

Local Government in AFRICA



THE 'WINDS OF CHANGE'

Kampala, Uganda. Photo:

Local government gaining momentum

Decentralisation and local government are fast becoming the buzz words of African governments busy reconfiguring their state structure. This has not always been the case. Centralisation of power has long been considered a solution for African ills. With the increasing shifting of powers to local government, the tight grip of central governments on power is slowly but surely loosening.

A paradigm shift

Centralised governance has characterised African states since independence in the 1960s. African leaders considered forging national unity as their main task. In addition, African political elites saw centralising power as necessary for economic development. A half-century of centralisation has not, however, achieved political stability or economic development. Most African states remain conflict- and poverty-ridden.

In a dramatic reversal from their tradition of centralisation, many African states are now moving towards policies that promote empowered subnational governments at the regional and local levels. As a recent World Bank study of 30 African countries found, slightly less than half have, to some degree, embraced a process to give power to subnational units. Most subnational units in Africa exercise autonomy over political, administrative and fiscal matters to varying degrees.

Why the shift?

Different factors motivate the decisions by central governments to transfer political, financial and administrative responsibilities to subnational governments. In countries like Uganda, the main reason was the need, in the aftermath of a discredited centralised regime, to secure democratic governance, and hence legitimacy, at the subnational level. Managing intra-state conflicts is the other main force that impelled some states in Africa to reluctantly grant subnational autonomy. Ethiopia is a prime example of granting subnational autonomy to manage ethnic conflicts as the constitutional system adopted in 1995 was motivated by the need to accommodate ethnic diversity within a common political and economic community. In other cases, such as Malawi, developmental problems are the stated driving forces behind the process of granting subnational autonomy.

Constitutional vs legislative framework

The autonomy granted to the subnational units comes within the framework of either constitutional or legislative frameworks. South Africa is, of course, a leading country in Africa in its granting of constitutional status to local government. Others have opted for statutory reforms instead. In countries like Senegal, Malawi and many others, a purely legislative status is conferred on subnational units, making the very existence of subnational units subject to the whims of the central government. Uganda's system of devolved local government is unique since it ensures local government autonomy by according it constitutional, as opposed to mere statutory,

status. Most African constitutions introduce local government very briefly, leaving the details of its powers and functions to be regulated by national legislation.

Financing local government

Only in South Africa does local government benefit from greater financial autonomy, derived from its power to impose property taxes and surcharges on fees for services. In practice, however, it is metropolitan municipalities, with relatively wealthy tax bases and established services, that benefit most from this, raising on average 92% of their total revenues. Rural municipalities, in contrast, have poor tax bases. Local governments in most other African states suffer from taxing powers that yield limited revenues. As a result, most rely on transfers from central governments. The district councils in Uganda depend on financial transfers from the central government for 78.6% of their revenue. In the extreme cases of Senegal, the politically autonomous local governments do not have any significant power to mobilise and raise revenue themselves.

The financial autonomy of subnational units is further undermined by the fiscal transfers, which often come with conditions imposed by central government. In some cases, the problem of financial autonomy of subnational governments is compounded by the fact that they receive inadequate transfers for their spending requirements, resulting in the so-called unfunded mandates. In Senegal, where subnational governments rely almost exclusively on transfers from the central government, the greatest problem is that they do not even receive financial support to match their expenditure responsibilities.

Administering local government

Different forms of personnel management are adopted in African states. In some, a separate system of personnel management for every subnational unit is adopted. Local governments in Uganda and South Africa can, for example, hire and fire their employees. Uganda has a separate civil servant system governed by the constitutionally mandated District Service Commission, which ensures that each district council has the power to employ persons in the local public service. The most common system, however, is a unified subnational government civil service parallel yet distinct from the national service. In Malawi, the staff of District Assemblies are recruited and selected by a national entity, the Local Authorities Service Commission. The same is true in Botswana

where a Local Government Service Management Unit is established to manage personnel at the level of subnational units. Administrative autonomy is weaker in states with an integrated system of civil servants where the subnational government executive is composed of national civil servants. In Senegal, the elected subnational governments must rely on the deconcentrated offices of central government for administrative needs.

Donors' support

Noticeably, all major international and African institutions promote decentralisation and practical programmes to this effect. Perhaps the earliest inspiration was the Local Agenda 21 adopted by delegates of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, which sought to enhance community involvement in local governance. In 1995, the Commonwealth Heads of Government created the Commonwealth Local Government Forum with a mandate to encourage and build local government democracy, including capacity building, in its member countries. Local government was institutionalised within the UN system in January 2000 when the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities, working with UN-HABITAT, was created to give voice to local government.

The first truly African meeting on decentralisation took place two years earlier at the Africities I Summit, held in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. But it was only in Africities III that the delegates approved the creation of the All Africa Ministerial Conference on Decentralisation and Local Development and the United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLGA),

which held its founding meeting in Tshwane, South Africa, in May 2005. UCLGA described itself as the united voice of African local government and the principal local government partner of regional and international institutions. There is thus a comprehensive layering of conferences and summits, as well as forums and associations to promote decentralisation in Africa.

Comment

The past two decades have seen a real trend towards shifting powers to subnational governments. In many African states, subnational councils are now elected by popular vote and have the power to pass by-laws with varying degrees of political autonomy. Many have elected councils with some legislative powers and executive discretion. The strong hand of central governments is, however, still a visible threat to many subnational units in Africa. However, with the multitude of all major African and international institutions that promote and support programmes that shift power to local government, the place of local government in African states is set to be further entrenched. The 'winds of change' are blowing and gaining momentum.

Yonatan Tesfaye Fessha
Local Government Project
Community Law Centre, UWC

&

Coel Kirkby
Fellow of the Local Government Project