

# IDS Bulletin

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## INTERROGATING DECENTRALISATION IN AFRICA

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# Foreword

In 1983, I wrote an article entitled ‘Decentralization: The Latest Fashion in Development Administration?’. I argued that there was ‘a growing interest in decentralisation among the governments of a number of Third World countries, especially – but not only – in Africa’ and ‘an even greater interest on the part of international development agencies, bilateral aid donors and academic circles’ (Conyers 1983: 97).

That was more than 30 years ago, and at the time, I was a relatively young and idealistic student of development – and an ardent supporter of decentralisation. I believed that decentralisation was the answer to a wide range of local development problems. I am now considerably older and, I hope, wiser. I realise now that decentralisation is not a panacea. In fact, no development policy is; if there was any one magic solution, development practitioners would have been out of business long ago.

However, although I have modified my views, many of the basic points about decentralisation that I made in that article are as valid now as they were then. I would like to highlight five of these.

Firstly, decentralisation remains a popular development policy. I acknowledged in the article that ‘this is not the first time that decentralisation has been advocated by those concerned with the theory and practice of development administration’. I also suggested that ‘the relationship between centralisation and decentralisation is, to some extent, similar to the movement of a pendulum, in the sense that a strong movement in one direction may well result in an opposite move as a reaction’ (*op. cit.*: 98). This remains true today.

Since 1983, there have been several more ‘waves’ of decentralisation, within individual countries and in international development policy. The most significant, perhaps, was the promotion of decentralisation by international agencies such as the World Bank as part of the neoliberal agenda of ‘rolling back the state’. This ‘wave’, which emerged in the 1990s, broadened the scope of the decentralisation debate to include privatisation as well as decentralisation within the state. It also brought economists into a field that had previously been dominated by political scientists and public administration specialists.

Secondly, decentralisation is still advocated as a means of addressing a wide range of development issues. It is seen as a way of increasing participation and strengthening democracy, promoting national unity,

improving the coordination of development efforts at the local level, increasing efficiency and maximising the use of scarce resources, and (as indicated previously), reducing the role of the central state. In fact, it is this multiplicity of potential benefits that make it such an attractive policy – and thus one that will probably always be in fashion somewhere or other.

Thirdly, decentralisation can take many different forms and there is still a big debate about the 'best' form. In the 1983 article, I argued that the form of decentralisation then being promoted, especially in Africa, was significantly different to that advocated earlier. The main difference was that powers were being decentralised to bodies comprising a mixture of central and local government representatives, rather than to autonomous local governments. I suggested that this model was more appropriate to 'third world' conditions and thus might be more durable. But I was to be proved wrong. A decade or so later, this 'new' model was being widely criticised as merely another means of central government control and there was a reversion to more 'traditional' local governments, composed entirely of elected local representatives.

There are also ongoing debates about the extent and type of powers that should be decentralised (how does one maximise local autonomy while maintaining national standards of service provision and without threatening national unity?); the levels to which these powers should be transferred (one level or a hierarchy, homogeneous or functional regions, large regions that are economically viable or small ones that foster participation?); and the financing of local governments (government transfers or local taxing powers, conditional or unconditional grants, allocation on the basis of need or of development potential?).

Fourthly, although decentralisation policies are widely advocated, their outcomes are often disappointing. Despite my enthusiasm for decentralisation at the time, I was forced to admit in my 1983 article that 'there does seem to be an increasing feeling – both within the countries concerned and among international agencies, academics and other interested 'outsiders' – that many of the programmes are not living up to their expectations' (*op. cit.*: 106). And this is as true now as it was then.

The reasons for this, I now realise, are complex and probably to some extent inevitable. Some of them relate to the 'design' of the reforms, and in particular the failure to match objectives and form. I suggested earlier that one of the attractions of decentralisation is that it can achieve many different objectives. However, this also creates problems because there is no 'one-size-fits-all' type of decentralisation that will achieve all of these objectives. Specific objectives require specific forms of decentralisation. Thus, the 'new' model to which I referred in 1983 was relatively effective as a means of coordinating local development efforts but far less appropriate for promoting local democracy.

However, many of the reasons for the frequent failure to meet expectations are political in nature. The main obstacles to effective

decentralisation are probably the reluctance of national officials to relinquish control, especially over money, and the ‘capture’ of power by elites at the local level. Although ‘technical’ issues have to be taken into account, decentralisation is above all a political process.

The fifth point that I made in the 1983 article is the difficulty of substantiating any of the claims and counter-claims about decentralisation because of the lack of detailed studies of its impact. This remains a problem today. It is not easy to study the impact of any public sector reform and particularly one as complex as decentralisation: reforms are often not fully implemented; it takes time before their impact can be assessed; the impact varies from one part of a country to another and over time – due in part to variations in local conditions but also to the role of individual actors; and it is difficult to separate the impact of decentralisation from that of other policy changes.

It is for this reason that I welcome this *IDS Bulletin* and am honoured to write a foreword for it. The collection of articles presented here provides detailed evidence of the impact of decentralisation reforms at the local level in a number of African countries, each of which has adopted a different approach to decentralisation. This evidence will help us to understand the multitude of factors that affect the impact of such reforms. Moreover, because the studies have adopted a variety of methodologies, the collection will also be useful for those wanting to know how best to study this fascinating phenomenon in the future.

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### **Reference**

Conyers, Diana (1983) ‘Decentralization: The Latest Fashion in Development Administration?’, *Public Administration and Development* 3: 97–109

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