Negotiating Inequalities: Democracy, Gender, and Politics of Difference in Water User Groups of Southeastern Turkey

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Chapter 11

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Introduction

The Turkish state-led Southeastern Anatolia project (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi-GAP) is described by planners as an ‘integrated regional development program’, aiming to improve the economic base of one of the least developed regions of the country, improve education levels and the status of women, and to foster democracy in a region that is often described as having few examples of horizontal associations or non-governmental organizations (see Harris, 2002, and Çarkoğlu and Eder, this volume). The concern of this chapter is to consider the potential attributed to the recently established water user groups in newly irrigated areas covered by the project.1 Perhaps mirroring the ambitious aims of the GAP project as a whole, state planners expect that water user groups will serve a diverse set of goals, from realizing efficiencies with respect to expenditures and irrigation delivery, to promoting sustainability of irrigation resources over time, to fostering closer state–society linkages by providing institutional bridges between farmers and state agencies.

One only needs to refer to GAP planning documents to get a sense of the many expectations planners have pegged on the devolution of irrigation management responsibility to farmers. Foremost among them, it is often noted that devolved resource management responsibility will reduce state expenditure (notably of the Devlet Su İşleri, DSİ, or State Hydraulic Works). This expectation is conveyed by an irrigation engineer as follows: ‘We work with farmers to try and

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1 The research presented in this chapter is largely based on an extended field study carried out in 2001, and follow-up work carried out in 2004, including interviews with government agents and rural households. In 2001, a 124 household survey in the Harran Plain was carried out in cooperation with sociologist Zühal Karahan Kara of Harran University. Professor Karahan Kara should not be held responsible for the arguments made in this chapter, nor for any mistakes herein.
give them the feeling of owning the Sulama Birliği. Without that, irrigation will not be successful. Also, it will be cheaper for the state if the farmers have a sense of ownership of the associations' (Interview 18, October 2001). In addition to cost savings, instilling a greater sense of ownership among farmers is expected to achieve other efficiencies, as well as to overcome dependencies that some view as characteristic of current state-society relations in the region. As former GAP President Örner (1997b, p. 477) describes it, 'water users' groups, which are formed by farmers, are responsible for the total management of irrigation services at the tertiary level. This leads to better maintenance, control, and more efficient use of water and also creates a participatory frame in the planning and design of irrigation schemes. These types of statements are also suggestive of even more ambitious goals, implying linkages between devolved resource management and broader notions of 'sustainability' and 'democracy'. Sustainability is implied in institutional senses (user groups will be better able to collect fees and respond to farmer needs), as well as in environmental senses (e.g. fostering irrigation use most appropriate changing conditions). Democracy is also suggested as one of many potential outcomes associated with the groups, with the expectation that the Sulama Birliği will provide some of the first examples of horizontal civil society associations in rural areas commonly cast as hierarchical. As one GAP planner explains, the 'social structure in the region is problematic. Patriarchal, semi-feudal relationships are very dominant in the region and this is an obstacle to development ... Our social programs are primarily created to realize a vision of a participatory democratic individual, a modern individual'. He continued, 'Sulama Birliği is one of the grassroots community organizations, so in that sense they contribute to participatory society because they represent farmers ... they are only a starting point' (Interview 20, July 2004). A government-commissioned report summarizes the hopes of transforming social relations with irrigation and water users this way: 'irrigation can be regarded as a powerful tool for transforming the social structure and habits of the rural population in addition to bringing about a significant increase in their agricultural productivity' (Halâer-Dolâar-RWC, 1994, p. 1). Echoing the hope that the user groups will foster democracy, one engineer exclaimed, 'there is nothing better and more natural than people administering themselves!' (Focus Group 28, October 2001).

However 'natural', planners and state agents frequently note that there have been many obstacles to achieving horizontal social relations in the region to date. Among other issues frequently noted as characteristic of socio-inequalities in the region, high rates of landlessness (e.g. Unver, 1997a, reports 37 percent), hierarchical gender relations, as well as what planners term the 'feudal' and 'tribal' aşiret system, are often mentioned. In the pilot irrigation area of the Harran Plain, the context for the case study research presented here (see Map 11.1), these trends are similarly noted. For instance, there are few examples of associational organizations and little evidence of agricultural cooperatives (Sanlıurfa and Harran Plains on Farm and Village Development Project, 1999, also confirmed by our 2001 survey data from 11 villages on the plain).

Harran Plain was one of the first areas to receive irrigation water as part of GAP, representing approximately 10% of the total land area planned for eventual irrigation. As shown on this map, water is transported via tunnel from the Atatürk dam reservoir to the plain.

Map 11.1 Harran Plain
Source: Drawn by the author

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2 Literally 'irrigation unity' or 'irrigation association'; however, I translate it here as 'water user groups'.

3 See Ostrom (1992) for a detailed discussion of conditions that allow for such efficiencies to be achieved through participatory irrigation management.

4 See Saltik (1994) for an extended discussion on the situation of women in the region prior to GAP implementation.

5 Social and political practices in the region are strongly organized along aşiret lines (referring to extended family lineage), from marriage practices to political parties (Doğanay, 1997, provides details).
Taken together, there is clear suggestion that efficiency, environmental resiliency, democracy, and notions of development are interlinked, and all potentially served by shifting scales and institutions of environmental governance, moving away from state responsibility toward ‘local’ management. Such implied relationships between scale, governance, and environment are not unique to planners in Turkey. The next section provides a brief discussion of these issues before turning to specific outcomes and issues of the Turkish case.

Scale, Development, Environmental Politics, and the State

While development theory and practice remain marked by controversy and debate, there seems to be increasing consensus around one idea: that decentralized and democratic resource management is a worthwhile and even necessary goal. Indeed, decentralized resource management has been celebrated by the unlikely bedfellows of state development planners and advocates of ‘sustainable development’ (e.g. the World Bank), by critics of state-led development and high modernism (Scott, 1998), as well as by post-development and common-pool resource theorists (e.g. Escobar, 1995 and Ostrom, 1990, respectively). Support for the notion of devolved responsibility for environmental outcomes is also served by recent political activism, with innumerable examples of communities that have agitated for greater involvement in decision-making that affects their communities (whether citizen opposition to dam building on the Narmada, women’s agitation for safe drinking water in Mexico City (Bennett, 1995), or emerging initiatives related to Local Agenda 21). It is worth noting that state responsibility for environmental issues also faces considerable challenge from supra-state or global scale institutions and actors (examples include transnational activism against the construction of the Ilisu dam in southeastern Turkey, or the intensified role of international epistemic communities in environmental governance, e.g. Haas, 1990). These trends can be understood as important scalar shifts with respect to environmental policy and governance, posing unique, and in some ways unprecedented, challenges to state institutions and practices. These challenges are precisely the sorts of examples cited as demonstration of the potential of environmental politics to foster democracy generally, one of the main concerns of this volume.

Implied connections between environmental challenges and governance need not be understood solely as multiple-scalar sources of pressure to which states must respond. Indeed, the very sphere of the ‘state’ is actively renegotiated in relation to environmental changes, as are the scales themselves (as those associated with ‘global’, ‘regional’, the ‘state’, or the ‘local’). Furthermore, it is increasingly clear that citizen actions or state policies are in no way restricted to particular scales (e.g. local or country-scales), but operate across scales, and must necessarily respond to multi-scale issues and challenges. Transnational environmental advocacy networks that respond to state practices (such as activism in opposition to France’s nuclear tests) provide further example of dense interconnections across scales and among actors, fundamentally confounding understandings of state–civil society linkages.

While these renegotiations have many dimensions, the primary element of concern for this chapter is to question how ‘local’ scale politics and processes are privileged, and negotiated, in relation to evolving environmental conditions and policy requirements. In particular, I focus on gender, landholdings, and other socio-economic inequalities in relation to newly formed water user groups in the Harran Plain to consider complex linkages between scales of governance, democracy, and participatory management. Turning to the situation that is unfolding in newly irrigated areas in the Harran Plain, I revisit these overarching themes in the last section. By way of conclusion, I call into question the uncritical tendency to diminish centralized or state roles in favor of ‘local-scale’ or devolved management mechanisms commonly upheld as preferable, if not necessary, to promote socially equitable or environmentally robust outcomes.

‘Democratic’ Water Management Institutions in Southeastern Turkey

As noted, recently established water user groups (Salama Birligi) in southeastern Turkey are meant to serve a range of diverse goals, from achieving greater efficiencies, to realizing economies for the state, or instilling stronger civil society and state–society linkages in the context of Turkey’s Kurdish and Arabic speaking populations in the southeast. My evaluation of user groups reveals that their initial operations have been marked by difficulties and important socio-political exclusions, most notably in relation to gender difference and landholdings (but also with respect to agricultural knowledge). Paralleling the arguments I have made elsewhere with respect to state-run women’s centers that appear to solidify the very terms ‘gender difference’ rather than upsetting the predominant inequalities (Harris and Atalan, 2002), or ways that terms of difference such as ‘gender’ or ‘ethnicity’ take on new meaning and function in relation to the new irrigated landscape (Harris, forthcoming)), aspects of the design and function of the emergent water user groups similarly appear to aggravate and reframe common operations of identifiable sphere may be in part dependent on specific environmental practices (see Harris, 2004, for discussion).

6 For studies that attempt to theorize relationships between democracy and environment, see Gleditsch and Sverdrup (2002) and Lafferty and Meadowcroft (1996).

7 As I have argued elsewhere, the state as a set of institutions, and as an identifiable sphere, may be fundamentally renegotiated in relation to environmental and developmental changes. Such changes do not only mean that the state is understood differently (for instance, as more or less ‘legitimate’ in relation to its practices), but also that the state as an

8 The example of climate change provides clear illustration of the interdependence of scales, as well as the ways that scales are redefined in relation to these changes.

9 I recognize the difficulty in referring to what constitutes the ‘local’, or related notions of ‘community’ (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999).
"difference" and "inequality," showing clear evidence of "elite capture" of the benefits and opportunities afforded by irrigation-related resources and institutions.

**Solano Birliği in the Harran Plain**

By 2004, nearly 20 water user groups had been established in the Harran Plain. Designed as decentralized structures for the collection of water fees, the election of irrigation officials, and decision-making related to water timing and use (see Akınbilek and Akçaokçu, 1997, for a general description), the user group model is meant to be consistent with recommendations made in the literature related to the "crafting of self-governing institutions" (Ostrom, 1992). In addition, the user group model clearly reflects trends in the development literature related to fostering participatory action in ways that counter implicit inefficiencies and bulldozing tendencies of top-down, state-led, or large-scale approaches (see Scott, 1998, among others). Further still, the user groups are meant to fashion responsive governance and active citizenship, linking farmers and the state water agency by relaying information about irrigation needs and timing of water transfers. In all of these senses, there are implied associations between active citizenship, efficiency, and improved government responsiveness to user needs and concerns.

However well-intentioned, and despite some improvements initiated from lessons during the first five years of implementation, the water user groups established in the Harran Plain engender severe limitations. First, the groups have been marked by embezzlement of funds, nepotism, and injustice. As Robbins (2000) notes, issues of "corruption" pose significant risk for resource use, despite remaining largely under-theorized. Further, the new user groups have also appeared to consolidate the power and control of the elite, with few opportunities available to more marginalized or impoverished community members. This issue, sometimes referred to as "elite capture," has been common enough to devoted resource management efforts that Ribot (2002) has specifically outlined steps that might be taken to mitigate against such outcomes. A related aspect, also in evidence across contexts, refers to the exclusion of particular populations from participation and benefits of the groups. Agarwal (2001) describes this tendency at length in her discussion of gendered "participatory exclusions" in the context of forest management in Nepal. I trace the issues of "corruption," "elite capture," and "participatory exclusions" in turn before revisiting implied associations between social equity, environmental resiliency, and democracy in the conclusion.

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10 For instance, new management rules to govern the institutions were drawn up in 2001, attempting to correct some failures of the first several years of operation. Discussions are currently underway for a redrafting of the rules again, in part to deal with some of the shortcomings discussed in this chapter.

See also Nightingale (2001) for discussion of caste and gender exclusions in similar contexts, and Sandberg's (2003) discussion of ways that indigenous populations have been marginalized from conservation efforts in Guatemala.

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11 As should be clear from this chapter, Chairman is indeed an appropriate term, as the position is very gendered.

**Negotiating Inequalities**

To date, corruption is perhaps the issue affecting user groups that has gained the most attention from farmers and state agents alike. I use the term corruption to refer to the practices of embezzlement of funds as well as problems of nepotism in hiring and firing of employees (most often the elected Başkan, or Chairman, has sole discretion over such decisions). In perhaps the most extreme example, the Şanlıurfa governor has called for new elections in one user group in response to charges of corruption over a dozen times in four years. In each case, complaints were filed, investigations followed, people were jailed, and new elections were called (at the rate of several elections per year).

In a focus group with General Secretaries—one of several paid positions of the user groups and the only position requiring a college degree—issues of corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power on the part of Chairmen were discussed at length. General Secretaries offered many examples of instances when they observed corruption. However, given their role in the organizations, and the power of the Chairmen in terms of decision making over employment decisions, they felt they had very little leverage to combat such instances. As several of the engineers explained, at times they have to sign off on paperwork with which they are not comfortable, but do so out of fear of losing their jobs. One engineer actually resigned from his job rather than be complicit with the illegal activities he observed. He waited until the Chairman of his user group was tried and jailed; a year later he was able to return to work. Needless to say, he did so at the expense of a full year's salary. Another engineer leveled charges of corruption and nepotism with the comment, "I cannot do anything to stop the technician under me from accepting bribes; if I kick him out, the Chairman kicks me out too, because the technician is his relative." Indeed, during the focus group meeting, one participant suggested that as much as 90-99 per cent of staff employed by the user group might be relatives of the Chairman.

In theory, the Chairman is elected by a group of democratically elected representatives—the water user group council. However, based on conversations with farmers in the region, in practice the election of council members appears to be seriously prescribed relative to democratic principles. For instance, farmers note that bribes often take place, or that voting is often coordinated along asiret lines to bring certain individuals to power. In this sense, many note that asirets need to continue to grow to remain strong, relating historic notions of strength through population numbers to present-day desires to win user group elections. While perhaps it is not different from 'democratic' elections in other contexts, farmers also note that one needs a lot of money and resources to be elected. One farmer said that he himself would like to serve as Chairman; he would enjoy the money and prestige. However, he remarks, 'But I would have to travel from village to village, spending money, and offering everyone tea and bread. And in the end it is
not even certain that you would be elected, so why would I spend that much money?" (Interview 16, October 2001).

Two questions asked in our 2001 survey of 124 rural households on the Harran Plain confirm general sentiment among farmers that the user groups are perceived as unfair and biased. Farmers were asked whether they agree or disagree with a series of statements. Among them, only 40 per cent agreed with the statement, 'Elections for the irrigation districts are fair and unbiased'. The remaining 60 per cent disagreed. By contrast two-thirds of farmers agreed with the statement, 'The irrigation districts (primarily) benefit those people who work for them'.

As Robbins argues, corruption is likely to be more common in resource management institutions than is often assumed, and is likely to have significant bearing on resource uses and outcomes. He also notes that, at times, practices of bribery, embezzlement, or nepotism may entrench 'casted, classed, and gendered power' and reproduce(s) persistent elements of local politics (2000, p. 424). In the case of the Harran Plain, it is clear that powerful aqıret leaders, village headmen (muhtarlar), large landowners, and those who already have significant access to resources are among those benefiting most from the new 'participatory' water management institutions.

Further Aspects of Elite Capture and Participatory Exclusions

The issue of retrenching inequalities in the region is one that may even surpass overt crimes described above, representing a lost opportunity to create a resource management mechanism that serves all members of the community. To be elected as a representative to the user group council (from which Chairmen are selected), one must own a minimum of 40 dönüm (equal to four hectares, although there is also a provision that allows election of a farmer who has rented the same land for three years or more). With high rates of landlessness in the plain (estimates are between 35 to 40 per cent of residents), and very few women holding effective title to land, this means that, in general, only a small subset of the adult population, primarily landed men, are eligible to participate in the user groups. Given that landlessness figures are typically estimated on a household basis, if we disaggregate adult men and women, this could mean that as many as 70 per cent of adults of the plain are ineligible to serve.13

Similar to benefits that accrue to Chairmen, muhtarlar also enjoy enhanced power with the new arrangements afforded by the user groups. Many farmers indicate that 'votes' are not taken in any formal sense, but rather typically involve a group of farmers sitting in a room at the house of the muhtar nodding their heads.

13 If only those on the title can serve on the council, and if virtually no women hold effective title to land, this means that up to 50 per cent of the adult population is ineligible. Further, if 40 per cent of families are landless, this means that an additional 20 per cent of the total adult population of the plain (landless men) are ineligible to serve, meaning that as much as 70 per cent of the adult population is effectively barred from meaningful participation.

in agreement for whom he has selected to serve on the council. Rather than casting a vote, one would in fact have to protest the muhtar's chosen candidates overtly in a public forum. Further, the muhtar himself serves as a 'natural' member of the user group council, and often exercises influence over who will serve as paid irrigation technician for the village. In one example, a farmer complained that the muhtar had selected his own nephew for a paid technician position. Whether it be in terms of paid jobs for themselves and family members, preference for water delivery (such stories were relayed on several occasions), access to farmer training, or embezzlement, there are a number of ways that the terms of difference and inequalities in the plain are cemented and exacerbated through the operations of the user groups. In this case, those who already enjoy access to resources (e.g. muhtarlar, aqıret leaders, and rich landed farmers) are those seemingly most able to upset the benefits and resources of water user groups. This reality stands in stark contrast to the claims made that 'democratic' management is likely to upset such inequalities.

The case of southeastern Turkey clearly enforces Agarwal's (2001) notion of gendered 'participatory exclusions'.14 While 'participatory exclusions' in the case of the Harran Plain go beyond notions of gender difference (e.g. landless residents are also excluded from user group benefits and possibilities), the exclusion of women remains an important consideration in this context. During the focus group with irrigation engineers, only one of the six General Secretaries had ever seen a woman participate in water user group activities—an elderly widow. Another responded to a question on women's non-participation in user groups by saying 'women have no such right to speak. There are not even many women who can speak proper Turkish, I mean I did not meet any (women) farmers or representatives in my area, and I do not expect that I will meet any in the future' (Focus Group 28, October 2001). When the initial question about women's participation in user group activities was asked, the revealing collective response from the managers was laughter. A separate conversation with a DSI manager also touched on this issue, 'DSI wants women to take part in the groups, but because of traditions women aren't involved in irrigation. Women become involved in picking cotton, but not irrigation. The problem is that men are the decision makers in the family and on the farm' (Interview 8, October 2001).

Recognizing that social considerations, or gendered work requirements, might make barriers to women's participation difficult to overcome, at a minimum, the structural barriers to participation could be eliminated. Further, proactive efforts to foster increased participation could be undertaken. As a number of researchers have argued, efforts need to be made from the outset to ensure that women are involved in resource management efforts (see Zwartteven, 1995; Ahmed, 1999; Agarwal, 2001). The same logic can be extended to landless and
impoverished farmers, exposing the need to actively overcome such exclusions, rather than instituting regulatory structures that reinforce such divides.

To provide one possible effort in this regard, written rules related to the council elections prescribe one vote per household (stating expressly that no two members of the same family can serve on the assembly, presumably to avoid the dominance of a single powerful family). However, this effectively reasserts control of a single male head of household over other alternatives that might allow shared responsibility for resource management among male and female household members. In an effort to deal with a similar situation in the Philippines, Zwartveen (1995, p. 10) describes arrangements made whereby two representatives were allowed from each family, in order to encourage greater female participation. Ahmed (1999) also suggests that other things can be done to allow women to feel more comfortable in approaching members of user groups with needs, even if they are not members of the groups themselves. This could involve including one or two women in the user group, or other steps that might enhance women’s comfort in expressing their concerns. Based on conversations with state planners, extension agents and farmers, similar incentives or even mandates for more inclusive participation have been left entirely unexplored in the GAP context. The only visible exception is the employment of several female agricultural engineers within the state ranks, serving as potential role models for women’s participation, but not challenging accepted boundaries and assumptions about appropriate roles for Turkish versus Arab/Kurdish women.

It is important to note that when follow-up research on this issue was undertaken in the summer of 2004, discussions of how to make elections more meaningful were underway, with several state agents intent on rewriting the user group legislation. One possibility being discussed in this regard, an idea that was supported by a number of local and state officials, is the idea of instituting a formal election, similar to that used to elect the muhtar. If this were implemented, all adults could vote, rather than having one vote per household, minimum landholding requirements, or informal fora where muhtars take it under their own charge to appoint members. Whatever the outcomes of those discussions, it is clear that allowing irrigation management and maintenance to remain the exclusive domain of men, particularly landed men, opposes the mandate of water user groups to foster democratic resource management. Furthermore, the operation of these
groups undermines other state development goals including overcoming gender inequalities and creating more opportunities for women.

Participatory exclusions’ of these sorts hold obvious social and political import, but they also bear significantly on the emerging landscape and livelihoods in the region. For example, several women complained that because water user groups determine the irrigation delivery schedule around cotton, the growing season for their plots of peppers and other vegetables is shortened (privileging men’s crops is a common pattern noted in other studies of gender dimensions of irrigation, see e.g., Zwartveen, 1995). As I argue elsewhere, the process of determining the irrigation schedule in this way also reinforces cotton monocropping, making it difficult for farmers to choose alternative crops (see Harris, 2004). It may not be feasible for the state water agency to extend the irrigation delivery season later into the fall to support the longer seasonality of alternative crops, but at a minimum such possibilities could be explored, especially from the perspective of achieving greater gender equity and fostering improved agro-ecological outcomes (Pangere, 1998).

Conclusion
To date, there is significant evidence that water user groups in the Harran Plain have afforded access to resources and prestige for some, while excluding meaningful participation of landless residents, women, and less powerful farmers. In the survey of rural residents representing villages of six different water user groups in the Harran Plain, 42 per cent of farmers noted that they are not satisfied with the management of the user groups in their area. Over two-thirds of the farmers also noted that they had never attended a meeting or training session of the groups. These results indicate that water user groups are excluding certain members of the rural population. I take this evidence also a bit further to suggest that the user groups are also implicated in other ongoing processes that serve to amplify and retrench demarcations and operations of difference more generally. Given that participation and access to user group resources and training fall importantly along landed, gendered, and ajami lines, it is clear these groups are not only excluded, but indeed the very terms of these 'differences' shift in relation to the function of the user groups. In short, what it means to live as ‘woman’, ‘landless’, or other categories take on new meaning and import in relation to emergent water user groups and other complex changes associated with GAP. With respect to water user groups in particular, discourses circulate that situate farmers as ignorant with respect to appropriate irrigation uses and technologies, describing Kurdish and Arabic farmers of the region as ‘backward’ vis-à-vis the technological resources of the user groups, state authorities, and the ‘West’ (cf. Gupta, 1998). Understanding that it is not only that women are excluded from user group activities, but that women, landless, and other segments of the population are codified as ‘different’, or more or less ‘appropriate’ as farmers with respect to the ongoing negotiations of water user groups, is an important modification to the 'participatory exclusions' concept (see also Harris, forthcoming).
Environmentalism in Turkey

With respect to the themes of environment, democracy, and development, it is of interest that Agarwala's theorization of participatory exclusions suggests that more equitable participation is not only important to further social equity goals (e.g., by allowing women more say in resource management and access), but she also infers that this will improve resource conditions over the long term. She argues, for instance, that if women are involved in decision-making from the outset, rules will be more likely to be amenable to women's needs and interests, women will have a greater sense of responsibility and ownership for the resources, and consequently, will be more likely to respect resource restrictions. Implied linkages between participation, and improved outcomes in terms of environmental resiliency, or 'sustainability', are echoed by other authors as well, including works that focus on women's participation in irrigation management (Workshop on Gender and Water Resources Management, 1993; Zwarteveen, 1995; Pangare, 1998). At the other extreme, Walker (1999) and Ribot (2002) are minority voices in the literature in acknowledging the potential for devolved management mechanisms to worsen environmental outcomes. However, they do so by suggesting in a way similar to the general vein of these arguments that perhaps this is because 'truly' democratic management has not been achieved. Thus, while voicing some skepticism, they maintain faith in the value of true democracy for social equity and environmental goals. For Walker (1999, p. 259) democracy remains essential for improving the effectiveness and equity of conservation programs.

On what basis is democratic or devolved resource management afforded such critical and nearly consensus acceptance? Given the case study of water user groups on the Harmun Plain, it appears that any possible linkages between participation, equity, efficiency, and environmental resiliency remain elusiv, and should be critically assessed rather than assumed. With regard to efficiency or equity concerns, embezzlement of funds, nepotism, and elite capture bypass such possibilities. In response to the question of who should manage the water in newly irrigated areas, one farmer responded, 'When it is the state it is fair. When the state pulls out, the powerful ones take it into their hands' (2001 Survey, A38). Such statements offer direct challenge to assumptions that local 'decentralized' management mechanisms are likely to foster greater equity than top-down management.

With respect to ecological goals, the connections between devolved management and improved environmental outcomes also appear to be tenuous and uncertain. As I have suggested, devolved management mechanisms may contribute to cotton monocropping as the irrigation schedule determined by farmers caters exclusively to the majority crop, creating a circuit whereby farmers have little choice but to plant cotton (with the attendant degradation associated with near monocropping of this notoriously water-intensive crop). Further, transfer of responsibility for irrigation operation and maintenance to farmers may result in insufficient attention to canal maintenance as well as artificially low water prices (in 2001, the price for irrigation water was approximately $4 per decare, regardless of amount of actual water used).

Negotiating Inequalities

These examples provide a sense of some of the tensions and ambiguities with respect to decentralized environmental governance. While 'democratic' or 'local scale' management clearly has potential to engender greater fairness, equity, or improved environmental outcomes, such outcomes are far from assured. Reporting on irrigation related outcomes in Kenya over a decade ago, Adams (1990) argued that despite widespread enthusiasm for 'small-scale' operations, the performance of both large- and small-scale projects has generally been poor, suggesting the need to de-link common associations between scale and efficiency. More careful evaluation of the relationship between scales of governance, modes of participation, and social and environmental conditions appears to be necessary to avoid assigning 'participatory' resource management mechanisms attributes that have thus far been largely unrealizable in practice.

While I am certainly not arguing against participatory management in any sense, I take this evidence to suggest that in the Harmun Plain, centralized structures might be engaged more meaningfully to ensure accountability, to provide agricultural credit or support, or to provide guidelines for use of resources. As Vincent (1990), Ostrom (1992) and Ribot (2002) remind us, ideals of decentralized or participatory management do not necessarily eliminate important roles for centralized governance. In fact, they argue that effective devolved management institutions are most likely to be achieved when centralized authorities work to maintain minimum ecological and social standards, provide support to mobilize local knowledge and capacity, or enforce rules. Echoing a continued role for central involvement in irrigation management, the survey data suggest strong support among rural residents for continued state involvement in irrigation management. Specifically, nearly 50 per cent of respondents suggested that the state should control the irrigation waters, compared with 36 per cent who replied that this should be the domain of 'water user groups'.

With respect to democracy more generally, I take Mouffe's suggestion that if we accept relations of power as constitutive of the social, then the primary question for democratic politics is not to eliminate power, but to constitute forms of power compatible with democratic values (Mouffe, 1995, p. 261). It may be the case as well that we must critically decipher discourses and calls for democracy, exposing some of the uneven relations of power they may otherwise obscure. In particular, as we consider this historical moment, and the degree to which notions of 'democracy' are invoked in a number of influential contemporary discourses, we can recognize the simultaneous motions to 'democracy' in calls for devolution, economism, and neo-liberalism. It is noteworthy that neo-liberalism in particular often employs rhetoric of devolution and 'participation' in ways that may create obstacles to meaningful participation from all segments of society (Razavi, 2002), that may allow devolution to proceed in the absence of adequate infrastructure to handle administrative responsibilities (Polatoglu, 2000), or that may mask women's needs in particular (Cornwall, 2002).

It is also worthy of consideration that contemporary calls for 'democracy' are invoked at once to support 'devolved' resource management to hand over the US federal lands to loggers and recreational vehicle users (McCarthy, 2002, describes such elements as part of the 'Wise Use' movement), to validate
International Monetary Fund imposed structural adjustment policies emphasizing reduced government involvement and service provision, as well as to justify recent US-led interventions in Iraq. Given the interplay between these parallel, albeit differing, interpretations there is a need to interrogate more critically how ‘democracy’ is invoked in each case, and to what ends. What are the implications and assumptions of each with respect to shifting scales of responsibility and governance? Rather than unquestionably accepting the inherent ‘goods’ associated with ‘democracy’ or devolved management, precise linkages need to be expressly interrogated. We must also bear in mind that efforts to promote ‘democratic’ resource management cannot be wholly abstracted from these concurrent discourses, many of which extend and enable each other through similar echoes.

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Negotiating Inequalities
