

DECENTRALISATION IN AFRICA: GOALS, DIMENSIONS, MYTHS AND CHALLENGES

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SUMMARY

Decentralisation is a complex and often somewhat elusive phenomenon. Many countries around the world have been attempting—for several reasons and with varying degrees of intention and success—to create or strengthen sub-national governments in recent years. Africa is no exception to either the decentralisation trend or the reality of its complexity and diversity. Drawing selectively on the large academic and practitioner literature on decentralisation and the articles in this volume, this article briefly outlines a number of typical prominent goals of decentralisation. It then reviews some key dimensions of decentralisation—fiscal, institutional and political. These are too frequently treated separately by policy analysts and policy makers although they are inherently linked. Next, a few popular myths and misconceptions about decentralisation are explored. Finally, a number of common outstanding challenges for improving decentralisation and local government reform efforts in Africa are considered. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

For a topic that receives so much international attention, there is a great deal that we do not know about decentralisation. Much of the decentralisation literature focuses on its often-problematic performance and positive writings tend to be based on anecdotal instances of success or enthusiastic rhetoric about its benefits.¹ Despite the limited empirical evidence to support decentralisation and clarify how to reap its potential benefits, policy makers seem to be willing to push it forward in many countries. This situation has a number of roots. First, decentralisation is not favoured primarily because there is unambiguous proof of its desirability. The real reasons are rather varied, but ultimately political. A number of articles in this volume, including those of Prud'homme, Olowu, Crook and Ouedraogo, point to the failure of centralised approaches to development and pressures from international development agencies, among others, as important forces driving the current wave of decentralisation in Africa. In some cases, decentralisation efforts are at least partly a guise for renewed attempts by national political elites to expand their control through developing new local institutions or restructuring existing ones.

Second, there is often a lack of clarity about the precise meaning of decentralisation. The British and French traditions in Africa use and understand the term quite differently, as Prud'homme's and Ouedraogo's articles in this volume particularly highlight. Many current efforts do look more like genuine devolution than the previous generation of more 'centralised' African decentralisations, but the influence of earlier approaches and attitudes is still evident.² Despite a considerable body of writing about the distinction between deconcentration and devolution,

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¹A number of recent reviews or comparative studies of decentralisation consider evidence on various aspects of its performance, including Bah and Linn (1992); Prud'homme (1995); Ter-Minassian (1997); Bird and Vaillancourt (1998); Litvack, Ahmad and Bird (1998); Allen (1999); Cohen and Peterson (1999); Manor (1999); Blair (2000); McCarney (2000); Turner (2000) and Smoke (2001). Belshaw (2000); Smoke (2000b); Steffensen and Trollegaard (2000); Charlick (2001); Harbeson (2001); Wunsch (2001); UNCDF (2002) and Wunsch and Olowu (forthcoming) particularly focus on Africa.

²Wunsch and Olowu (1990) and Wunsch and Olowu (forthcoming) provide a good review of centralisation and decentralisation in Africa.

they are often rather blurred in decentralisations debates and policies and are sometimes treated as mutually exclusive.³ Decentralisation is also sometimes treated as an 'all or nothing' phenomenon in which the role of the central government is very limited.⁴ Equally important, decentralisation is difficult to measure. Economists, for example, have tended to measure it as the percentage of total public expenditures undertaken by sub-national governments. This definition, however, tells us nothing about the level of autonomy or the degree of accountability with which sub-national governments function and these are key aspects of decentralisation.⁵

Third, virtually all of the articles in this volume and much of the literature on the topic emphasise the fact that decentralisation is almost invariably complex. Because it has several dimensions, its appropriate extent and form vary across countries and its implementation takes considerable time, decentralisation is a difficult phenomenon both to design and to study. This problem is compounded by the tendency of disciplinary specialists to compartmentalise decentralisation. Economists focus on fiscal and economic development, political scientists focus on intergovernmental relations, local elections and accountability mechanisms, and public administration experts work on institutional structures, processes and procedures. As the articles of Prud'homme, Olowu, Ribot and Conyers particularly highlight, these various dimensions are integrated and must be considered together. Specialists within broad disciplines also create confusion by focusing only on issues of particular concern to them. For example, macro-economists preoccupied with maintaining public sector fiscal discipline tend to highlight the potentially dangerous impact of fiscally irresponsible behaviour by unduly autonomous and empowered sub-national governments, while pro-decentralisation economists promote potential improvements in local-level resource allocation. Similarly, some grassroots-oriented social scientists focus narrowly on the potential political empowerment benefits of decentralisation, while others emphasise the problems inherent in giving license to (not infrequently corrupt) local elites who may dominate autonomous local government decisions. These are all relevant issues and one may predominate in some cases but a broader lens is usually required to gain a balanced understanding of decentralisation both in a particular country and in general.

Finally, interested parties in any country who are likely to benefit or suffer under decentralisation, not surprisingly, also push their own views on its desirability. Local government officials who stand to gain from enhanced powers and resources sing the praises of decentralisation, while national government agencies that stand to lose their often-considerable powers and resources sound the alarm bell. Similarly, community organisations that might benefit from a close association with newly empowered local governments will view decentralisation favourably, while those that see resources being diverted from community-oriented support programmes to intergovernmental transfer systems will resist decentralisation.⁶

Thus, both within the developing countries considering public sector reform and within the international institutions that support or study it, decentralisation has often been considered in selective and sometimes biased ways that fail to provide a solid basis for making informed judgements. Because countries are different and approach decentralisation in various ways that may or may not be appropriately defined, anyone who has a particular point of view can usually find at least some anecdotal evidence to back it up. In the final analysis, decentralisation has often been pushed forward or constrained without an adequate understanding of how best to structure it in order to maximise potential benefits and minimise potential problems.

As we have learnt more from experience in recent years, a more balanced view of decentralisation and a more nuanced and integrated perspective on how to approach it are slowly emerging. Decentralisation is not a monolithic concept and it is not inherently positive or negative. Thus, in order to evaluate the desirability of decentralisation and determine its appropriate form in a particular case, it is useful to 'deconstruct' decentralisation into its main goals and elements. In this article, I first briefly review some of the typical primary goals of decentralisation. Second, I summarise major dimensions of decentralisation and suggest some of the key linkages among them. Third, I highlight a few popular myths and misconceptions about decentralisation. Finally, I suggest several

³Cohen and Peterson (1999) usefully discuss the meaning and use of the term 'decentralisation'.

⁴Tendler (1997) provides an interesting discussion of the role of different levels of government in making decentralisation work.

⁵For a discussion of this issue, see: Huther and Shah (1998); Martinez-Velazquez and McNab (2001); Smoke (2001) and Ebel and Yilmaz (2003).

⁶This has been a factor in the debate between those who favour direct support to communities through social funds and similar mechanisms and those who prefer greater support for formal local governments. See, for example, the discussion in Parker and Serrano (2000) and Tendler (2000) as well as the article by Romeo in this volume.

of the main outstanding challenges for policy analysts and practitioners considering how to make decentralisation efforts in Africa more effective. Given the degree of attention decentralisation has received, the complexity of the topic and the vast array of issues involved, what can be said in this short article involves both coverage of some familiar territory and a degree of simplification. Most of the issues raised here, however, are considered in more detail in some or all of the other articles in this volume which also contain more extensive references to literature on various aspects of decentralisation.

COMMON GOALS (POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES) OF DECENTRALISATION

There are many potential, sometimes conflicting, goals of decentralisation, as broadly elaborated in the articles by Prud'homme and Andrews/Schroeder and considered to some degree or with respect to specific aspects of decentralisation in most others. The majority of these advantages can be broadly captured as improved efficiency, governance and/or equity. These results, in turn, are often associated with economic development and poverty alleviation. The realisation of these benefits depends significantly on the 'devolution' version of decentralisation. This presumes appropriate assignment of powers and resources to reasonably autonomous local governments, responsive governance through elected councils and other accountability mechanisms and adequate capacity of local governments to meet their responsibilities.

Improved efficiency

Proponents of decentralisation argue that people are not the same everywhere within a country—they have varying needs for public services. Sub-national governments are said to be closer to the people, have good access to local information and understand local context well. If so, they can better identify the mix and level of services that their constituents need than can the higher-levels, thus improving allocative efficiency. There are, of course, a number of caveats. Certain services that local people want may best be provided at greater scale by a higher-level government, and some may affect other jurisdictions and should not be left to the control of a single local government. Prud'homme demonstrates that the case for decentralisation may be weakened in developing countries because poverty can limit preference differentiation and decentralisation typically leads to increases in public overhead expenditures, potentially undermining both productive and allocative efficiency. Andrews and Schroeder show that many public services can be decomposed into components, some of which are more suitable for decentralisation than others and Ribot focuses on special challenges of decentralised natural resource management.

Improved governance

If people see that their interactions with elected local governments lead to decisions that are more consistent with their wishes than those made by higher levels, they will feel better connected to local governments. Being able to influence public affairs in at least some modest ways that directly affect them empowers people, giving them a new sense of control and autonomy. Again, there are caveats. People should not necessarily have everything that they want in cases where key national goals must take precedence over local needs. Governance and collective action are not purely local. Governance issues are particularly the focus of the articles by Olowu, Ribot and Crook, and they also figure prominently in different ways in the country case studies by Ouedraogo (Senegal, Burkina Faso and Mali), Onyach-Olaa (Uganda) and Conyers (Zimbabwe).

Improved equity

If local governments are familiar with local circumstances, they may be in the best position to more equitably distribute public resources and target poverty within their own jurisdictions. They are, of course, constrained by their internal resources, so the redistribution from richer to poorer areas must be the responsibility of central governments. In addition, local governments will not necessarily choose to pursue redistribution in their jurisdictions unless forced to do so by broadly inclusive local political processes or interventionist central governments. Inter-jurisdictional redistribution is particularly highlighted in Prud'homme's article, while the effects of decentralisation on local-level intra-area redistribution figure prominently in Crook's article.

Improved development and poverty reduction

Local governments are expected to contribute to local economic development in a number of ways. First, they can provide services that serve as production and distribution inputs for local firms and entrepreneurs. Second, they can contribute to a legal and institutional environment that is conducive for development. Third, 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. Ultimately, local economic development is required for sustainable poverty reduction but is not a sufficient condition for it. The Helmsing's article particularly focuses on new directions for local economic development, while poverty reduction is the focus of Crook's article, as well as an important theme in Romeo's article on donor support and Onyach-Olaa's article on Uganda.

MAJOR DIMENSIONS OF DECENTRALISATION AND THEIR LINKAGES

Having outlined the main goals and benefits of decentralisation, I now briefly review how three fundamental dimensions of decentralisation—fiscal, institutional (local and intergovernmental) and political—may individually and collectively affect its success in meeting these goals.

Fiscal decentralisation

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.

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—traditional local authorities, non-governmental organisations, private sector partners, etc. 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.

The articles in this volume give considerable attention to institutional concerns. Olowu reviews a variety of local and intergovernmental institutional mechanisms being used in Africa. Andrews and Schroeder consider appropriate arrangements for two major service sectors while Ribot focuses on institutional arrangements for environmental management and pays particular attention to the high-profile issue of capacity. The articles of Onyach-Olaa and Conyers focus on intergovernmental institutional arrangements in particular countries, respectively Uganda and Zimbabwe and Ouedraogo emphasises the role of traditional local institutions. In addition,

Romeo focuses on the role of international development institutions and their relationship with client country institutions in promoting decentralisation. Although Ribot, Helmsing and Conyers touch on the role of non-governmental and community-based organisations and local participatory mechanisms in decentralisation, this is not prominently featured in most of the articles in this volume. A recent special issue of this journal focusing on Africa (Vol. 21, No. 2) covers these issues well, as do a number of chapters in Collins (2000).

Political decentralisation

Although fiscal and institutional decentralisation are critical, they cannot bring about the major goals of decentralisation without adequate political reform. Sub-national governments may be empowered with clear and appropriate functions and resources and they may also have adequate institutional mechanisms and capacity. But in the context discussed above, efficiency is predicated on the ability of sub-national governments to understand and act on the needs and preferences of local people better than the central government. Without a well-developed and broadly inclusive local political process, this is impossible and fiscal and institutional decentralisation will not meet their intended goals. It is important to emphasise that decentralisation typically implies some reduction in the accountability of sub-national governments to the central government. If this is not replaced by a degree of accountability to local people, local officials may become primarily accountable to themselves and influential local elites. Most of the articles in this volume deal to some extent with issues and experiences regarding local political actors and processes in decentralising African countries, particularly those by Olowu, Ribot and Crook.

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.

POPULAR MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT DECENTRALISATION

Having briefly outlined some of the main goals of decentralisation and simply sketched some key linkages among its various dimensions, I now turn to some unfortunately popular myths and misconceptions about decentralisation. A few issues are particularly worth highlighting.

Decentralisation as a panacea or a tragedy

As suggested above, decentralisation is commonly treated as an unambiguously desirable phenomenon that can alleviate many problems of the public sector or sometimes as an invariably destructive force that frustrates effective government. We know that decentralisation can have negative effects and decentralisation proponents must recognise this. Too much or inappropriate decentralisation, for example, can undermine macroeconomic control and worsen interregional income disparities.⁷ Still, many alleged dangers of decentralisation, such as the extent and size of local government budget deficits, fiscal irresponsibility in repaying debt (not very relevant in most of Africa) and local elite capture are not inherent flaws of decentralisation. Instead, they result from poor design, procedural weaknesses, political immaturity and capacity problems that ought to be targeted by sensible decentralisation and local government reform programmes. To argue that such problems justify maintaining centralisation is equivalent to condoning permanent authoritarian regimes in countries where people are poorly educated and unfamiliar with democracy.

The more prudent view is to be initially neutral about decentralisation. It can work under certain circumstances if properly designed and applied, but it is certainly not a panacea for public sector ills or a natural enemy of effective government. As most of the articles in this volume illustrate in one way or another, the same degree of decentralisation is not uniformly desirable across, or even necessarily within, countries or sectors and the potential benefits of decentralisation are far from certain or automatic.

⁷See, for example, Prud'homme (1995); Tanzi (1996); Ter-Minassian (1997) and Smoke (2001).

Decentralisation prerequisites

Some recent policy literature about decentralisation argues that there are certain individual or collective prerequisites to decentralisation—strong enabling frameworks, effective local political systems, substantial locally derived resources, strong local capacity, etc.⁸ There is an element of truth in these assertions, but they are also somewhat misleading. Much has been written, for example, about the critical need for an adequate enabling framework in the form of constitutional recognition of local governments and strong laws outlining their roles and responsibilities. There are, however, examples from around the world in which some local governments have performed reasonably well in the absence of this requirement, as well as cases where central governments have undermined decentralisation even when there was an apparently strong framework in place.

In terms of the broader list, if all of these requirements were prerequisites, no developing country would ever be able to decentralise. The definition of a less-developed country is precisely that there is a lack of institutional, political and fiscal development. While it is true that these mechanisms must eventually be in place to sustain effective decentralisation, it will generally take considerable time to develop them. Thus, these so-called prerequisites can be more productively characterised as basic elements of a sensible programme for building decentralisation. From this perspective, the key policy issues are identifying the elements (of the ‘prerequisites’) that are already in place, determining those that still need to be developed, and considering how this can be done.

The primacy of political will

One of the most ubiquitous claims about decentralisation is that the lack of political will is the greatest impediment to progress and the principal requirement for success. Although it is evident that political will—which may come from the central government or be forced on it by the people if pressures for democratisation are great—is important for decentralisation to succeed, it is not sufficient by itself. In recent years, dramatically changing political situations have led to constitutional and legal reforms to support decentralisation in many countries. Brazil’s post-military government constitution gave a powerful role to sub-national governments, as did South Africa’s progressive post-apartheid constitution. Ethiopia’s post-Mengistu regime constitution created a strong federal system in the expectation that after the secession of Eritrea, the country could be preserved by relaxing central control of the largely ethnic-based states and giving them substantial resources. Uganda under Museveni, a case discussed in Onyach-Olaa’s article, passed a constitution and a local government act that involved dramatic shifts of power and finances to local governments. Other heavily centralised systems undergoing major political changes, such as Indonesia and Cambodia, are moving in the same direction, but through legislation rather than constitutional reform. Strong political forces driving specific decentralisation efforts are discussed in Ouedraogo’s (Mali) and Crook’s (Ghana and Nigeria, among others) articles in this volume.

All of these cases and others apparently had considerable ‘political will’ to decentralise and most have made progress. But none has attained the system they claim to have intended when they passed new constitutions and laws. A number of countries have even formally re-centralised certain powers after taking significant actions to give local governments substantially more resources and autonomy. Why? In some cases, there was a politically driven desire to *appear* to be decentralising. The real goal in such cases, as Crook particularly highlights, is often to consolidate power through political parties and local elites, sometimes to neutralise regional ethnic challenges. But even where political will is somewhat more genuinely oriented to normative decentralisation goals, there is often a tendency to try to undertake too many reforms too quickly in complex institutional and political environments, leading to problematic results that play into the hands of those who oppose decentralisation. Reforms overwhelm the capacity of weak local governments or create opportunities for poor use of resources by freeing local officials from central control without adequately developing their accountability to local constituents. In addition, reforms may severely test the bureaucratic resolve of central agencies that are losing power and resources more rapidly than they can accept.

⁸This issue of prerequisites is discussed from various perspectives in Litvack, Ahmad and Bird (1998); Cohen and Peterson (1999); Manor (1999) and Smoke (2001).

KEY CHALLENGES FOR APPROACHING DECENTRALISATION

Highlighting the above myths and misconceptions about decentralisation leads us to the final set of issues—how to approach decentralisation in practice. Making progress requires that a number of major challenges be confronted. One is defining an intergovernmental system that makes sense in the context of a particular country. A second is to create mechanisms for coordinating activities of the multiple actors invariably involved in decentralisation and to ensure that linkages among the key dimensions of decentralisation will be built. A third is to develop an appropriate strategy for implementing decentralisation.

Defining decentralisation in context

As emphasised above and in most of the articles in this volume, decentralisation is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. The specific form it should take to be beneficial will vary across countries with different, political, institutional, fiscal and cultural characteristics. The history and traditions of a country will determine what makes sense, particularly in the short-term but also in the long-term. The political context—the nature and competitiveness of political parties, their power at local levels and the strength of civil society—is particularly important. Thus, it is critical to take stock of what is feasible from the beginning with particular consideration given to the delicate balance between developing genuine local autonomy and maintaining justifiable levels of central control. An appropriately defined system will reduce the probability of making serious mistakes that undermine decentralisation before it begins. The articles in this volume clearly indicate that the varying contexts of different countries around Africa influence the form that a decentralised system can and should most appropriately take, the forces that are likely to support or undermine it, and the pace at which it can be implemented.

Coordinating actors and building linkages

Many aspects of decentralisation outlined above and in the articles in this volume are the responsibility of different actors. Ministries of Finance or National Treasuries tend to have primary responsibility for decentralising revenues and developing intergovernmental transfers. Various sectoral ministries—health, education, agriculture, public works, environment, water, etc.—tend to be in charge of or to have significant influence over devolution of responsibilities under their general expertise. Ministries of Local Government, Home Affairs or Interior are generally responsible for developing sub-national institutions and managerial procedures. Sometimes they also have responsibility for local electoral processes or these may be under the control of Elections Commissions or other central agencies. Rarely is any single agency clearly in overall charge and even if one institution nominally has a coordinating role, it often has its own agenda or lacks enforcement authority. Thus, key dimensions of decentralisation that we know must function in concert, are often at the mercy of several agencies that may have different visions of decentralisation and/or may be competing with each other to control the decentralisation agenda and to access central government and international donor resources. Some countries have experimented with coordination mechanisms, such as decentralisation secretariats, with varying success. A similar problem exists locally, where it is necessary to coordinate activities of local government councils, their departments, central government field offices, traditional authorities and non-governmental organisations. In newly decentralising countries, the latter two may have more capacity and power than formal local governments. One of the greatest deficiencies in most decentralisation efforts is the lack of coordination of the actors involved and the consequent failure to build linkages among the components of decentralisation at the national, intergovernmental and local levels.

It is also important to emphasise that, as noted above, international agencies often play a key role as partners in supporting or even pushing decentralisation in Africa. Decentralisation remains, however, somewhat on the sidelines for most major donors compared to macroeconomic and broader public service reforms and the donors often pursue it in problematic, fragmented ways that do not adequately support and may even undermine the development of effective and sustainable local governments. Romeo provides a more detailed constructive critique of the role of international agencies in supporting decentralisation, highlighting recent approaches that have been productive. Onyach-Olaa shows how carefully considered donor interventions had a generally positive impact on certain aspects of decentralisation in Uganda. Conyers shows how donor support for decentralisation can be suddenly withdrawn when national political circumstances change, severely reducing the resources available for local government activities.

Decentralisation strategy

This brings us to the final point. *What most decentralisation efforts lack, even those with a relatively clearly defined and well-coordinated system backed by reasonably strong political will, is a pragmatic implementation strategy.* Decentralisation is not a once-and-for-all act. It is a complex process that involves fundamental changes in attitudes about the way that the public sector works. All major actors involved typically start from positions inconsistent with decentralisation. Central officials—both political and appointed—are accustomed to making major decisions and controlling local authorities extensively. Local officials may be comfortable with heavy central subsidisation and control and they may not be accustomed to feeling accountable to local residents. Local people are often unaccustomed to expecting much response from local governments or to paying anything for services. These long-held attitudes and behaviour patterns require time, incentives and patient consultation to change. Even highly developed countries that have undertaken decentralisation, such as France, have suffered through a slow and sometimes difficult process.

What are the elements of a good decentralisation implementation strategy? This is a topic of considerable complexity, but some ideas can be suggested.⁹ First, although they need not be fully articulated as prerequisites, a general vision and reform framework are needed. This means developing a process for defining decentralisation appropriately for a particular country. Experimentation with different approaches may help to define what works best. Equally important and consistent with the discussion above is the need to develop mechanisms for coordination and building linkages among the elements of decentralisation.

Second, although this can be politically problematic, reformers must try not to do too much too quickly and they should phase steps in a logical way to the extent possible. It is not necessary to turn over all constitutionally or legally mandated responsibilities to all local governments immediately. Reforms with the greatest possibility of working effectively in a relatively short time frame could be undertaken first. This requires prioritisation of simple sectors, tasks and revenues that don't immediately threaten in a significant way the tolerance of the central power base or overwhelm local capacity. In cases where local governance and capacity are particularly underdeveloped, it may be best to focus on providing modest financial and technical resources and allowing local choice before assigning formal responsibilities, so as to build the credibility of local governments with their constituents. Strategically differentiating among local governments—on the basis of capacity and performance rather than size or classification—can also be productive. Some local governments are more capable and can manage greater responsibility, while others will require more control and substantial support. In a few cases, reform steps have been negotiated with local governments, placing some responsibility on them if they fail to perform. Collectively, these aspects of an initially modest, gradual and strategic approach should raise prospects for early success, creating a base on which to build in the future.

Third, information, education and incentives for behavioural change are critical. All actors must understand how the situation is to evolve and what is expected of them at each step. Central officials need to support and monitor decentralisation in a coordinated way. Local officials must learn to work with elected representatives and other local actors. Perhaps most critically, local people themselves must learn to hold local officials responsible for meeting their needs more fully. Often-alienated local residents have to be gradually convinced that local governments can and will respond to them. This requires not only participatory consultation, but also concrete results in the form of improved performance. If some services are improved, people may be more willing to participate and pay local taxes. Participation is not needed for all local decisions, but it is certainly appropriate for some. Heavier participation early on, if genuine, may help to raise the interest of citizens in public affairs and their confidence in being able to hold their local officials accountable.

Some articles in this volume have a great deal to say about implementation strategy. Ribot focuses on implementing decentralisation and sequencing larger system reforms and Andrews and Schroeder consider the challenge

⁹Some recent writings on the lack of attention to the implementation of decentralisation and the need for a strategy include Smoke and Lewis (1996); Litvack, Ahmad and Bird (1998); Bahl (2000); Smoke (2000a); Nielson (2001); Peterson (2001); Smoke (2001); Wunsch (2001) and Bahl and Smoke (forthcoming).

of implementing sectoral decentralisation. Romeo illustrates the role of donors in helping to support and pilot strategic implementation. Ouedraogo indicates that (although not how) Burkina Faso is phasing in decentralisation to rural local governments, and Conyers considers how the lack of an implementation strategy damaged decentralisation efforts in Zimbabwe. Onyach-Olaa's article on Uganda illustrates how differentiation among local governments can provide incentives for improved performance. Even most articles that do not focus on implementation clearly indicate that decentralisation does not just 'happen' and must be approached with care. The logic of Crook's article reminds us that decentralisation is inherently so political that its 'proponents' in a particular country may hold a rather different view of what constitutes an 'implementation strategy' than the one discussed here. Nevertheless, there should generally be room for some improvement over current approaches and there may be increasing pressures to do better given the often-dismal performance of recent African decentralisation efforts. It seems likely that implementation strategy is going to be a critical feature of the decentralisation debate in Africa in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

In applying these broad principles, the linkages among the main aspects of decentralisation and the need to build various capacities must be taken explicitly into account. Gradual need not mean focusing exclusively on one dimension of decentralisation first and ignoring others, such as holding elections far in advance of devolving powers and resources. Such an approach could raise public expectations that local governments will be unable to meet. Where possible, it may be preferable to sequence decentralisation to incorporate various key dimensions together throughout the process. In early stages, where local institutions are weak, modest funding (central grants with a local contribution) to support small-scale projects/activities with carefully targeted technical assistance and governance support would be a logical starting point. Conditions could be attached to receiving central assistance, but local flexibility in funding use may serve an important political development role. Conditions might include, e.g. following an inclusive participatory planning process, beginning to keep local records in a more systematic form and making a minimum local contribution to service costs. If a local government meets the conditions, it can move on to progressively more substantial and rewarding activities requiring increasingly sophisticated reforms. More advanced local governments meeting clear conditions could be treated more independently from the start. Under such an asymmetric, targeted, incremental and integrated process, local governments would have concrete incentives to gradually and simultaneously improve fiscal, managerial and political performance, thereby progressively earning autonomy and realising some potential benefits of decentralisation. Attempts to publicise good performance and cases where sanctions were imposed for poor performance may help to stimulate improvements in other places.

Given space constraints, these comments cannot fully capture this very complex process—decentralisation is by no means as easy or straightforward as this abbreviated exposition might suggest, and it requires considerable central government capacity and effort to design and implement. Political realities will almost invariably preclude straightforward use of the systematic process outlined above, but the principles outlined should have relevance in many cases. Most of the articles in this volume warn against generalisation and highlight the importance of the context. Systems have evolved in different ways and are at different stages today, so how to decentralise more genuinely and strategically cannot be neatly mapped out in a uniform plan. Despite cross-country differences, it is fair to state that the basic requirements for effective decentralisation are universal: some broad vision for what the decentralised system should be and what it is expected to accomplish over time; an initial framework that defines—in an adequate and enforceable way—some basic components of the system and the linkages among them; and a pragmatic strategy for bringing the system into existence and to adjust and support its evolution over time. This latter component is neglected almost everywhere, even though it is in many ways the most critical element of effective decentralisation. The key challenge for African leaders and policymakers is to search for informed and creative ways to define and implement an appropriate vision of decentralisation—gradually and strategically. The articles in this volume provide some useful guidance, but more empirical and conceptual work is clearly needed.

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