

Making Decentralization Promote Empowerment of the Local People: Tanzanian Experience

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Abstract

Decentralization is a form of governance that has recently gained much emphasis in Africa. This form of governance is emphasized as it promotes popular participation in decision making. It involves the transferring of powers and resources to the lowest levels of government. However, transfer of the sought powers and resources to enable the local people take their destiny on their own ends has remain a challenge. Some studies have shown a gap between policy theory and practice in the ground. This paper highlights the contemporary state of decentralization in Tanzania by examining community's autonomy in development projects. The paper employs secondary data analysis from various documents. It was found that community voice was less reflected in the Council Comprehensive Development Plans (CCDP). It is through CCDP community voices on development projects are expected to be observed. In most cases community levels development projects were superimposed by the central government. Community's wishes were only observed in situation where they coincided to "central government's priorities". It is argued that new strategies and mechanisms are needed to make decentralization a reality in promoting popular participation. This is a manifestation that more commitment is required from the government to support it. The paper finally gives some recommendations to improve procedures and practices of decentralization in Tanzania.

Keywords: Decentralization, local government authority, local autonomy

1. Introduction

Decentralization is the practice engrossed by many countries worldwide. The practice started to unfold during the 1970s and early 1980s. Dissatisfaction with the results of national planning and administration and change in the underlying rationale of international development strategies in 1970 has triggered this course. However, during that time, it became difficult for policymakers to devise and implement vibrant policies that would ensure equitable distribution of wealth and improve living standards of people (Rondinelli et al 1983). Though severe financial crisis existed during that time could be conceived as a limitation to such difficulty, in view of Rondinelli and colleagues, it instead promoted decentralization as a partial solution to the problem.

Since then, decentralization pervaded environments of the developing countries and was espoused hand-in-hand with centralization. The current phase of decentralization owes its strength from the onset of democratization in 1990s (Olowu, 2001:8). Olowu argues that current decentralization is an extension of the past approaches to decentralization as well as a search for local institutions that are genuinely participatory and responsible to the local communities.

Although decentralization brought some positive results in some countries, in most parts it had modest or low results. To great extent, the sought powers and autonomy which decentralization process was keen to distribute downward was significantly held by the central authority.

This paper highlights the contemporary state of decentralization in Tanzania by examining community's autonomy in airing their voices through participation in development projects as well as decision making. In the outset, decentralization literature is reviewed to pave the way to explication of specific issues of this discourse. The paper employs secondary data analysis from various documents.

2. Conceptualizing Decentralization

Decentralization is conceived differently by different people. Varied conceptions put it in a danger of lacking clarity and precise meaning (Smoke, 2003:7). Complexity of decentralization is also culminated by its multiple dimensions. Smoke (2003:8) argues that its appropriate extent and form vary across countries and its implementation takes considerable time as such decentralization is a difficult phenomenon both to design and to study. According to him, the problem is complicated by the tendency of disciplinary specialists to compartmentalize decentralization. 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.

Decentralization refers to the transfer of responsibility for planning, management and resource raising and allocation from the central government and its agencies to: (a) field units of central government ministries or agencies, (b) subordinate units or levels of government, (c) semi-autonomous public authorities or corporations, (d) area wide, regional or functional authorities, or (e) nongovernmental private or voluntary organizations (Rondinelli, 1981a cited in Rondinelli et al, 1983:13)

Mniwasa & Shauri (2001) asserts that, decentralization is commonly viewed as the transfer of legal and political authority from the central government and its agencies to the field organizations and institutions. Though perceptions of decentralization vary, it is normally viewed as the transfer of legal and political authority from the central government and its agencies to the field organizations and institutions. For that reason, this transfer should include the authority to plan, make decisions and manage public affairs by agencies other than the central government (Ng'ethe, 1998).

3. Forms of Decentralization

Decentralization is a comprehensive term that incorporates the diverse forms. Decentralization may take many forms for example; delegation, deconcentration, devolution, privatization (Lister & Betley, 1999; UNDP, 2004) and deregulation (Rondinelli, 1981). Rondinelli et al (1983) regards delegation as the transfers of managerial responsibility for specifically defined functions to organizations outside the regular bureaucratic structure but continuing controlling them indirectly through the central government. Deconcentration on the other hand is a redistribution of responsibilities to sub-national units of central government (e.g. regional ministerial offices). It represents the weakest form of decentralization. Some argue that this is not even part of decentralization because the shift in responsibility simply takes place within the central government hierarchy (Popic & Patel, 2011:9). Devolution is viewed as the process where the central government deliberately creates or strengthens the structures of the sub-national units of government, thus, lessening the direct control of the central government. Normally, local units of government make autonomous and independent decisions that are separate from the central government (Mniwasa & Shauri, 2001).

Schläppi & Kälin (2001) are also talking about market decentralization as a form of decentralization. According to them, it refers to transfer of functions from public to private sector in two forms: (a) privatization which entails transfer of full or partial responsibility for the production of some specific goods and services from government to private undertakings and (b) deregulation which entails reduction of legal barriers which obstruct the private production of goods and services. They have termed this as economic decentralization. Another form of decentralization has been termed as partial or hybrid decentralization which entails decentralization of responsibilities and personnel whilst financing remains centralized (Silverman, 1992).

4. Why Countries Decentralize?

The push factor for country to undertake decentralization varies (Devas & Delay, 2006). According to them justification of decentralization includes demand for local level democratic control and autonomy, the perceived economic, administrative and political advantages of decentralization, post conflict reconstruction, interests of local and national political elites, and demand from the World Bank and other donor agencies (p. 678-79). Devas & Delay's arguments are in line with that of the world Bank Report.

According to the World Bank Report (1989:81), decentralization in Sub-Saharan Africa has objective of fostering democratic, popular and participating government. Others include maintenance of law and order at the local level, and promoting rapid social and economic development.

Decentralization is also viewed as a development catalyst. In line with this, Phirinyane (2009:18) argues that, for developing countries decentralization is not only a reform strategy but it is increasingly seen as an integral part or a *sine qua non* of the development process. Phirinyane is in line with Rondinelli (1978 in Rondinelli et al, 1983) who pointed out that, decentralization is often justified as a way of managing national economic development more effectively or efficiently.

Other justifications which have been given for engaging in decentralization include: The need to reduce overload and congestion in the channels of administration and communication, need to quick response to local citizens' demands and mobilization of support and strengthening legitimacy (Rondinelli et al, 1983). Rondinelli et al (1983) argues that, decentralization has been seen as a device which will reduce overload and congestion in the channels of administration and communication. According to them, delays and administrators' unresponsiveness to satisfy their clients' needs may be taken care by decentralized programs.

Rondinelli et al (1983) further argues that decentralization in some countries is seen as a means of marshalling support for national development policies by making them better known at the local level. Local governments or administrative units, it is assumed, can be effective channels of communication between the national government and local communities. Greater participation in development planning and management supposedly promotes national unity by giving groups in different regions in a country a greater ability to participate in planning and decision making, and thus increases their stake in maintaining political stability.

5. A Glance On Decentralization Experience in the Orb: Victory or Disappointment?

Although many countries in the orb have been adopting decentralization for diversified reasons, the realization of these objectives have not been simple. Rondinelli et al (1983:32) argues that, despite its vast scope, decentralization has seldom, if ever, lived up to expectations. Regardless of its modest success rate, however, government planners, donor institutions, and observers of the development process continue to promote it.

Experience shows that success and failure of decentralization have been observed in different angles. In some countries, the general view of decentralization shows signs of success but some specific issues success is difficult to be realized. For instance, there are some evidence which shows that even the most successful forms of decentralization have been unable to overcome economic and political disparities, both within and among regions of East-Asia and Pacific (Crook & Sverrisson, 2001). So far most East-Asia and Pacific governments primarily pursued decentralization for political and fiscal reasons (Popic & Patel, 2011), economic and political disparities has not been exterminated.

Despite of the modest or poor outcome, countries have continued pursuing decentralization. Its continued pursuance according to Rondinelli et al (1983: 32) is aggregated to the fact that some political objectives are being achieved for instance, increased political stability. This has been considered as a sufficient condition to pursue decentralization even though principles of efficient management are being sub-optimized (economic and administrative efficiency is not realized). Rondinelli and colleagues further argues that countries pursue decentralization despite of the modest yields because highly centralized procedures are manifestly ineffective in many countries, especially in implementing local development programs. In most cases, failures have been attributed to difficulties associated with starting new operations rather than the new adopted structure (p.33).

Complexities associated with evaluating the impact of decentralization, which arises from the fact that it is primarily a political process that works through a number of nonpolitical channels (Rondinelli et al,1983) has also perpetuated it. Each one of these channels, transfers a different amount or type of responsibility and power from the central government to other organizations. The implication is that, in every decentralization programs one must deal not only with administrative and management issues, but also with some complicating factors, like some actors and agencies relinquishing powers and reduction of socio-political alienation of some groups or regions.

Experience shows that though many countries have attempted to decentralize, their systems currently remains significantly centralized. Despite the apparent concern for decentralization in South and Southeast Asia, the results have often led to greater dependence of local administrative units on the center (Rondinelli et al, 1983:36).

Harris (1983) argues that the proliferation of public corporations, parastatal enterprises, special function authorities, and quasi-public institutes in Latin America has actually expanded the power and control of the national government at the expense of local governments.

Instances abound where innovative decentralization programs were centrally created but not linked to established local organizations and sources of political and financial support. As noted, authority is commonly delegated to local organizations, but they are not given the resources to perform their new functions. Local governments in most Asian countries, for example, still function as bureaucratic instruments of the center rather than as generators of alternative values, preferences, and aspirations. Local organizations thus cannot easily nurture political or administrative development; they act merely to extend centrally established priorities and controls. Local leaders are seen by central government officials merely as communicators and solicitors of support for national policies, rather than as channels through which the conditions and needs of local communities are articulated and made known to central planners and policymakers, or as mobilizers of local resources for promoting development from the bottom up (Friedman, 1983).

Resource scarcity problems pervade all areas of local government and are widespread in Africa. As Wunsch (2001) pointed out, decentralization is more likely to fail where the decentralized institutions experience acute lack of funding and appropriate skills to the extent they cannot carry out their functions efficiently.

6. Current State of Decentralization in Tanzania: Does it Promote Popular Participation

The policy paper on Local Government Reform (1998) emphasises on local autonomy and community participation. In this policy local autonomy is regarded as necessary for development: if citizens feel empowered they will take their destiny into their own hands, which will in the end contribute to the development of the community (Chaligha, 2008). Community participation has a similar effect. Participation promotes accountability of the Local Government Authorities (LGAs) and ensures that the LGAs respond to the needs of the local population.

In an effort to make community participation a reality, the government through the President's Office-Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) developed an 'Opportunity and Obstacles to Development' (O&OD) methodology to facilitate the bottom-up approach in planning (PO-RALG 2005). The methodology was developed in 2001 and its main concern was to reduce dependency and create a sense of ownership in the community plan. The methodology was expected to augment local involvement at the decisions that are relevant for their specific community, such as health- and education services.

'The O&OD Methodology is thus designed to promote community initiatives as well as to accelerate achievement of national goals in the Tanzanian Development Vision 2025. In the O&OD planning process, the sub-goals in the Vision 2025 become direct basis of setting specific objectives, under which planning items are identified such as opportunities, obstacles, interventions, costs and so on. Besides, the O&OD is intended to promote effective and efficient allocation of Local Government Capital Development Grants (LGCDG) as clearly elaborated in the Planning Guidelines for villages and *Mtaa*¹ that the O&OD is an essential methodology to identify community preferences for which the LGCDG is disbursed.' (The United Republic of Tanzania 2006; PO-RALG 2004).

The O&OD methodology involves three levels of government: the grassroots level that formulates wishes and preferences, the village and ward level where local wishes are translated into a village and ward plan and finally the council level that decides upon the grants and funds through the Council Comprehensive Development Plan (CCDP). Some studies and literature on decentralization in Tanzania, provides accounts that suggest the opposite. Development projects implemented at the local level are mainly priorities of the central government. In other words, the O&OD is yet or failing to bring about the intended real popular participation and the sought empowerment of the local people.

Tordoff, (1994) observed that although Tanzania has attempted decentralization; in practice its systems have remained largely centralized. The current local government structure does not provide adequate autonomy to local governments. They are unable to make important decisions independently because many legal provisions make the local government dependent on the Central Government.

¹ A Swahili word connoting neighbourhood. It is the lowest level in the urban local government administration hierarchy in Tanzania

According to Ngware & Haule (1993:5), for local governments to be thriving in sustainable grassroots social development, they must have the unregulated power to serve the local people rather than act as agents for the central state. Ngware & Haule also argue that limited autonomy and authority of local governments is evidenced by hiring and disciplining mechanisms for local government personnel. Local authorities lack the power to discipline or dismiss disobedient personnel. All these powers are vested in the Local Government Service Commission, which is the appointing and disciplinary authority. This organ, as Ngware & Haule argue, is not connected to the local authorities, because the local authorities "employees" are subject to the control of the district/municipal/city directors who are appointed by the President. These directors wield a lot of influence because of their decision making powers and control of financial matters.

Kessy (1999:76) argues that, the decision making process in local authorities is mainly done by local bureaucrats (Council officers in collaboration with District and Regional Commissioners) and not the elected members (councilors) as one would expect. Kessy (1999) found that, most of the decision making process, from agenda setting to the implementation stage, is mainly controlled by local bureaucrats. At the urban level, there is no counterpart of the village assembly. Though the law directs the *mtaa* to meet in every two months and submit minutes of the meeting to the Ward Development Committee (WDC), the *mtaa*'s role appears to be to implement decisions already made by the higher authorities. Consequently, *mitaa*² citizens do not seem to have decision-making powers over matters affecting their lives (Yilmaz & Venugopal, 2010:221).

In reality, in many LGAs budgets are compiled by the departmental heads and harmonized by the treasurer (World Bank, 2001). Local development needs are not always reflected in the LGA plans (Chaligha et al., 2007). For instance, in a study of village and *mtaa* residents, the authors observed that the local development budgets were dominated by expenditure on education despite of the fact that residents usually put a towering priority on the improvement of water supply (Chaligha et al., 2007). This inconsistency was probably because the ruling party directives have determined construction of schools as an exclusive priority (Yilmaz & Venugopal, 2010).

Yilmaz & Venugopal (2010) further argues that, even if citizen priorities were to be reflected in the plans and budgets, the ministry seems to have ultimate say on them. Central government always delays in issuing guidelines with final ceilings. Normally, the final indicative figures are released in May, a month before the budget session, while the planning and budgeting process in the councils is completed by March. In this case, plan and budgets that are approved by the councils are further modified by Prime Minister's Office-Regional Administration and Local government (PMO-RALG) and Ministry of Finance, thus circumventing the rules and laws governing the functions of the councils.

The study conducted by Mollel (2010) in three councils i.e. Morogoro municipal council, Morogoro district council and Kilosa district council in which he wanted to know whether local people's wishes are reflected in the council plans revealed lack of citizens voice in the councils' development plans. Of all six facilities studied within the councils, only one had its wishes reflected in the council plan.

Mollel (2010) concede with Kessy (1999) where he reveals that the council staff developed plan that reflects the preset wishes instead of responding to local preferences. To them the guidelines and central priorities are compulsory requests that must be taken onboard. Strong tie exist between central ministries and local government staff which perpetuate central government dominance in the local level.

7. How decentralization in Tanzania can be made to promote popular participation and local empowerment?

Implementing decentralization as provided by Policy Paper on Local Government (1998) is one of the key strategies to success. Studies and literature give some indications of a mismatch between policy theories and practice in the ground. Adherence to decentralization policy requires serious commitment of top level politician and government officials. These include removing the longstanding government dominance promoted by single-national party ideology. The legacy of party supremacy is still haunting politics of the country.

In the same vein-more autonomy should be devolved as evidence shows that more autonomy in the local authority may foster development not only at local levels but also nation-wide. Example, the study conducted by Lund reveal that decentralizing natural resource taxation to villages increased revenue collection and transparency (Lund, 2007 in Yilmaz & Venugopal, 2010:229).

² Plural of *mtaa*

8. Conclusion

Decentralization process in Tanzania is yet to promote popular participation and sought empowerment. The decentralization processes and procedures intended to facilitate empowerment are still overwhelmed by central dominance (Ringo et al, 2013). The true devolution has always been illusory as substantial power is still with the central government. Political disciplines and commitment of the top governments officials and politicians seems substantially weaker than anticipated by the theories of decentralization. Although the issue of central government control is seen necessary as part of the balance required between the local autonomy and upward accountability, yet it is argued the purported control is unwarranted. Yilmaz & Venugopal (2010:229) elucidate this by giving an example where PMO-RALG and some centrally appointed staff like District Commissioner and District Executive Director interferes in local government affairs. In their words, this is excessive interference of local government functioning.

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