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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

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Decentralization in Africa

Decentralization as the antonym of centralization is usually assumed to be a better way of organizing government business. It involves the sharing, and sometimes even the ceding, of power and authority to lower-level units of government to act on behalf of the centre. Decentralization is not an end in itself. Its main raison d'être is the improvement of the quality of service development and provision to the intended beneficiaries. Where a decentralized system of government exists without leading to the realization of these objectives, a question often asked is: what is the problem? Another justifying myth about decentralization is that it provides an institutional framework within which subnational units of government as well as the population therein can be meaningfully involved in decision making on matters that affect them directly. The reality, however, is that regardless of the form of decentralization put in place, the performance of decentralization schemes in Africa has not lived up to the above expectations. In the last two decades, a lot of writing has been done on this subject, addressing the broad issues involved in decentralization as well as those addressing unique country experiences. In this venture, UNCRD has made what ought to be considered a major contribution both in the refinement of the concepts of decentralization as well as in the presentation of country-specific experiences through its publication outlets.

In 1981, UNCRD (Nagoya) convened an international conference on the subject of decentralization, which was attended by some of the leading decentralization scholars at the time. Later on, that conference would provide the impetus for the focused works the organization has conducted over the last two-and-a-half decades or so.

The African components of the activities in the subject have been directed from its Africa Office in Nairobi. During the period in question, a number of issues of the *Regional Development Dialogue* (*RDD*) journal have carried studies on diverse aspects of decentralization and regional and local governance, and development in Africa. Some of such recent studies are to be found in, for example, the Vol. 19, Autumn 1998 issue on "Rethinking Regional Development: Africa, Asian, and Latin American Perspectives"; the Vol. 21, Spring 2000 issue, which addresses the broad issue of "Decentralization and Citizen Participation in Africa"; and the Vol. 25, Spring 2004 issue, which discusses "Local Governance and Poverty Alleviation in Africa".

The present volume revisits the decentralization theme by discussing the general African experience as well as the experiences of selected African countries; namely, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Tanzania, and Uganda. This particular volume is unique

in that for the first time ever, we have two Japanese scholars writing respectively on Kenya and Tanzania — a kind of manifestation of the widening interest in the study of decentralization in Africa.

Although the experiences of the countries covered in this issue vary according to their unique individual circumstances, on the whole, however, there is a running theme in all the articles, namely, that the performance of schemes of decentralization over the years has left a lot to be desired. At the general level, Walter O. Oyugi's article in this volume attributes the relatively poor performance of the decentralization scheme in the continent to a number of factors, particularly:

- The lingering culture of centralization in the body politic in African countries;
- The poor design of schemes of decentralization;
- The weaknesses in both financial and human resources, which in the case of the former has led to continued dependence on the centre by the localities — a phenomenon which has led to the loss of voice by the localities in their relationship with the centre; and
- Weak mechanisms of intergovernmental and inter-organizational relationships in devolved governance, even in situations where the design is considered to be well thought out as illustrated in the case of Uganda, both in this article as well as in the article on Uganda in this volume.

Below, brief summaries of the articles are presented.

The articles on Ethiopia, Ghana, and Tanzania, and to some extent Uganda, demonstrate that even where political decentralization (devolution and/or federalism) is embedded in the *Constitution*, the *Constitution* is designed in a manner that leaves — in the hands of the centre — many sanction powers that simply render relative autonomy of subnational units of the government a nullity.

The article on Ethiopia by Kassahun Berhanu takes off by presenting the background of the decentralization policy of the country. According to the author, the design of Ethiopia's federalism was informed by the need to achieve unity in diversity through the so-called ethnic federalism in order to forestall a possible disintegration of the state following the collapse of the Mengistu regime in 1991.

Ethiopian federalism is anchored on the stipulation that regional government shall be responsible for all units of government within their individual jurisdictions. The reality on the ground, however, is that it stands out to be one in which the regional governments themselves are heavily dependent on the federal government, without whose budgetary support they cannot survive. Under these circumstances, regions have been unable to provide support to the district (*woreda*) government, contrary to the stipulations of the *Constitution*. Thus, the weakness of subnational units of the federal government has led to continued subordination of these units to the centre, making them function as mere extensions of the federal government.

Implicit in the notion of federalism is the expectation of relative autonomy of the regions vis-à-vis their relationship with the federal government. In the Ethiopian federal system, which is based on the establishment of ethno-regional states, the experience gained so far, according to the author, is that federalism has become a haven for exclusivist and ethnocentric dispositions which, in turn, has culminated into intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts. This problem directly affects state stability as confounded by the existence of a weak legislature whose performance thus far demonstrates its inability to act as a check on the executive. The problem is further accentuated by the existence of parallel structures

of the ruling party and government, with the former having become overarching and omnipresent in the management of affairs of the state.

Arising from the foregoing argument, the author concludes that the Ethiopian political system is favourably disposed towards the pursuit of top-down management of government business, thereby increasingly falling back to the old authoritarian tendencies. Hence, devolution as a form of decentralization remains simply a pretentious posturing.

According to Joseph R. A. Ayee, decentralization policy in Ghana is designed to enable the central government and units of governance in the field, such as district assemblies (DAs), civil society organizations (CSOs), local communities, and the private sector, to share responsibility in the governance process. The central purpose is to promote responsive and accountable governance which serves the interests of the poor. The functional aspect of the policy is to be expressed through strengthening and expanding local democracy as well as promoting local socioeconomic development.

The structure of decentralization in Ghana is expressed through the creation of DAs as the key unit of government at the subnational level. The structural configuration of the individual district is, by and large, a replica of the structure inherited at independence, in that the membership of the assembly while being predominantly elective, still draws a third of the membership through a nomination system, according to which the president is supposed to make a nomination in consultation with the local leaders, but which, in practice, is unilaterally carried out by the centre. The article contends that although the activities of the assemblies are supposed to be open and participatory, this is rarely the case as they are always expected to toe the leadership line.

The weakest link in Ghana's decentralization is to be found in the nature of the relationship between the assembly and the centre, which is characterized by the departure of the latter on the former. This is not only the case in Ghana, but is also the current situation in all Anglophone African countries. It is characterized by the retention of overwhelming powers which the centre can, and often does, exercise to control the behaviour of devolved governments. All the bylaws must be approved by the president or minister in charge of local government; the power of dissolution is usually exercised by the president without consultation. Furthermore, the assemblies depend on the central government for the bulk of their financial requirements. And since 1992, the centrally disbursed district assemblies' common fund (DACF) has emerged as the mainstay of assembly revenue.

Financial constraints aside, DAs are characterized by administrative incapacity occasioned by the absence of and/or unpredictable nature of capacity-building. And as is the case elsewhere in Africa, the financial weakness of local authorities (LAs) in Ghana make them unattractive employment avenues for qualified staff.

The two articles on Kenya by Winnie V. Mitullah and Yuichi Sasaoka focus on urban service delivery and on fiscal decentralization, respectively. Mitullah's article starts off by revisiting the "unending theoretical/conceptual debate about what decentralization entails by citing conflictual positions on the subject". She also brings into focus the theories that inform what she refers to as the "romanticization of decentralization". Thereafter, the article discusses issues and problems of service provision in urban areas in the third world and in Kenya generally, and concludes that the crisis of service provision in the countries under review have been occasioned by unplanned urbanization.

In her analysis of decentralized urban service delivery in Nairobi, the focus is on the relationship between the city government and its constituent units, generally referred to

as divisions and wards.

A discussion of the performance of the city council in the sphere of service provision, prior to the introduction of the Local Government Reform Programme (LGRP) in 2003, observes that it (service provision) remained poor in spite of the efforts to improve its quality and scope. However, with the decentralization of service provision to the eight administrative units of the city, a number of services not previously provided have been brought on board. And revenue collection is said to have improved as well, although it still remains as one of the challenges the council has to address.

Notwithstanding the observed positive development since 2003, Mitullah cautions about premature decentralization to the wards which are still ill-equipped in many respects to grapple with the demand of decentralized development management. On the other hand, she decries the inability (or perhaps unwillingness) of the council to engage non-state actors in the development process and service provision activities to the mutual benefit of both parties. Notwithstanding the above-recorded improvements, the author ends on a warning note: decentralized service delivery in urban areas has been embraced without putting in place adequate measures to ensure its success.

Sasaoka's article is a product of an ongoing research which he has been carrying out in three East African countries. The article takes off by sketching out the background to fiscal decentralization in Kenya. He asserts that Kenya's decentralization has been carried out in three waves, namely: District Focus for Rural Development, launched in 1983; Kenya Local Government Reform Programme under whose umbrella the Local Authority Transfer Fund (LATF) was initiated in 1999/2000; and the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) put in place in 2003.

The article also discusses in passing all the major funds which have been devolved in recent years while giving more attention to LATF and CDF. The former is a fund which is generated from a percentage of income tax received by the central government, and is disbursed to LAs according to stipulated formulae. The latter (CDF) is based on a percentage of the national budget, which is distributed to all the parliamentary constituencies, again on stipulated formulae. Both LATF and CDF are meant for both capital investment and service delivery. The funds also support the overhead expenditure inherent in their management. The article by Sasaoka points out the overlap which exists in the projects and services to which the two funds are supposed to support.

In the management front, a number of weaknesses of the two funds have been identified. In the case of CDF, a major weakness appears to be the dominant role the incumbent member of parliament (MP) exercises over the appointment of the constituency committee members who manage the fund as well as the choice of the projects to be supported by the fund, contrary to the stipulations of the Act establishing the fund. He intimates that the available evidence suggest that the fund is some kind of a milk cow for the individual MP, a matter which the national committee and the responsible ministry appear to be aware of and are taking appropriate remedial measures.

A similar situation has been experienced with the management of LATF. A key instrument which informs the activities of the fund is the so-called Local Authority Service Delivery Action Plan (LASDAP). This instrument is supposed to be prepared with full participation of the would-be beneficiaries of the projects, yet this hardly happens, he avers. The stipulations in the Act regarding the utilization of the fund between service provision and the administration is generally ignored in favour of the administrative aspect

of the expenditure. However, he observes that in regards to this, as is the case of CDF, the parent ministry is putting in place accountability measures to address the emerging trends. His closing observation is that Kenya's case in fiscal decentralization is unique because of the provision for full participation of the politicians (i.e., MPs and councillors) in the management of the projects. His contention, though, is that this provision is not appropriate since it has transformed the lawmakers into executors of policies contrary to the doctrine of separation of powers.

The article on Namibia by Gerhard K. H. Tötemeyer focuses on the promises and bottlenecks inherent in the implementation of the decentralization policy in Namibia, and also addresses what he refers to as 'quality governance and capacity-building' linked to the success of the said programme. The reader is reminded that the objective of decentralization as a national policy in Namibia seeks to promote participatory democracy and sustainable development to the benefit of the citizens.

Specific measures have since been taken to operationalize the policy. They include putting in place mechanisms and processes for the implementation of the programme; mainstreaming decentralization policies within the individual ministry activities; putting in place the requisite structures and systems at the subnational level to support the implementation of the programme; development by the parent ministry of a communication framework intended to disseminate information relevant to the programme; and mobilization and sensitization of the people about the programme.

However, the experience so far is that there has been conflict between the centre and the decentralized units, which has generated misunderstanding and conflict. He further argues that even within the regions, the relationship between LAs and ministerial departments seem to be working at cross-purposes. Indeed, Namibia's decentralization scheme has faced hostility since its inception. Tötemeyer observes that there is fear within the central government that decentralization, if implemented as designed, would undermine its authority.

The message throughout the article is that regardless of what efforts are being made, there are still misgivings about the efficacy of decentralization both at the national and subnational levels. This has had the effect of either distorting what is being done or slowing down the pace of implementation.

A key concept addressed in the article is what the writer refers to as "quality governance," which he uses as a substitute for good governance. He defines quality governance as "the best governance a country can offer at its particular stage of development," and that conceptually, quality governance "leaves room for constant improvement". Thereafter, a presentation is made of what he refers to as principles of quality governance.

The author also addresses the issue of capacity-building which he considers as being critical to the success of decentralization and which, at the moment, is still a weak link in the decentralization project in Namibia. Finally, he makes a plea for the need to put in place an integrated approach to development at the subnational level.

Next, Masao Yoshida's article on Tanzania focuses on decentralized service delivery in the country. The policy/legal frameworks which have informed the implementation of decentralized service delivery are: Local Government Reform, 1998; and Local Government Reform Programme, 2000.

The implementation of the Local Government Reform Programme has been affected by the weak resource base among the LAs, as a result of which the authorities continue to

rely on the central government for diverse funding mechanisms. The weakness is attributed partly to the decision by the central government to abolish some of the sources of revenue for LAs, apparently due to political considerations.

Continued dependence on the central government has therefore deprived LAs of their relative autonomy. With the abolition of some taxes, the government introduced the Local Government Capital Development Fund which has emerged as the main source of council revenue. The fund, which was established in 2005 as a grant mechanism by the central government, is managed by LAs on the basis of established rules. The allocation of this fund is to all authorities, and allocation is based on established formulae. The problem though is that LAs are ill-prepared to efficiently plan for, and manage, the utilization of the fund.

Under the Local Government Reform, districts are now supposed to be responsible for a number of services earlier on provided by the central government, such as medical services, but disparity in LA capacity remains a bottleneck in the realization of the set objectives. This weakness has also affected the realization of what is supposed to be bottom-up approaches to planning.

According to John Kiyaga-Nsubuga and Martin Onyach-Olaa, the two authors of the article on Uganda, the country's decentralization project was intended to promote democratization, improve service provision, enhance government legitimacy, and reduce poverty. As designed and expressed both in the *Constitution* (1995) and the *Local Governments Act* (1997), it gives LAs extensive powers over both planning and implementation of programmes and projects.

The key assumptions in designing the local government system were:

- Participation of the citizens in the management of local affairs;
- Local leaders would always act in the best interest of their electorate; and
- The central government would provide effective oversight, guidance, and support to local governments.

These assumptions have faced challenges over the years.

The article presents key provisions of the Act in areas of finance, functions, staffing, accountability measures, among others, and proceeds to address the challenges which have been faced in operationalizing the provisions of the law. The authors make a number of pertinent observations as follows:

- Some named policy decisions in the area of revenue collection have deprived the councils of revenue, thereby accentuating their dependence on central government remittances;
- Taxes assigned to LAs are low-yield types and difficult to collect, yet there have not been reforms in this area; and
- Inadequate and uncoordinated capacity-building efforts have been addressed through the Local Government Capacity Building Policy involving training, coupled with mentoring. A positive impact on performance has been recorded.

The quest for democratic governance remains a pipe dream in spite of the greatly improved electoral process. The tendency to corrupt the process remains a major concern. And popular democracy envisaged in the design of the policy is yet to be realized as participation in decision making at the village level is in decline. The National Resistance Movement (the ruling party) continues to interfere in council affairs. Low popular participation is attributed to lack of organization on the part of the local people, as well as

their poor understanding of the rights that the law accords to them under the decentralization dispensation. In conclusion, the authors aver that a major problem facing decentralization, and especially the local government system, is the failure to accept and operationalize the provisions of the law by the stakeholders.

In short, the studies in this volume carry forward the ongoing debate on the nature and performance of decentralization schemes in Africa in general, as well as in the individual countries. The articles treat cross-cutting issues with findings demonstrating that the problems confronting schemes of decentralization find similar, if not identical, expressions throughout the continent.

Finally, the guest editor wishes to thank UNCRD and especially its Africa Office Coordinator, Asfaw Kumssa, for having initiated the project that has led to the publication of this volume.