

The critical role of political elites in development

Convener:

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Development discourses, research and practice have over time focussed on a multitude of dimensions or themes, such as economic growth, poverty, nutrition security, health, environmental degradation, pollution, climate change, the water-food-energy-nexus, and migration. A core issue that crosscuts all these themes, that considerably determines development paths and the ‘achievements’ and ‘failures’ in all these fields, but that is often neglected concerns the roles of political elites.

With the widespread decentralisation of governance and the establishment of community-based management, which are meant to enhance representation, participation, equity, accountability, and sense of ownership, the roles of local and regional elites have gained importance, vis-à-vis the roles of national governments. Decentralisation has enhanced the scope for local and regional elites to steer political and economic processes to their personal benefit and to directly capture and control funds, natural resources, and productive capacities on the cost of the majority and particularly the disadvantaged social groups. While many elites are part of stable or even hereditary structures, it also occurs that formerly powerless actors, regarded as in need of empowerment, turn into new exploitative elites, capturing resources and funds on the cost of other marginalised people.

Despite their pervasive impacts, the roles of elites tend to be overlooked, as researchers may be trapped in a priori assumptions of local governance being more just and sustainable, and as development practitioners exercise pragmatism in striving to achieve at least some of their project goals. In the diverse messiness of varying local historically-rooted contexts, structures and power relations, the roles of old and new elites also tend to be difficult to anticipate, assess and address.

To direct attention to and foster the debate on this crucial issue, this session invites contributions that focus on the roles of political elites in development. Possible thematic foci include, but are not limited to:

Assessments of the roles of political elites on social, economic and political developments at local, regional, national or global scales.

The roles of political elites with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The circumstances (including political, social, economic, and historical factors) supporting or impeding the formation and persistence of exploitative, on self-interests focused, and unaccountable political elites.

Strategies to address the issues sketched above.