

Decentralising environmental management – beyond the crisis narrative*

David Brown and Kojo Amanor

Democratic decentralisation is much in vogue in development policy. But what are the implications for environmental management? Collaborative research on this theme is being carried out by ODI and the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana.

Modernisation theory lives on?

Environmental issues figure prominently in the District Assemblies in Ghana's Brong-Ahafo Region. However, the debate is preoccupied with narratives of an impending environmental crisis which arguably have more to do with promoting elitist models of change than representing local concerns.

Such crisis narratives are simplifying stories which claim special explanatory power to influence the future course of events. They tend to conjure up images of the catastrophes which will occur if major changes in policy and/or public behaviour are not urgently brought about. In the developing world, they often function to justify shifts in authority away from the rural resource users towards urban elites.

In the case of Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, the crisis narratives are marked by their simplicity and uniformity. Their common theme is the culpability of smallholder agriculture. They speak of the burgeoning rural population; a system of traditional 'slash and burn' agriculture which is marked by destructiveness of the natural environment, loss of forest cover and non-sustainability; recurrent bush fires which devastate the natural environment; and an impending crisis in agriculture which can only be solved by modern technology and ideas.

Assessing the narratives

Such negative perceptions can be questioned on a number of grounds. Farm practices in Brong-Ahafo vary so much as to make the concept of a 'traditional farming system' a very doubtful analytical tool to understand environmental

change. A broader view of the history of fire in this transitional zone suggests that human causality is only one influence among many. The focus on the overall loss of forest biomass obscures some important variations in experience, both positive and negative. Evidence from areas where the landscape has been enriched in recent years may be just as important, from the perspective of policy-making, as that from areas where it has been degraded.



Charcoal producers (David Brown)

Interestingly, the crisis narratives make very little mention of the often-catastrophic effects of previous modernising interventions, such as state and other large-scale mechanised farms.

Sustaining the doomsday narratives

Why, if the narratives of cultural modernisation are so dismissive of local capacities, are they not rejected outright by the rural dwellers?

One explanation lies in the way in which they are manipulated by local groups to support partisan interests. They thus develop an appearance of 'local ownership'. Paradoxically, the great social heterogeneity typical of rural Ghana tends to sustain and dynamise the narratives on behalf of factional interests, in support of their own claims and against those with competing interests.

How can environmental management be more responsive to local interests?

Local government in Brong-Ahafo is not responding well

ODI OPINIONS are signed opinion pieces by ODI researchers on current development and humanitarian topics.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not commit the Institute.

ODI OPINIONS may be cited or reproduced with due acknowledgement.

For further information contact ODI Public Affairs office on +44 (0)20 7922 0394 – opinions@odi.org.uk

to the needs of the farming population. New approaches are required to improve decision-making in natural resource management at all levels, from local producers up to national administrators. Yet there is some hope for future democratic reform. On the positive side, the legal framework for decentralisation provides ample scope for greater public accountability, and for communities to develop their own development plans, aided by civil society.

To achieve this will require institutional innovations which: create strong local platforms for negotiation by the users of the key resources; promote feedback on the environment and production systems to decision makers; and lead to the creation of information systems that the public and policy makers can use to learn about the conditions which effect the farmers' daily lives.

Better policy processes are unlikely to be achieved by increased public awareness, but rather through the fostering of information flows which are socially and occupationally inclusive and which bind policy-makers to downward accountability. The institutional mechanism must ultimately be the democratic process. Whatever its limitations, the process of decentralisation in Ghana offers the only avenue through which rural dwellers come into contact with development administration and can have any say in development planning. It is equally the only forum with the authority to arbitrate between competing interests in a manner which accords legitimacy. Thus, the ultimate aim of the research is to strengthen elective local government, to allow it to achieve its mandate of environmental democracy.

* Amanor K & Brown D (2003) 'Making environmental management more responsive to local needs: Decentralisation and evidence-based environmental policy in Ghana', ODI Forestry Briefings No. 3.