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**ARTICLE**

**Decentralisation and good governance in Africa: A critical review**

Sabiti Makara

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*Review*

## **Decentralisation and good governance in Africa: A critical review**

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**This review essay outlines and discusses the conceptual and empirical dimensions of decentralisation in Africa. It examines the link between decentralisation, development and good governance. The essay contends that even if decentralisation has been embraced by several countries as an institutional reform capable of transforming intergovernmental relations, fiscal arrangements in local governments, increasing people's popular participation and enhancing accountability, there is evidence that suggests that the 'good governance' dividends of decentralisation remain limited. The key conclusion is that though the new decentralisation efforts aimed at reshaping central-local power relations of the state, introduction of markets into public service provision, and allowing civil society to play a greater role in public governance than was the case in the past, significant issues of political capture and manipulation continue to undermine its gains. This also appears to have reduced the capacity of decentralisation to engineer the much touted good governance tenets of transparency, accountability, efficiency and value-for-money to transform the ways the African states operate.**

**Key words:** Good governance, decentralisation, popular participation, accountability and state-society relations.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study draws from myriad sources of literature. The review has been undertaken following a thematic synthesis of issues that revolve around decentralisation and good governance. The goal is to drive home an argument that the resurgence of decentralisation in several countries, especially in Africa has become indispensable as African leaders reform their states for development and good governance. This is pertinent from a hindsight of the fact that during the first decades of post-independence period, most African states "failed" to steer development and to govern well (Ake, 2000). Part of

state failure was attributed to over-centralisation, and its tendency to alienate the people it governed (Hyden, 1983). To this extent, the key issue addressed by this review is to explore whether or not, the current decentralization undertakings have significantly transformed the African state.

#### **Rationale for resurgence of decentralisation**

Studies of decentralisation tend to over-emphasise

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transfer of power from the centre to local governments. This alone may not produce the desired good governance results. This essay focuses on the various ways in which political, fiscal and administrative decentralisation shapes a new landscape for good governance in Africa. Governance is not just about decentralisation, it is a broad milieu of how the state and society relate to ensure respect for human rights, participation and voice, effective and efficient administration; capable of delivering services.

Decentralisation is known to cement these society-state relations. The purpose of doing this essay primarily as a review of existing literature is to highlight the conceptual and empirical underpinnings of decentralisation, and its capacity to engineer good governance in Africa. We begin from the broad conceptual issues, discuss the connection between decentralisation and good governance; and assess whether decentralisation leads to good governance.

From a broad perspective, decentralisation has since the 1990s become a key policy component of governance in several countries (The World Bank, 2000). The World Bank points out that by the end of 2000s, some 95% of democracies had elected sub-national governments, and that countries everywhere large, small; rich and poor have devolved political, fiscal and administrative powers to sub-national tiers of government.

In developing countries, decentralisation has been seriously reconsidered as an appropriate form of governance. Thus, though centralisation could have some advantages in young nations, over-centralisation kills initiatives and innovations. Realising this weak governance link, most developing countries undertaking reforms of their economies have at the same time restructured their governments to give priority to strengthening of their local governments and local institutions (Wunsch and Olowu, 1990). The World Bank submits:

Decentralisation itself is neither good nor bad. It is a means to an end, often imposed by political reality. The issue is whether it is successful or not. Successful decentralisation improves the efficiency and responsiveness of the public sector while accommodating potentially explosive political forces. Unsuccessful decentralisation threatens economic and political stability and disrupts the delivery of public services (The World Bank, 2000).

It is further argued that even if decentralisation is not a panacea for the multitude of Third World problems, it is worth attempting. For example, Mawhood (1993) asserts:

Decentralisation suggests the hope of cracking open the blockage of a central bureaucracy, curing managerial constipation, giving more direct access for the people to government and the government to the people, stimulating the whole nation to participate in national

development plans.

From the aforementioned perspectives, the issue of decentralisation seems to suggest an ideological standpoint that is desirable for national development, and as Kauzya (2007) observes, the issue is not only restructuring the state but most important, is people's 'voice'. Moreover, it is apparently clear that the utility and primacy of decentralisation lies in its policy content, design and outcomes (Devas, 2005). These should be intended to increase people's voice and choice in governance and service delivery.

In Africa, the initial post-independence attempts at decentralisation failed due to the desire of political leaders to control power. This centralisation failed in most African countries. However, in recent years, a resurgence of decentralisation is taking place, believed to be one of the most ambitious institutional policy reforms (Francis and James, 2003).

Nonetheless, this needs to be understood in a comparative manner (Olowu, 2001; Kauzya, 2007). It seems clear that decentralisation policy objectives and implementation have had varied processes and outcomes in different African countries. The processes of decentralisation tend to be complex at both national and local levels. As the decentralisation process gets rolled out, there is a need to establish with certainty what can be done to mitigate the challenges it encounters. Thus, in proceeding to capture the complex issues of decentralisation, we need to understand the contexts, perspectives and outcomes of its processes; and how these have impacted on governance of African states.

### **Decentralisation in perspective**

There has been growing consensus amongst scholars, policy makers and development practitioners since 1970s that development, good policymaking and practice are not a preserve of the central bureaucratic agencies alone. The dominant thinking over the past three decades has revolved around partnerships between government agencies, organisations and actors in society as well as individual citizens. It has meant that previously marginalised groups and organisations expect to be actively engaged in the realm of public governance. To this end, decentralisation can be understood from four perspectives:

- (1) Democratic and participatory decision making
- (2) Freedom of civil society to play an active role in society
- (3) Engendering effective accountability; and
- (4) Reforming the state for development in Africa.

From an angle of participation, decentralisation opens the state system to competitive societal forces by allowing political pluralism to replace single party systems, markets to replace state controlled prices and civil society to provide services where the state is weak (Olowu 1993).

Mawhood (1993) posits that decentralisation creates a situation where autonomous bodies will have a constructive dialogue with the state at various levels. Democratisation should not stop at the centre. For decentralisation to be meaningful, it is important for the state and other elements in society to act in a democratic manner (Crook and Manor, 1995).

This arises because there are some decentralising states which simply transfer powers and responsibilities from the hierarchies of the centre to those of the sub-national authorities. Such a transfer of responsibilities alone will not constitute a democratic method of managing society. The mere transfer of responsibilities may not transform state-society relations which should be the core of a decentralisation programme.

To many people, decentralisation is associated with people's rights to freely organise, form associations and where need be, counter some excesses of the state. Rondinelli, (1984) and Mawhood (1993) perceive decentralisation as a system of autonomous local governments. To Wunsch and Olowu (2000), decentralisation means "self-governance" of the local communities - their values, aspirations and innovations. To Tostensen et al. (2001) decentralisation means freedom of civil society and the whole realm of associational life to organise their membership to engage in actions that are beneficial to them or to question the state.

Public accountability is at the heart of decentralisation. To Sandbrook (1993), when decentralisation becomes a *modus operandi*, both formal and informal groups get actively engaged with the state demanding that public officials be accountable to the citizens. In this way, Sandbrook (1993) notes that there is a linkage between decentralisation and the notion of empowerment, whereby previously deprived groups such as women, peasants and minorities develop a sense of agency and usefulness by making decisions that enable them to expand their autonomy and capabilities. Although civil society organisations generally lack capacity, confidence and autonomy to confront powerful political forces, according to Sandbrook (1993, *ibid*), it is possible for them to overcome these weaknesses in an era of decentralisation.

First of all, they can mobilise their membership to confront government. Secondly, civil society can overcome passivity within its membership. This in turn, will help them to remain focused, to act independently and confront tasks they were previously unable to undertake. In this way, the engagement between the state and civil society could gradually produce conditions favourable for a developmental and democratic society. This is supposed to be the ultimate goal of decentralisation.

### **From centralisation to decentralisation**

The world is experiencing a tremendous upsurge towards local democratic governance (The World Bank, 2000). This trend is underpinned by several factors: first, in most

Third World countries, authoritarian regimes that dominated the first three decades of the post-colonial Africa are crumbling under pressure from both internal as well as external forces. Secondly, in most of the African countries, socio-economic crises have undermined the legitimacy of undemocratic regimes. Thirdly, most of the African authoritarian regimes seem to have realised that by continuing to hold power at the centre, this has generated a source of weakness rather than strength (Olowu, 1993).

The authoritarian practices of the post-colonial state in Africa were inherited from its predecessor - the colonial state. While the colonial state sowed seeds of authoritarianism, the post-colonial state failed its mission of significantly reforming the state for the benefit of its peoples. Moreover, while a semblance of local autonomy that had been created by the colonial state, this was either abolished or undermined by its successor in the guise of national unity, centralised planning and development (Kasfir 1993). Centralisation of power had the effect of breeding dictatorship, consolidating one-partyism, political cronyism and intolerance of the views of opposition groups.

The post-colonial African leaders have been obsessed with maintaining their grip to power by creating cliques of cronies and ensuring unquestionable loyalty. This state of affairs created a situation where the state was no longer a *res publica* for all, but for some (Ake 2000). These authoritarian tendencies undermined the legitimacy of the state, which according to Kasfir (1993, *ibid*) had now to rely on force rather than persuasion. Centralisation manifested not only in political behaviour and practices of the leaders, it also affected the administrative systems.

The negative effects of centralisation of power were compounded by the severe fiscal crises that afflicted most African countries since the 1970s and 1980s. According to Mutahaba (1993), the poor state of public finances in most African countries has been attributed to two factors: initially, fiscal deficits were a result of escalating expenditures by African post-colonial governments' commitments to development as a response to the pressures for enhanced public services, where the government was seen as a provider for most of the services in society. Another factor has been the depressed scale of economic activity (Mutahaba, *ibid*) resulting in the economic crisis that plagued most African states since the 1970s. We could add that a serious lack of accountability and transparency of the African political and bureaucratic elite exacerbated the situation.

The economic crisis in Africa has had three effects on the conduct and management of public affairs. As result of fiscal stress, the political leaders had fewer resources at their disposal to dispense patronage. This had the effect of weakening their hold onto power at the centre. At the same time, due to the deepening weaknesses in the resource base at the centre, civil society organisations began to emerge, either to provide for their membership



(in areas where the state previously had a monopolistic role) or to press the governments for services that should be provided by the state (Mutahaba, 1993).

Additionally, the poor economic performance in most African countries took place at the same time as there was rapid increase in their populations which necessitated increased investment in service delivery. Yet, this happened when state capacity was too weak to give an adequate response. The weak capacity of the state and the economic decline forced most the Sub-Saharan African countries to seek for assistance from international financiers especially the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These financial institutions imposed conditionalities which the aid recipient countries had to comply with. Such conditions included: cutting down public expenditure, reduction in public employment, scaling down activities of government and privatisation (Mutahaba, 1993). In effect, these measures engendered a critical change in the conduct of public administration in donor-supported countries. One of these changes has been the restructuring of the state from centralisation to decentralisation.

The changes brought about by decentralisation have largely entailed allowing sub-national units of government to acquire some powers and responsibilities outside the direct control of the centrally-based officials. Despite other numerous weaknesses of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank driven neo-liberal reforms, the decentralisation policies are perceived as a critical measure in reducing the "commandist" role of the central bureaucracy, with all its inefficiency, and failure to deliver services at the grassroots. Decentralisation has created a role for local communities to participate in policy agenda of the government. There is a renewed focus on citizens' participation in affairs that affect their well-being.

### **Primacy of local government reforms**

The upsurge towards revitalising local governments in most post-colonial states especially in Africa since the 1990s has been necessitated by a number of factors: first, the fresh search for legitimacy of the state. Second, the attempt by African governments to meet the increasing internal and external pressures for democratic governance and thirdly, the attempt to revitalise the mechanisms of service delivery and to meet the challenges of new expectations in public management and state-society relations. The legitimacy of the state in Africa has been contested. Its claim for control over societal forces has remained weak. In general, the post-colonial state in Africa has tended not to fare any better than its colonial predecessor.

Hyden (1983) argues that the post-colonial state in Africa is similar in many respects to the colonial state because both of them chose to govern without a democratic engagement with the majority of the people.

From this perspective, it is probably not very useful to disconnect the authoritarian practices of the post-colonial state from those of the colonial state. While it is argued that the first few years of independence were relatively prosperous for most African states (Manor, 1999), other evidence suggests that it was at the same time that the African leaders overextended the "boundaries" of the state into the space previously occupied by other organisations in society (Wunch and Olowu, 1993).

These tendencies reinforced authoritarian state predispositions. In several post-colonial African countries, the responses to pre-independence local government arrangements varied but the temptation towards centralisation and weakening local governments was prevalent (Halifani, 1997). Weakening local governments and other autonomous organisations in society had the effect of undermining the legitimacy of the state itself (Lalaye and Olowu, 1989). Thus, while the post-colonial regimes attempted to govern in isolation of the prevailing social forces in society their success was limited because this undermined their very source of legitimacy.

The renewed efforts by the state in Africa to reinstate institutions of local governments and to allow civil society organisations some space may be seen as an attempt by the states to search for new avenues of legitimation as well as readiness to face the challenges imposed by realities of internal and external pressures to act more democratically and responsively to the needs of society.

There is a sweeping wave towards decentralisation and reforms of local government with the aim of allowing sub-national units of government to enjoy some degree of autonomy, to act on priorities of their local areas and to elect local representatives. Decentralisation is seen to promote social learning, decongest the centre, and empower local communities; to introduce administrative efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness.

It is argued that since decentralisation brings authority closer to the people, it promotes appropriate action on their needs and aspirations (Crook and Manor, 1998). In their work, Crook and Manor (ibid) on South Asia and West Africa found that several groups advocated for decentralisation for several reasons: economists pursued decentralisation as a means of stopping rent-seeking behaviours of the leaders, pluralists hoped it could give interest groups space to organise, autocratic leaders welcomed decentralisation because it could act as a substitute for democracy, democratic leaders saw it as a way of making governments more responsive to local needs while community mobilisers perceived it as a means to achieve things through cooperation with the local communities.

The decentralisation reforms in most African and many other countries have been precipitated by a number of other factors (Smoke, 2003). The most important factors include: the realization by central governments that they are unable to effectively deliver services, the high and increasing incidence of poverty in both rural and urban

areas; the failure of centralised organisations to work efficiently or cost-effectively and the failure of their managers to be adequately responsive to the needs of the people, and in some cases the collapse of managerial systems themselves. These factors have, over the years, culminated in the failure of the centralised organisations to mobilise resources, to motivate their staff and to be innovative. Thus, decentralisation is a response to a myriad of problems associated with centralised organisational failures (Wunch and Olowu, 1993).

### **Inter-governmental relations and service delivery**

The decentralisation reforms have entailed new centre-local relations. There is an increased tendency to transfer powers to local governments with some legal mandates. Of the dominant typologies of decentralisation, that is: deconcentration (limited transfer of power) and devolution (extensive transfer of legal, political and fiscal authority), it is the latter that is now common. The new mandates allow local governments to take some political decisions, collect specific revenues and to spend it on local priorities, to exercise discretionary powers over locally employed staff and to plan for the development of their areas. The central governments have undertaken to offer a range of grants to local governments, to maintain security, to engage in macro-economic planning and to monitor and tender advice to local governments.

Most of the decentralisation reforms require local governments to avoid "centralisation" at the immediate local government, district or municipality level. Meaningful decentralisation involves organised dispersal of power in society in political, social as well as economic sense (Olum, 2014; Dickovick and Wunch, 2014; Caldeira, 2015; Ribot, 2010). This means sharing power and responsibility between several sub-national authority units which have jurisdiction over their areas in terms of providing services to their constituents. It also means allowing various actors in society to participate meaningfully in governance, including service provision. Implementation of decentralisation requires exploration of alternative models of service delivery (Rondinelli, 1989). The alternative modes of financing local services suggested by Rondinelli (1989) include:

- (1) Public goods: These are consumed jointly and simultaneously by many people from which it is difficult to exclude anyone. These goods may be financed from taxes, for example, public roads
- (2) Open access *goods* are also jointly consumed by people. Such goods may include rivers and most natural resources
- (3) Toll goods, these may be provided on the basis of people's ability to pay, thus, exclusion is feasible. Such goods may include electricity, schools, hospitals and others.
- (4) Private goods- these are consumed by individuals on

the basis of ability to pay.

The people who are unable to pay are excluded. The aforementioned classification of goods can help local governments to determine when to apply market mechanisms of provision, co-production or quasi-market principles. The underlying assumption in this classification is the search for equity and efficiency. The issue is that since local governments are public organizations, the public expects them to provide services without marginalisation of the vast numbers of citizens.

At the same time, local governments must be cost-effective in the process of rendering services, thus those goods which service a larger private end of individuals should be paid for by those who can afford while those that serve the public at large should be paid for by the state. In reality however, these models of public service provision depend on concrete circumstances of a particular country.

Rondinelli, (1989) also concede that any tendency to over-rely on the market for provision of public goods may raise the profit motive above only equity considerations. It may also lead to over-use or over-consumption of certain resources (Rondinelli, 1989). This model of public service provision could have successfully worked in more developed countries but is likely to be inappropriate for poor countries (Nangoli et al., 2015). Freinkman and Plekhanov (2009) note that the success of such arrangements depends on the effectiveness of institutions. It may also be observed, for example, that in developing countries this model of public service provision has encountered challenges.

For example, Cabral (2011) notes that poverty renders service delivery in local governments by the private sector unaffordable to the poor. In addition, the absence of a strong indigenous private sector leaves foreign companies as the most significant players. This marginalises the local business elites. A weak local middle class increases feelings of marginalisation, even xenophobia, as has been the case in South Africa. Moreover, in some cases, lack of strong civic societies may undermine chances of accountability (Escobar-Lemon and Ross, 2013).

It may further be argued that although the private provision model of public services has become prevalent, there is a need for local governments to take an active role by putting in place regulatory frameworks, monitoring and structuring the arrangements in which the private and public sectors play a role. Regulatory agencies may require new types of skills to fully comprehend the application of private provision model in local governments.

Arrangements for service provision similar to the ones described by Rondinelli, (1989) have been experimented in several African countries since the 1990s. The following mechanisms of service provision have been adopted by local governments in several countries, and include: contracting out, outright sale of non-core assets, tendering

markets, charges for bus and taxi terminals, engaging private companies to collect revenues such as property tax and collection of debts. It is also important to note that local governments' engagement with each particular group produces different forms of interactions and results. These may be in form of co-funding, start-off capital (seed money) or whole funding, and leaving the community to takeover sustainability of the service. These alternative options and their outcomes impact differently on, and are perceived differently by communities. For example in Tanzania, it has been noted that there is a disconnection between the mode of local service delivery, and the so-called people's power in decision making (Massoi and Norman, 2009).

### Political commitment to decentralisation

The political *raison d'être* for local government reforms is that the success of decentralisation depends on the political commitments of central and local governments. However, this depends on the political and other motives of the elites in both central and local governments. This resonates with Manor's argument that the real reason why national politicians accept decentralisation is because they wish to "use decentralisation to connect their regime with social groups, and to sustain or revive their party organisations (Manor, 1999)".

For example, Makara (2000) argues that President Museveni's government in Uganda was motivated to decentralise power in early 1990s because decentralisation was seen as an alternative to full political democratisation. In such situations, the underlying political objectives of the decentralisation policy are downplayed. There is a tendency to emphasise the technocratic objectives of. The critics of such an approach argue (Slater, 1989) that this has led decentralisation to be linked to ambiguity, with intent to "conceal more than it reveals". Eaton has summarised the unrevealed motives of some politicians in adopting decentralisation thus:

...Even where national politicians genuinely supported decentralisation for the broad benefits it promises to deliver, they continue to meddle in the activities that have been officially devolved (Eaton, 2001).

Indeed, there is usually a tendency by central governments to pull back some powers already decentralised. In a study of decentralisation in Uganda, Francis and James (2003) argue (that little attention has been paid to the ways in which the newly established system of decentralisation has functioned at the local level. According to Francis and James (2003) the "no-party" system in Uganda (1986 to 2005) gained political 'capital' and self-perpetuation through decentralisation. In other words, decentralisation helped the survival of the "Movement" regime in Uganda by

forestalling the pressure from local elites and the international donor community for more democratic reforms. Francis and James summarise their observation thus:

In these circumstances, decentralisation has provided a democratic gloss in the eyes of both international donors and local actors. Over time however the movement style of politics began to take on some characteristics of traditional one-party rule (Francis and James, 2003).

These authors further observe that in the case of Uganda, decentralisation was undertaken by the government for two principal reasons: one was the "technocratic" and the other was "patronage". The "technocratic mode" prioritised national targets especially poverty reduction (Nsibambi, 1998). The "patronage mode" drew on the language of participatory planning, which in the context of lack of resources and the "capture by the local elites", was reduced to ritualised performance with little meaningful citizens' involvement (Francis and James, 2003).

In the "technocratic" mode of decentralisation, there is a tendency for the bureaucrats to stick to their hierarchical methods of work, for instance, the lengthy bureaucratic procedures, which are non-participatory and non-consultative. To assume that the bureaucratic technocrats will become more democratic in decision-making may simply overstretch the expectations, even under decentralisation. In developed countries like Britain, it is observed that while the primacy of local authorities is to encourage the participation of citizens in decision making, this may just be a classical wish.

According to Stuart (1996), local authorities in Britain have not prepared themselves for such a role. Departments of local governments perform limited functions, for example, while local authorities may try to speak on behalf of their communities, they consider this role as peripheral to their work. In less developed countries, technocratic competence itself is a problem. Pointing out this problem in Uganda, Brett observes:

"Effective policy implementation is equivalent to the difficulty of the tasks they perform. Where these are complex and require continuous supervision, neither management nor day to day maintenance can be left to amateurs. Staff must be employed with appropriate skills" (Brett, 1993).

Similar concerns about the calibre of Uganda bureaucrats are expressed by Goetz and Jenkins (1998) who observe that the local governments in Uganda hardly have the technical capacity in areas of planning, implementation and monitoring of government policies. These authors find no link between decentralisation and poverty eradication, especially for the poorest of the poor, who continue to have no influence on both local and national policy issues. According to Goetz et al. (1998):

Local authorities often have at their disposal even more resources – symbolic and material – with which to resist effort to address the needs of the poor, whether these are initiated locally or by national and international agencies. For most part, especially remote and largely obscured from the scrutiny of the media or public advocacy groups, local political environments frequently reduce the incentives for elites to re-orient the priorities.

From this observation, it is important to ascertain the extent to which these kinds of claims of remoteness/alooftness of elites or what others call “elite capture” have affected service delivery (Olowu, 2001).

Similarly, evidence that civil society has been active in demanding and pressing local governments to live to the desired expectations is yet to be seen. The situation in local governments seems to be a semblance of concentration of power which as Harris (1983) observes could lead to those with wealth and power to dominate the process of decision making, culminating in concentration of power in the hands of a few elites, leaving the poor more disadvantaged than was the case before decentralisation.

It is equally important that managerial innovation and a shift towards less authoritarian methods are desirable in this era of decentralisation. Indeed, the problem of management in most of the African countries is two- fold: first it is the failure of the managerial systems themselves and secondly it is the failure to innovate. Thus, the promise of decentralisation to improve service delivery is also largely dependent on whether or not managerial system are revamped, revitalized and significantly improved, including attitudes of local government officials.

In this context, it is expected that the government policies will be designed to put in place frameworks through which the needs, desires and aspirations of the people will be met. The basic assumption in such policy framework would be that the government knows what people’s needs, desires and aspirations are. It would solicit views on how they could be met and consequently, would make attempts towards getting them met. In reality however, in poor countries of Africa – afflicted by political conflicts, economic decline and mismanagement, institutional decay and social disorders (Twaddle and Hansen 1988).

The conditions for proper policy planning, economic development and political stability have not been sufficiently salubrious to allow long term planning and sustenance of certain respectable levels of service delivery. Moreover, even if managerial capacity was growing, in some African countries such as Uganda and Ghana which pioneered decentralisation, there are already political moves towards re-centralisation of some aspects of local government (Awortwi, 2010; Ojumbo, 2012).

A more recent study (Lewis, 2014) found that in Uganda (one time, a bacon of decentralisation), the government has created several unviable local authorities-which are poorly resourced, weak, unable to negotiate with the centre; and entirely beholden to the patronage of central

government elites. These growing political tendencies will do more harm than good on the nascent policies of decentralisation, and its goals in Africa.

### **Is decentralisation an effective tool for “good” governance in Africa?**

A key question for this essay is whether or not decentralisation engenders political commitment to “good governance” broadly, or good public management in Africa. Broadly, Leonard (1987) observing the situation of public management in Africa comments:

Africans are unusual among the World’s elites in the extent of their patronage obligation to the poorer people and the strength of the moral pressures they fulfil. For these reasons and for selfish ones that are far more universal, state organizations in Africa are extensively used to pursue informal, personal goals of their managers rather than collective ones that are formally proclaimed.

Leonard (1987) further asserts that unlike Europe or United States, Africa has different managerial values and the problem in Africa is absence of what he calls “bureaucratic hygiene”.

Lack of “bureaucratic hygiene”—includes failures of systems of accounting, auditing, procurement, contract compliance and personnel management. According to Leonard (1987), these elements introduced in Africa by Westerners, have been on the decline. Important to note in this regard is the fact that in most African countries both in central government and local governments, political patronage interferes with the bureaucratic order and functioning.

Consequently, the ordinary citizen is not properly served. This is compounded, in the case of poor countries by the lack of adequate resources, skilled and technically competent personnel and collapse of the managerial systems.

### **Understanding governance**

In the 1980s, a realisation by international organisations that inefficient and poor management was responsible for poor economic and political performance in the Third World, a governance approach was coined to tackle these challenges.

“Governance” does not have a specific or fixed meaning. It is used in most places as a generic concept but its common usage underlies the roles of three agents in society: the state, the market and civil society. The World Bank (1992) defines governance as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a county’s economic and social resources for development. The World Bank’s emphasis is on “good governance”. This governance with adjective “good” is taken to include four key elements: sound public sector management

(efficiency), accountability, exchange and free flow of information (transparency) and legal framework for development (justice, human rights and civil liberties). On its part, The World Bank (1989) report, *Sub-Saharan Africa: from Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, observes:

Ultimately better governance requires political renewal. This means a concerted attack on corruption from the highest to the lowest level. This can be done by strengthening accountability, encouraging public debate, nurturing free press and empowering the women and the poor by fostering grassroots organizations (The World Bank, 1989).

Beyond The World Bank's perspective, the debate on what governance is, remains varied and at times, controversial; yet it is a useful one. Almost all commentators and analysts who have utilized the concept of "governance" have adopted it to particular circumstances and realities. What is critically prevalent, especially in the developing countries, is the dominance of neo-liberal institutional policies. These, in one way or the other, claim to promote "good governance".

The policy reforms ranging from macro- economic restructuring, civil service reforms, trade and currency liberalisation, privatisation and decentralisation have elements of "good governance". Some observers have specifically noted that the policy of decentralisation is aimed to promote good governance.

However, others have some reservation about the extent to which decentralisation contributes to good governance. For example, Cabral (2011) notes... "Weaknesses found with the local governance are a reflection of problems affecting governance more broadly and cannot be attributed to decentralisation". It is also observed that the ascendance of neo-liberal governments in several countries in the 1990s onwards saw the rise of economic and political restructuring of the state: deregulation of markets, privatisation; reduction of civil service, introduction of "managerialism" and other institutional reforms as part of governance (Pierre, 2000). The restructuring of the state (including decentralisation) was part of the strategy to re-define the role of the state in society (Pierre, 2000).

Pierre (2000) posits that there are two meanings of governance: "old governance" and "new governance" (Pierre, 2000). To Pierre (2003), "governance refers to sustained coordination and coherence among a wider variety of actors with different purposes and objectives". Such actors may include: political actors and institutions, corporate groups and interests, civil society and informal groups and transnational organizations. In such a situation, some of the roles that were previously performed by government may be taken over by other actors. According to this logic, that is the reason why the concept of governance is broader than government. Thus, governance is the synergy between the state and the non

-state actors. Since governance is a very broad and elusive concept, it is important that several of its elements are delineated.

As Hirst (2000) puts it, governance should be seen as the means by which an activity or a set of activities is controlled so that it produces a set of acceptable outcomes. Of particular importance is the debate about states and markets. Hirst (2000:24) argues that if the market was left to govern society it would breed "liberal anarchism". Since the state is seen to be overextended, the market and other forces in society are supposed to limit that extension. If that is to happen, then it is imperative that the limited state be democratic and efficient. Governance is also perceived as a response to the inherent weaknesses in the state and the market.

Rhodes (2000) has pointed out that the shift from traditional public administration to governance was the result of loss of faith by students of public administration in the state because bureaucrats were conceived as self-serving who sought to maximize the agency budgets and public interest had become a myth (Rhodes, 2000). The "marketisation" too, was fragmented, and had lost control or coordination.

The shift in the emphasis to public management as a typology of governance is occasioned by the failure of the state to steer development and at times acting as a barrier to development. Public bureaucracies are failing to manage efficiently. Public service is seen as "too inflexible and rule-bound to respond to the changing needs" of society (Minogue et al., 1998).

In pursuit of public management, private sector principles have been adopted for management of public sector organizations. The private sector principles include: managerial capacity, flexibility and competitive drive essential for the efficient and effective provision of activities previously assumed to be the province of the public sector. The public sector in most countries is being reviewed to take care of these fundamental changes for instance local governments have to tender for more work to competitive private sector organisations. The imperative elements of public sector management are identified by Minogue et al. (1998) include:

- (1) Managers should be given, the freedom to manage, they must be under corresponding obligation of accountability for their performance,
- (2) Efficiency mechanisms must be promoted: managers must be cost-conscious, efficiency review mechanisms be put in performance agreements for senior managers, service targets should be designed and above all, methods of measuring customer satisfaction/ dissatisfaction should designed;
- (3) Decentralized accountability (financial delegation), and
- (4) The gap between customer expectations and satisfaction must be narrowed (Minogue et al 1998: 27). Programmes for customer care could include: citizens' charter and quality management initiatives in addition to

standards of service delivery, openness, consultation with service users; value for money and choice.

Public sector management principles have been introduced in most local governments. However, the success of these mechanisms in the developed industrial societies cannot be assumed for poor countries. It is generally acknowledged that the concept of a “customer” which has been borrowed from private sector management does adequately apply to a public service consumer, who is at the same time a citizen and a taxpayer. In poor countries, where poverty and illiteracy are high, with limited information, the assumptions that an ordinary citizen will make informed choice amongst alternatives presented in the provision of public service is greatly compromised by his or her failure to access all the information. Most ordinary citizens in poor countries believe that after paying taxes, the government should provide the public services on the basis of the taxes paid.

Advocates of the public sector management tend to assume that the new approach will open up bureaucratic systems to scrutiny and transparency. On the contrary, in Africa public information in government, including local governments, remain inaccessible. The behaviour of the political and bureaucratic elites also remains oriented to the old ways. Hence, the quest for “good governance” through new public management remains contentious in the African public sector.

Some elements of public sector management which are claimed to promote “good governance” have been attempted in some African countries. The implementation of decentralisation policy in a number of African countries was accompanied by new governance reforms intended to enhance accountability at the local level, these include:

- (1) “Value for money” accountability where it is emphasized that money’s worth of service must be seen instead of ‘paper’ accountability,
- (2) Institutional accountability whereby each organ of the local government is charged with a particular responsibility has to account for its activities in its work plan and budget.
- (3) Representation whereby the elected representatives of the people constitute a “body corporate”, the council of each local government level to which the administrative staff have to account. This representative element also acts as a “voice” of the people in determining priorities of each local government. The representatives also oversee the implementation of programmes of the local government concerned;
- (4) At managerial level, the recommendations of the civil service reform require the local government to practise results –oriented-management;
- (5) And competitive examinations conducted by the District /Municipal Service Commissions are held for promotions in local governments (Uganda Government 2000).

Despite existence of these new managerial benchmarks to

promote good governance through new public management principles, there are many grey areas of patronage. The tendencies towards favouritism, corruption, nepotism and political cronyism) that have undermined the efficacy of “good governance”. Efficiency and effectiveness, the pinnacles of new public management have suffered at the altar of political expediency. Following that logic, the claim that better management will increase the citizens’ willingness to pay taxes and contribute towards programmes could be greatly reduced. However, a recent study posits that even with decentralisation, the centre tends to control most of the resources, delays in transfers, pretending to oversee service delivery at local level- yet it has no means of effectively supervising what happens at the local level (Lutoti et al., 2015).

### **State –society relations and “good governance”**

While attempts have been made to reform the public sector by introducing some public management principles in the process of implementing decentralisation in Africa, the main missing link has remained on restructuring and reconfiguring state – society relations in that the process. While it is claimed that decentralisation is a means of “bringing power closer to the people”, this in itself, could be an empty political rhetoric. Alternatively, it may imply “decentralized despotism” (Mamdani, 1995).

Decentralisation without real people’s power is a hoax. State–society relations are interplay between state actions and those of other actors in society. Contextualised in the sense of good governance, non-state actors play significant roles in promoting national and local democracy, advocating for the rights of their membership, self–provision and above all in engaging the state to meet its obligations.

By engaging in service delivery, non-state actors become either independent providers or co-producers with state agents, in both cases they lie in the realm of the market. By engaging the state actors in a continuous dialogue they become watchdogs against abuse of the public office and enhance accountability and prompt effectiveness of the state actors.

In short, they play a representative function which logically, promotes a democratic engagement. And by occupying the space where the state has failed to perform its mandated functions they enhance values of collective citizenship and collective action. Thus while the new public management approach discussed above deals with the quality of government as an aspect of good governance, the notion of civil society (non- state actors) promotes good governance by virtue of promoting participation, representation, responsiveness and self–determination. The question then is, how do these play at the local level? This question needs empirical research.

Equally, the new approaches adopted by African states for provision of services under decentralisation require that

organized groups make some input in policies of local government including their budgets. Some civil society organizations have played key roles in this arrangement.

In conceptual terms, the term civil society remains confusing due to the competing usages it attracts. Robinson and White (1998) warn that “any attempt to compress the idea of civil society into homogeneous and virtuous stereotype is doomed to failure.” Thus, a broader conceptualization of civil society should include as many non-state actors as possible.

It is well known that not all non-state actors are necessarily “virtuous”. However, a diagnosis of their internal behaviours should reveal their strength and weaknesses, prejudging them may be dangerous. Moreover, as White and Robinson argue (1998), while there is a strong argument to the effect that both state and civil society forms of provision have intrinsic, albeit different, strength and weaknesses, the question arises as to the extent to which some kind of complementarity can be organized in the provision of services between state agencies on one side and civil society organizations of various kinds on the other.

From this perspective, it is plausible to talk of a synergy between state agencies and non-state actors in provision of services. Thus, unlike situations where the state agencies impose their will and bureaucratic formalism, a non-bureaucratic synergy is seen as more productive, producing people-centred governance outcomes (Swilling, 1997; USAID, 2010).

It remains empirically unclear whether decentralisation policy has benefited from state and civil society interface or not. Nonetheless, it is the politics of decentralisation that should be put in focus. For example, Ribot (2002) notes that because decentralisation tends to democratise and transfer power, few central government actors have been very keen to fully implement decentralisation, the way it is supposed to be done. The irony is that less democratic governments find it easier to implement decentralisation than more democratic ones, as was the case in Latin American countries in the 1970s.

Thus, as Rhodes (2009) puts it, even with a reformist model of governance such as decentralisation, the traditional governance modalities have persisted, not least the lack of a direct connection between new governance and democratic practices. To this extent, several African states have for several decades been on-and-off in terms of implementing decentralisation. It remains uncertain if the current wave of decentralisation will survive political vicissitudes that characterise most of the African states.

## CONCLUSION

This survey of issues on the linkage between decentralisation and good governance makes no claim of exhaustion of all the matters. The two concepts are broad and touch several issues of politics and public administration. Nonetheless, we have attempted to stress

that decentralisation appears prodigious and where it has been implemented successfully with commitment, the results have been amazing. And where its implementation has been bungled, the claim of good local governance remains in question. It is imperative to stress further that African states need more, not less decentralisation, for if well implemented, it facilitates some measure of good governance especially at the grassroots level. Moreover, Africa is already through with the centralisation experiment that has largely failed to advance good governance and development on the continent. Therefore, despite the pitfalls of decentralisation, it is worth trying (Muhumuza, 2008).

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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