[Section 1 Overview]

The political economy of resources and the cultural politics of rights: challenges for accountability

Peter Newell and Joanna Wheeler

The current focus on good governance in development debates implies some assumptions about accountability, in particular that increased accountability will lead to greater social, economic and political equity. By the same token, an inherent assumption in much of the current enthusiasm for rights-based approaches in development is that implementing rights will help create predictability for poor and marginalised groups by establishing clear relationships of responsibility between powerful actors and these groups. This section of the book will challenge both of these assumptions by examining, in rich empirical detail, the relationship between rights and resources in terms of accountability.

These chapters consider how marginalised groups contest access to a range of resources, including adequate housing, health care and water. These 'resources' are not defined in the narrow sense of extractable natural materials like oil and minerals, which are the focus of the literature on the 'resource curse', referred to in Chapter 10. Instead, these chapters take a wider view, exploring the interaction between the material features of resources and the social and political struggles over the control of their use. The starting point for understanding rights and accountability in relation to these resources is the deprivation of, or lack of access to, the resources in question. And while there is, in most cases, an important and pressing material deprivation (lack of adequate housing, lack of clean water, lack of

appropriate health care), these chapters will focus on the political contestations to gain access to these resources. This section explores both the political economy of gaining rights to resources and the cultural politics of how resources are constituted and contested.

Within these processes of political contestation over resources, some key themes have emerged that shed some light on the relationship between rights and resources, and speak to the assumptions about accountability outlined above. In particular, these chapters focus on a variety of formal and informal strategies adopted by different groups to contest access to specific resources (see Table 1.1 in the Introduction). The rights claims in these cases can be categorised into two types. Some are claims of entitlement to a particular resource, as in the case of water in South Africa, housing in Kenya, and the health care system in Brazil. Others are claims of access to a resource, as in the case of the watersheds and natural reserves in Mexico. What is important is how these different rights claims are interrelated, and the intertwining of different types of rights (political, social and economic) in practice. While the claims to entitlement may spring from the immediate and pressing material deprivations people experience, the struggles over gaining access and control over these resources bring a whole range of other rights and accountability relationships into play. For example, the struggle of the Mombasa tenants' association to secure access to adequate housing has had to address the significant political corruption and lack of transparency in the council authorities, bringing political rights, such as the right to information, to the fore. For these tenants, securing access to housing is important for reasons beyond their physical needs – it is also about their sense of belonging and citizenship, which is tied to having a legitimate claim to their homes.

As we noted in the introduction, the cases in this book show not only how different types of rights are indivisible, but also how there can be conflicts between and among different rights. We see in the next section on corporate accountability how the rights of corporate actors can conflict with those of poorer communities, but there can also be conflicts between rights that emerge through the mobilisation strategies of communities. For example, in Mexico, the direct action of rural indigenous groups in cutting off a dam deprived urban groups (especially the poor) of their right to water. Yet this direct action was part of the informal strategies the rural indigenous groups used to demand accountability from municipal governments. These conflicts between rights have important implications for the extent to which they can be used as a strategy for demanding accountability.

The chapters in this section offer some important lessons about the circumstances in which these mobilisations to demand accountability can be successful. There is a clear division between short-term and long-term strategies for gaining access to resources. The short-term strategies of indigenous municipalities in the watershed in Veracruz, Mexico have led to a tokenistic response by the government in order to forestall direct social action. When the indigenous people shut down the dam and the water supply to the cities below, the municipal government reacted with offers of paved roads, funds towards clinics and schools for the indigenous communities. But these concessions, while couched in the language of fulfilling the rights of the indigenous communities, actually served as a palliative for defusing the social mobilisation without addressing the real issue of the responsibility for managing the watershed that is the essential basis of the right to water for both rural and urban communities. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that even short-term strategies, which result in quick victories over marginal issues, can eventually have more transformative

effects.

Another challenge for informal strategies and mobilisations around rights over resources is scale. In many cases – including Mexico, Brazil, South Africa and Kenya – mobilisations have led to key victories. But the challenge, given the complexity of actors and institutional relationships, is how to scale up (or down) these advances in a way that leads to substantive changes to government institutions. In South Africa, the right to water exists in the constitution, but in practice the right is not evenly upheld. In Kenya, gains at the local level by the tenants' association are difficult to sustain and scale up to the council authorities because of political and financial pressure on the groups demanding accountability.

In chapter 1, we discussed the limits of the law and the role of the state in the politics of how rights are defined. In addition, these chapters show how national and international legal frameworks have a central role in determining how rights over resources are realised and accountability relationships are established. But far from being a neutral enforcer of these obligations, the state plays a political role in terms of how resources are defined and allocated, so that the limits of the law and of legal frameworks rapidly become apparent. In the case of protected natural areas (PNAs) in Mexico, conflict continues over how natural resources are defined – indigenous groups are claiming knowledge rights in these areas, while international NGOs and others are constructing the rainforest as the object of conservation, and the government is attempting to enforce bans on using the rainforest for conservationist and geopolitical reasons. The chapters in this section reinforce the focus in the existing literature on ecological democracy (Watts 2003) and feminist political ecology (Rochelau et al 1995) on 'how local communities resisted the incursions of the state, and how the state in

turn attempted to "criminalise" local customary rights' over access to and control over

resources (Watts 2003). These cases demonstrate how the state can act as a guarantor of

accountability and also perpetuate a lack of accountability.

This section will explore the complex relationships between rights and resources in terms of

accountability both by broadening the definition of resources and by focusing on the

multiple strategies, informal as well as formal, for making rights claims in relationship to

those resources. In so doing, these chapters raise some important challenges to dominant

assumptions about the transformative effects of technocratic approaches to accountability and

top-down versions of rights. By taking deprivation and the lack of access to resources as a

starting point, these chapters investigate the political economy of gaining access to these

resources, and the cultural politics of making rights claims. Within this complex landscape

of actors, interests and discourses, it becomes clear that accountabilities must be claimed and

negotiated by poor and less privileged people themselves if the fundamental issue of access

to society's wealth and resources is to be addressed.

References

Rocheleau,D. Thomas-Slayter,B. Wangari,E. (1995) (eds) *Feminist Political Ecology*
London: Routledge.
Watts, Michael (2003) 'Economies of violence: More oil, more blood' *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XXXVIII No.48, pp. 5089-5099.