



Decentralized Corruption or Corrupt Decentralization? Community Monitoring of Poverty-Alleviation Schemes in Eastern India

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Summary. — Democratic decentralization and community participation often stand at the center of an agenda of “good governance” that aims to reduce corruption and increase the state’s accountability to its citizens. However, this paper suggests based on empirical studies on the Employment Assurance Scheme in rural West Bengal that the strength of upward accountability (especially to political parties) is as crucial as downward accountability to communities. When these vertical accountabilities are weak, horizontal accountability structures between local civil society and officials can mutate into networks of corruption in which “community” actors become accomplices or primary agents.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Development theory has recently paid increased attention to issues of accountability and transparency. Corrupt practices and systems are said to undermine growth and access to public services, in addition to being morally repugnant.¹ The question of corruption, however, is dealt with very differently by competing intellectual and policy-making traditions. Drawing on Anne Krueger’s early work on rent-seeking, many neoliberal economists have sought to connect landscapes of corruption to the dominance of predatory states or bureaucratic populism. They have recommended the “rolling back” of the state—of the license and permit *raj* in the case of India—as the primary

means of dealing with corruption and rent-seeking behavior. The structural adjustment programs that were implemented by the World Bank and the IMF in the 1980s and early 1990s thus remained relatively silent on accountability structures in non-market institutions. They

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trusted that the expansion of free markets and competition would remove the scope for generalized rent seeking.

After two decades of deregulation and economic liberalization, however, levels of political and bureaucratic corruption seem not to have dissipated in most countries, and perhaps least of all in the transitional economies of the former Soviet bloc (see Humphrey, 2002). Whereas many hard-liners might insist that corruption persists only where liberalization has been incomplete, or where states have been left with too many regulatory powers, many donor agencies are promoting an agenda of “good governance” that seeks to address issues of accountability and transparency on a broader front. In doing so, they follow political scientists who increasingly regard corruption as a sign of “bad governance.” Dharieswar and colleagues have argued that “corruption ought to be seen as a symptom of the state’s *fundamental weaknesses*, not some basic or single determinant of society’s ills” (Dharieswar *et al.*, 2000, p. 136; *emphasis added*), and that appropriate designing of political and economic institutions would therefore be capable of defeating widespread rent-seeking (see also Rose-Ackerman, 1999).² Multi-pronged strategies for strengthening good governance—including public-sector and judicial reforms, economic policy measures and financial controls, the strengthening of civil liberties, and of structures of participation of civil society—are thus proposed as a way of dealing with bad governance. Proposals for decentralization have also cut into initiatives for the promotion of “good governance” and have been proposed as a conduit for institutional public reform that can enhance levels of political accountability, participation and voice (see World Bank, 2000a, 2001). Decentralization now stands at the heart of a bundle of measures that is meant to enhance state capabilities (see World Bank, 2000b).

This comprehensive view of anti-corruption strategies is an important step forward, and particularly so when compared to the more simplistic perspectives linking reduced corruption to a “rolling back” of the state. But the framework of “good governance” continues to see state actors as the prime agents of corrupt practices—a view that is reflected in the classic and commonly used definition of corruption as “the abuse of public office for private [economic and political] gain” (Dharieswar *et al.*, 2000, p. 137; see also Bardhan, 1997). It is true that the agenda for “good gov-

ernance” looks beyond the state sector and stresses the importance of public participation, but civil society makes an appearance mainly as a safeguard against corrupt officials (see World Bank, 2000a). Yet recent critical studies on participatory development also reveal the “fundamental weaknesses” of many local community institutions that are divided along the lines of class, gender or ethnicity (see Leach, Mearns, & Scoones, 1997). This paper thus takes a critical look at the practices of civil society, and at the complex relations—as well as “blurred boundaries” (Gupta, 1995)—between the state and civil society. Such a perspective takes inspiration from the works of Harriss-White and White (1996), amongst others. Based on country case studies, Harriss-White and White found that in many cases rent-seeking had increased under economic liberalization and had changed its character: corruption was now more likely to be initiated and controlled by actors in civil society, including businesspersons, than it was by state actors. Formal democratization had created opportunities, incentives and pressures for politicians and elected officials “to compensate for political uncertainty by building up a capital stake through corruption” (Harriss-White & White, 1996, p. 3). Corbridge and Kumar (2002) made a similar point in their study of the tree trade in Jharkhand. While their paper argues for a reduction of state controls in some parts of the timber trade, they show how local elites and political brokers have joined with some forest officials in resisting the deregulation of trade in the jack(fruit) tree. Robbins (2000) has further shown that the rural poor in Rajasthan are driven to participate in the corruption of forms of common property management from which they might be expected to benefit.

This paper aims to go beyond recent critiques of participatory development that focus on the perils of assuming strong and homogenous communities to suggest, in addition, that key members of “village communities” can be accomplices to, or prime agents of, local networks of corruption. Collusion can of course transcend the boundaries of a community, as Mosse (2001) has shown in his studies of the Western India Rainfed Farming Project. In this case it was mostly better-off and male villagers, and “outsiders” from the project staff, who joined together in homogenizing and representing local knowledge and local needs. In other cases, a collision of interests can form “corruption

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