

What Decentralisation is — and what it is not

To celebrate the publication of [Decentralised Governance](#), the book's co-editor, [Professor Jean-Paul Faguet](#), considers its core ideas, a big, fundamental issue that is almost never acknowledged by the enormous decentralisation literature, but which one way or another affects almost all of its results.

Decentralisation is a huge phenomenon across all of the world's regions, cultures, income levels, and politico-administrative systems. It began in the aftermath of decolonization and built through the 1980s and '90s.

Around the early 2000s, many of us working in the field thought the decentralisation wave was cresting. Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee produced [a seminal book](#) – *Decentralization and Local Governance in Developing Countries* – which took stock of what we knew about the different types of decentralisation in developing countries. But to the surprise of many of us, the decentralisation wave continued to build. All around the world, there were more reforms at different levels of devolution with greater creativity about the technologies employed.

At about the same time, a huge amount of new, finer-grained data on not just fiscal flows, but also political, social, and cultural variables became available across many developing countries, permitting us to ask difficult, nuanced questions that could not be answered before.

The book which Sarmistha Pal and I have recently edited and published with LSE Press, *Decentralised Governance: Crafting Effective Democracies Around The World*, takes advantage of this new evidence to take stock of the state of knowledge on decentralisation in the world today, with a special focus on governance and democracy-building in developing countries. Its chapters include thematic, critical surveys of recent advances in decentralisation, combined with focused, cutting-edge empirical studies. Empirical chapters include broad cross-country studies as well as detailed explorations of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, China, Indonesia, Ghana, Kenya and Colombia. We're proud to include a range of authors in this new volume, including younger scholars

alongside some of the most influential and established thinkers in the field. Many of these authors are themselves from developing countries and their papers employ the latest evidence and methods to explore complex issues analytically with a blend of qualitative and quantitative data.

One of the key ideas that underpins all our analysis is the recognition that decentralisation is not 'a thing'. It is many things. It is not a switch one can flip with results that are predictable and symmetric. Rather – and by definition – decentralisation generates a heterogeneity of responses that, in any particular dimension (e.g. education, health, transportation), differ from one another as much as the underlying districts, provinces, municipalities, etc. differ from one another. Any country that decentralises should expect not one tidy outcome replicated in many localities, but rather a wide variety of outcomes that range from the strongly negative, through the null ("no change"), all the way to highly positive responses. Such heterogeneity is not a problem. It's the way decentralisation is supposed to work. Indeed, in a deep sense it's why you do it.

This idea is tied to wealth of conceptual and methodological insights that we're only beginning to comprehend. For over 50 years, researchers asked questions of the type: *Is decentralisation good or bad for X?*, where *X* was some important policy-related outcome, such as primary enrolment rates, access to water and sanitation, or levels of corruption. Such studies approached decentralisation as if it were a technocratic issue. They treated the specifics of reform – the many decisions about how to unpick centralised public services and decentralise which components to what levels – as if these were given, choosing instead to compare 'the effects of decentralisation' across countries.

Researchers were not entirely unaware of these issues. Their methodological stance was always more a convenience than an assertion of principle. But it coloured the empirical literature all the same, affecting what questions were asked, and how studies were structured. Only recently have researchers begun to internalise that the many decisions about *how* to decentralise precisely *which* state functions are not fundamentally technocratic issues. They are political issues everywhere, all the time.

Jean-Paul Faguet is a co-editor and contributing author to *Decentralised Governance: Crafting Effective Democracies Around The World*. This book is [free to read and download](#) from the LSE Press website via Open Access publishing.

Further reading

Dilip Mokherjee, [Decentralised targeting of transfer programmes: A reassessment](#)

1. Anirban Mitra and Sarmistha Pal, [Impact of fiscal decentralisation and ethnic heterogeneity on choice of local polity](#)
2. Zaki Wahhaj and Abu S. Shonchoy, [Birth Registration in the Developing World: Bridging the gap between policy and practice](#)

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and do not reflect those of the International Development LSE blog, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the European External Action Service. The blog is based on the author's dissertation.

This article was first published with the [LSE Press Blog](#).

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