. 2003). Decentralisation translated through formal structures backed by legal arrangements obscure the issues of ongoing local politics and the processual nature of authority at the local level (ibid). The issue of power and politics should not be confined only to the affairs of the state but to the economic and social spheres of society, especially the contestations and struggles that occur among heterogeneous actors on decision-making and negotiations over resources. Mohan and Stoke (2000) write that since the preferred destination of decentralisation is the community, the politics and the ensuing power relations shaping interactions among heterogeneous actors need to be considered. Therefore, we argue for a wider conception of power and politics in decentralisation approaches to include all social relationships based on power embedded in the day-to-day routinised interactions of social actors.

From the foregoing analysis, it can be inferred that institutionalised decentralisation provide realistic opportunities for choice and action, if its components are taken into account as its fundamental determinants. The importance of institutionalised decentralisation analysed above the elucidate how social dynamics influence community management or governance activities of diverse groups of people, and how these activities in turn shape particular kinds of outcomes is required. This is not to suggest that social thinking is absent in development policy, however, it has not been accorded a significant role in policy-making around decentralisation. For example, social thinking in decentralisation policy and practice failed to adequately take into consideration the structural factors that shaped poverty in societies. The discourse on decentralisation still tends to define the social context of democratic decentralisation in narrowly institutional terms (Ribot, 2004).

II.   CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the diverse core notions and concepts that underpin the discourse of decentralisation indicating the complexity of the concept. The theoretical insights gained from the literature review provided the basis for questioning the transformative potential of decentralisation. The authors have shown that the mainstream literature on decentralisation pays a greater attention to achieving functional ends. Such a technocratic approach, we argued, inadequately takes into consideration the peculiarities and heterogeneity of context. The emphasis placed on effectiveness and efficiency within the decentralisation discourse is in tension with the principles of social equity and inclusion.

The various perspectives of decentralisation explored in this paper revealed the conceptual separation of governance from other spheres of social life. The institutional approach to decentralisation bestows citizenship rights to individuals enabling them to behave autonomously irrespective of social relations. Power relations and existing structural factors that shape the individual agency are side stepped in decentralisation. The mainstream view on decentralisation conceptualises authority as fixed and static however this paper has shown that authority in local governance is rather than fluid and permeable. Drawing on the New Institutional Economics and emerging post-institutionalists arguments, the paper has shown that the approach to decentralisation needs to critically engage with dynamic individual-society relations, discard the separation of the formal from the socially embedded institutions to identify the complex mechanisms that shape local governance within a locality.

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