

CURRENT STATUS OF DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Decentralisation should ideally result in democratic transfer of effective powers and control from the state to elected local level authorities. Where this occurs, it enables resources users to actively participate in decision-making and hold accountable those to whom decentralised powers and democratic reforms have been transferred. At times, this democratic reforms shows resistance and resilience of communities in the face of change but it could also be interpreted as a crisis where

communities feel they have lost control over their livelihoods. Where community collective interests are threatened, the powerful actors make adjustments, compromise and form networks and alliances aimed at fulfilling individual or collective interests. This paper focuses at the current status of democratic decentralisation and local government reforms in Africa.

Key words: Democracy, Decentralisation, Local Government, Reforms, status

1. Introduction

The paper looks at the current status of democratic decentralisation and local government reforms in Africa. The paper argues that there is a relationship between decentralisation, democracy and development in the context of local governance, in that local level development is linked to decentralisation, whereas decentralisation facilitates the performance of development activities at the local level which cannot be performed by the central government. In this arrangement, citizens residing outside the boundaries of the power engines (national capitals) are accorded an opportunity to freely elect their representatives through direct or indirect democracy, to enable them to meaningfully participate in decision making processes on matters pertaining to their lives.

1.1 Background of the research paper

Local government comprises local community management and administration. It denotes the elected political and appointed bureaucratic structures and processes through which community activities are promoted and regulated on a day-to-day basis (Mark, 2013). Local government does not exist in isolation from other levels of government. Although it is always a creature of national government, it is supposed to be a separate level of government in democratic societies, with separate local and national

elections. The current wave of national level political reforms sweeping the world has also affected local government. Marks (2013) stated that the status, power and resources of local authorities' vis-à-vis the national and other sub-national governments are major indicators of the importance of this level of government in the society concerned.

In most developed countries, the post-war period witnessed rapid growth in the number of services rendered by public administration at all levels, national and local. In recent decades, however, local sources of income in many developed countries have not kept pace with the rapid escalation of local authorities expenditures. Many developed countries are characterized by a high degree of political and administrative centralisation. Local Authorities in such countries is weakly developed and plays a far smaller legitimising role than in developed countries.

Mukwena (2004) indicated that in many African countries, including Namibia, decentralised governance has gained acceptance as a vehicle for democratic governance and sustainable economic development. Implementing this recognition in practical terms requires creating and sustaining different autonomous levels of government with clearly defined powers and responsibilities. Further, it is not possible for different self-governing units or levels of government in a nation-state to exist without properly designed intergovernmental relationships existing between them both vertical and horizontally. Intergovernmental relations permeate constitutional provisions, statutes, rules, regulations and procedures, as well as the institutions that govern and facilitate the relationships between the different levels of government. They come into play at the level of legal and institutional framework and administrative procedure and extend to the finer details of specific responsibilities and revenue sources. Proper, clear and transparent relationships between the central and lower-level governments and between lower-level governments themselves are essential for decentralised governance function effectively. The principle that should guide the design of intergovernmental relations is a shared vision

of good and effective governance. Elected representatives of the people at whatever level of government they serve should have as their overriding objective the well-being of the citizens they serve.

Mukwena (2008) argues that the Namibian situation is such that centralization plays a bigger role in influencing the activities of the local authorities countrywide. More political powers continue to be exerted on local authorities and hence the demonstration of autonomy as per the constitutional creation of the local authorities is highly affected. Local authorities' councillors also exercise more political powers than allowing local authorities to operate on a day-to-day basis in ensuring that the administrative staff is given more room to collect funds from all sources of the residents of such towns. If electricity is switched off, political powers muscle in to reconnect electricity to non-compliant users who are supposed to pay their dues on a monthly basis based on the usages.

Mukwena (2008) further revealed that the middle-class professionals and intellectuals who run key public institutions tend to be understandably preoccupied with their own economic survival, which often prevents their institutions from helping civil society to checkmate state hegemony. Political interference has, in most cases, hampered the integrity of the Local Authorities in most of African states and it has paralysed the proper functioning of these institutions leading to their failure. In this context, Local Authorities are not able to play their meaningful role in supporting a development that is sustainable throughout the African Continent. Namibia has a more centralised local government and is not an exception of the other local authorities of the world. The difference in Namibia is that the central level was not disbursing funds to local authorities to carry out their duties. The impact of this centralism means that the local authorities do not have autonomy in generating, using and accounting for local authorities funds.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Local government is enhanced as local democracy by the close-ness of council members to those they represent. A greater number of members embed local government into the grass root.

Many African states are characterized by a high degree of political and administrative centralization. Local government in such countries is weakly developed and plays a smaller legitimizing role than in developed countries. There is also a problem of limited human capacity which leads central government to lack confidence in the ability of local government to use additional resources effectively. In the poorest countries or those caught up in conflict, and in the least developed countries such South Africa, the infrastructure for effective local government may be almost be absent.

1.3 Research question

The main research question that the research paper aims to answer is as follows:

- What is current status of democratic decentralisation and local government reforms in Africa?

1.4 The objectives of the study

- The main objective of the research paper is to assess the current status of democratic decentralisation and local government reforms in Africa.
- To identify the contributing factors affecting local government reforms and effectiveness of service delivery.

1.5 Significance of the study

The paper is significant it provides a deeper understanding of local government reforms and some possible suggestions to improve the effectiveness of service delivery of the selected countries. It provides sound information to the policy-makers and decision-makers to come up with possible strategies to address these shortcomings. It will also serve as a guiding tool to future researchers who

would wish to conduct research on local government reforms in Africa.

1.6 Limitations of the study

The paper only covers the middle and top management members at African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) due to the limited time prescribed and financial constraints in terms of data collection.

2. Literature Review and theoretical frame of the research paper

Earl (2008) defines a literature review as a critical summary and assessment of the range of existing literature in a given field. Literature review can be restricted to books and papers in one discipline or sub discipline or may be ranging in approach. The main purpose is to situate the research to form its context or background and to provide insight into previous work.

Rondinelli (1983) defines decentralization as the transfer of responsibility for planning, management, and the raising and allocation of resources from the central government and its agencies to field units of government agencies, subordinate units or levels of government, semi-autonomous public authorities or non-governmental private or voluntary organizations.

Theoretical framework

Wilson (1996) observed that the fact that Regional and Local authorities in some African countries are still relatively young and most staff members in their services are inexperienced, means that there is a need for them to determine the level of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing organisational arrangements and procedures to detect and punish corruption and other unethical practices. Despite increasing democratic decentralisation and stability in Africa, corruption and conflict remain serious barriers to ending extreme poverty on the continent. In addition to the human and psychological toll corruption and conflict take on African populations, they also cost money and the continent loses billions each year as a result of corruption alone.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 Of 1996 the objectives of local government are to:

- Provide democratic and accountable government for local communities.
- To ensure that the provision of services to communities is done in a sustainable manner.
- To promote social and economic development.
- To promote a safe and healthy environment.
- To encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government.

In other words, local governments are required to exercise a political function to achieve service delivery, social and economic development and a healthy environment.

2.1. Financial accountability

Wilson (1996) found that one of the primary methods of achieving accountability for the expenditure of public money by local government is through the procedures of external audit. The tradition of local government which has emerged this century is based on the idea of local councils as multi-functional authorities which are vested with broad discretionary powers to enable them to provide a range of services which meet the needs of their communities.

Wilson (1996) further revealed that the recent reforms to local government can be understood to reflect a sense of dissatisfaction over the performance of local government and the government seems to have accepted that the traditional structure of accountability within local government should be viewed as forming part of the problem.

Elhiraika (2007) argues that decentralization leads to greater accountability and increases prospects that services would reach targeted groups. One of the essential purposes of decentralization is to improve provision of public service delivery.

With regards to shortages of financial resources, local government in Africa also struggle with a shortage of educated and experienced manpower. Both politicians and civil servants are often inadequately trained, which is not surprising given the relative low level of education in some African countries Namibia in particular (Edgar, 2013).

Wilson (1996) stated that many of the reforms designed to strengthen the accountability of local government may be welcome, in terms both of enhancing the idea of citizenship and rendering the authority more responsive to the needs of those it exists to serve.

2.2 Management capacity

Wooldridge (2013) argues that the lack of financial management capacity in local government has been a recurrent theme. Poor management practices have been related to an inherent lack of capacity rather than the accounting system per se. budgeting often proves to be unrealistic. Control expenditure and credit is weak. The capacity of employer representatives to negotiate affordable salary increases is critical; as municipal services are currently labour intensive and labour costs make up a large component of the costs of services. Internal reporting formats are very weak and external reporting to the community is mostly absent.

Elections should promote citizens' voice in three ways:

- They constitute a major form of participation, as indicated by the voter turn-out figures.
- They have the potential to enhance accountability.
- Provide information on policy intentions and outcomes to electors.

This brief exposition cannot do full justice to the complex relationships among the various key dimensions of decentralisation, but it establishes the critical importance of considering linkages in designing, implementing and evaluating decentralisation.

2.3 Key Issues in Decentralisation

Interaction between Spheres of Government

Kwemeri (2010) found that in most parts of the world, the leaders of sub-national spheres of government regularly consider whether their relationship with national government could be improved. This assessment often includes calculations as to whether greater independence from national government might enhance the region politically, economically and with respect to the delivery of services to its people.

While the situation of each region has to be considered on the basis of its own unique characteristics and history, there are certain general observations that can be made.

Improved development and poverty reduction

Local governments are expected to contribute to local economic development in a number of ways. Firstly, they can provide services that serve as production and distribution inputs for local firms and entrepreneurs. Secondly, they can contribute to a legal and institutional environment that is conducive for development. Thirdly, they can help to coordinate key local public, private and community actors in creating partnerships that promote development. Of course, as noted above, local governments cannot provide certain types of large-scale infrastructure and local development is also dependent on larger macro-economic and institutional conditions over which local governments have no control.

2.4 Major dimensions of decentralisation and their linkages

Wooldridge (2013) revealed that many associate the term 'fiscal' only with finances, but as Prud'homme demonstrates, economists use it in a much broader way. Fiscal decentralisation comprises the assignment of responsibilities, including sectoral functions, as well as the assignment of own-source revenues to sub-national governments. There is an almost universal deficiency of sub-national own-source revenues relative to assigned sub-national expenditure requirements. Intergovernmental transfers play a critical role in closing this fiscal gap as well as in alleviating interregional resource disparities.

Clearly, without properly defined fiscal decentralisation, political and institutional decentralisation would have little impact. Poorly articulated roles and resource deficiencies can cripple local governments and undermine incentives for local officials and elected representatives to perform effectively. Similarly, if local people participate in public decision-making processes and see no concrete result because local officials have inadequate power and resources to deliver services, they may become disillusioned and cynical about local government. Linkages between fiscal and political decentralisation are considered in a number of the articles in this volume, particularly those by Andrews and Schroeder, and Olowu and Conyers,(2003)

2.5 Institutional decentralisation

Institutional decentralisation refers to the administrative bodies, systems and mechanisms, both local and intergovernmental, which help to manage and support decentralisation. It also includes mechanisms that link formal government bodies to other key local actors and traditional local authorities, non-governmental organisations, private sector partners. Wooldridge (2013) found that this is the critical institutional architecture on which decentralisation is built. Interaction among government levels must be managed to facilitate local service delivery rather than, as is sometimes the case, to hinder it. Similarly, local government staff must function with organisational structures and procedures that allow them to meet their obligations, including development of a good working relationship with elected representative councils. Without appropriately designed and implemented structures and processes as well as adequate local capacity to manage the political and fiscal functions of sub-national governments, decentralisation will fail.

This article recommends that, local governments in African states should dispose a full autonomy in local decision-making. The level of human and financial resources should not be restricted in local governments. Both politicians as well as civil servants should fulfill their assigned functions effectively.

Local government officials should provide sufficient space for citizens to get involved in decision-making.

In conclusion, the reality though is that ending corruption in our societies and our continent lies in our own hands. It is our countries, our people and our continent that are victims of the underdevelopment that is caused by corruption and our people that suffer poverty and other preventable maladies as a consequence. Corruption basically destabilizes societies. In many instances corruption also endangers the security of our states.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.

3.1 Research Design

This paper adopts a qualitative research design to assess the status of democratic decentralisation and local government reforms in Africa. The method used is a case study. The research design focuses on fostering a relationship of trust and empathy between the research and the research subjects. The data were collected by means of interviews, observations and document analysis as well as questionnaires.

3.2 Research Population

The research population for the paper consists of the selected officials of Southern African Development Community (SADC), African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) member states and the High Commissions for Africa, representing their countries in Namibia.

3.3 Sample

This paper used a purposive non-probability sampling. The research paper targeted 30 respondents who were purposefully selected from various countries, selected officials from SADC, AU, ECOWAS and High Commissions representing their countries in Namibia.

3.4 Research Instruments

The researcher used multiple instruments and techniques within the qualitative approach of data collection. The following research instruments were employed: a questionnaire, semi- structured interviews and documentary analysis. Goddard and Melville (2002) found that document analysis is important because it gives the researcher a general background on the subject that is being studied. Since official records are vital sources of data, it is necessary to include the documents which enhance the interview. **3.5 Data Collect Procedure**

Both primary and secondary data were used to collect data from the respondents. The researcher used primary data by means of a structured questionnaire; interviews. Interviews were used to obtain views and opinions from officials of AU, SADC and ECOWAS. Responses of face to face interview were recorded on a tape recorder and then transcribed. Secondary data such as documentary analysis and books were explored. Questionnaires were distributed to the respondents to fill in the presence of the researcher so that assistance can be availed if required.

3.6 Data analysis

To analyse the data collected from respondents, the researcher used coding, transcription and thematic analysis. Data were presented through tables and charts and it was interpreted in a narrative form. Face to face interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed.

3.7 Ethical issues

The purpose of the research paper is to explained to the participates and only after their consent is given will they partake in the research. The researcher strived for honesty, confidentiality and anonymity

which include keeping the identity of respondents private. The researcher acknowledges authors whose work is reflected in the research paper.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Almighty God for his love and guidance, without him this research paper would not have been a success. I wish to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Victor. L. Tonchi for working together up to the end of this research paper and I would like to thank the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development for the corporation and assistance they gave us during data collection, without their assistance this research paper would not have been successful.

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