

Decentralization and Local Economic Development in Four Southern African Countries

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the process of decentralization and its link with local economic development (LED) like Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The paper reviews literature on decentralization, local economic development and the experience of the four countries using the lenses of participatory development. Most countries have decentralized as a way of democratizing governance and local development. Regrettably, in some cases decentralization has not been embraced voluntarily because of its promises of better governance but as a prescriptive measure to meet the demands of the donor community. This has resulted in decentralization in form but not in substance. This paper discusses the trends in restructuring and the alternatives that can ensure that policy intentions are realized. The paper concludes that constitutional provisions for the authority and functions of decentralized structures are key to the realization of local economic development. Despite associated challenges, decentralization provides better room for local economic development than a centralized government.

INTRODUCTION

The paper is an assessment of decentralization and LED in four Southern African countries namely Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Following democratic reforms, most Southern African countries have battles with poverty, inequality and underdevelopment. The paper argues that at the center of these challenges has been the question of governance. The growing need for effective service delivery has put many countries in the region on their toes to establish an effective and efficient public sector. The move has been towards opening the political space, democratizing development so as to promote wide participation of people in government and promoting good governance. A number of reforms have taken place in Southern Africa as the region is undergoing democratization.

The pressure to democratize has not only come from internal organs but much more from the external forces of globalization. The need to democratize development and service delivery has put pressure on the state to restructure and ensure that development is done with and for the people. The paper gives a brief background of decentralization in the region. After the background, decentralization and LED are conceptualized. Subsequently, the experience of each case is examined drawing linkages between the decentralization process and local development. Challenges faced by the four countries in their

decentralization effort are discussed, examining possible ways of improving this effort on LED.

Southern Africa is grappling with high levels of unemployment with countries like Zimbabwe reaching a disturbing ninety-five percent in 2009 (IndexMundi 2012). The high levels of unemployment and abject poverty where some families could hardly obtain two meals a day are accompanied by uncertainty in terms of food security due to prolonged droughts in recent years. The adverse weather conditions have seen countries like Malawi and Zimbabwe grappling to feed their own people following long droughts and reduction in donor aid. Adding to the woes of the region are high debts owed to the international funding organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. It is this helplessness among other things that has also prompted some governments to look inwardly for answers to the search for sustainable development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A case study approach is employed in this paper so as to provide an in-depth analysis of decentralization and LED in the region. The four countries were used as a random sample to appreciate how the regional block has experienced decentralization and LED. Malawi and Zambia attained independence in 1964 and are among the earliest to gain independence, while Zimba-

bwe (1980) and South Africa (1994) are in the category of those that obtained their political freedoms later within the Southern African Development Community block. The four countries constitute about a quarter of the 15 member regional bloc. The qualitative nature of the study necessitated a qualitative approach through review of literature on the two subjects. The analysis is drawn from literature on decentralization and LED in the four countries.

Decentralization

There have been a number of shifts between centralization and decentralization from the colonial era to date. Decentralization was one of the major policies of colonizers in the 1960s as noted by Buthelezi (2003:1) who observes that this was accepted and reinforced by the post-colonial state. After few years of majority rule the state reversed the inherited decentralization as pressure for a developmental state became stronger. In the majority of the countries, this saw a move to central planning and greater control of resources by the state. The forces of globalization and the failure of the central state to meet development needs of its people have seen countries in the region moving towards decentralization. The period from 1980 to date has seen countries in the region pressurized to liberalize their public economic policies. The unstoppable pressure from various sources has pushed nation states to let markets work where they can and the state to step in where markets cannot. Liou (2007:10) observes that in many developing countries, decentralization policies have been adopted by policymakers because of the importance of structural adjustment policies emphasized by international assistance organizations (IMF and World Bank).

The move to decentralize is upheld by the provisions of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, which sets out the objectives of the Union, one of the objectives is to promote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance, which have seen the local sphere of government become a very integral player in economic development because of its closeness to the people.

In a number of ways decentralization has not been adopted for good reasons despite its promise for effectiveness in pursuing public goals. Decentralization, which is a deliberate and

planned transfer of resources away from the central state institutions to peripheral institutions, takes a number of forms. These include deconcentration, delegation, devolution and transfer of functions. The difference between these forms are on the extent to which the authority to plan, decide, and manage is transferred from the central government to the other organizations, and the level of autonomy the subnational units have in executing their mandates (Buthelezi 2003: 28).

Deconcentration is a form of decentralization, which entails the redistribution of national administrative responsibilities through field administration away from the capital. This means the field staff exercises some discretion in making routine decisions, within the confines of the national state department. In this form of decentralization the regions, provinces, districts and municipalities and other sub-national units are led by officials appointed by or directly reporting to the central state department.

Delegation involves transfer of decision-making and management to organizations, which are not necessarily under direct control of a national department. Under delegation, central government functions are transferred to public corporations, regional planning or area development authorities.

Devolution refers to the creation of independent units of government to which the central government relinquish certain functions. These units of government enjoy some independence and exercise autonomy within their sphere of operation. The government units have clearly defined boundaries in terms of law and geographic location. In devolution, there mutually beneficial, and coordinate relationships between the local and central government. Decentralization can also be categorized into administrative, financial and political. One of the findings of the Malawi's Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLG and RD Review Report 2004: 9) is that one of the challenges to decentralization in the country has been resistance by sectoral ministries to devolve their functions and resources to local assemblies. The report further notes that this resistance has been due to lack of awareness and understanding of decentralization, lack of political and institutional drivers of devolution and the fear among politicians and government officials of losing control over resources.

Local Economic Development

LED has become increasingly important in the region following the failure of the state to tackle growing levels of poverty. LED is seen as a process in which local governments or community-based organizations engage to stimulate or maintain business activity and/or employment opportunities in sectors that improve the community, using existing human, natural and institutional resources (Moyo 2007: 221). It can be viewed as a locality based response to globalization challenges, devolution and local level opportunities and crises (Nel and Rogerson 2005:1). Blakley and Leigh (2010:1) argue that whether poor or rich, local entities in a global economy have the challenge and the opportunity to shape their economic future. In this paper, LED is viewed as a collective action by different parties at the local level aimed at improving economic future of the local populace.

The Link between Decentralization and Local Economic Development

It is worth noting at the onset of this section that there is a general dearth of empirical research in this area. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the difficulty of linking a complex issue like economic development with decentralization when so many other variables are involved (Scott 2009: 5). However, there are a number of ways by which decentralization can indirectly impact LED. LED links with decentralization in that it occurs when communities, government and business sectors usually acting in partnership start to engage in activities deriving from decentralization to improve local economic conditions (Edoun and Jahed 2009: 4). Hampwaye (2008:51) points out that for local authorities to plan and implement LED activities, they require powers and authority from the central government and the participation of the community down to the village level. In this way opportunities are created by decentralization to take development into their hands. Furthermore, the decongestion of workload at the center promotes cost effectiveness and efficiency in LED, public resource utilization and service delivery. In other words, a properly decentralized government is ideal for the promotion of LED as it creates room for citizen participation. Liou (2007:10) notes that the implementation of decentralization policies has

resulted in the important role of regional and local governments in the process of economic development. It is worth noting here that despite the positives attributed to decentralization there are limitations to what decentralization can achieve. Critics of decentralization point out that there is a possibility of inequalities in development, promotion of sectional interests and disunity (Edoun and Jahed 2009: 8). While the debate on the negatives and positives of decentralization is beyond the scope of this paper it is worth noting that the associated disadvantages mostly lie with the nature of decentralization and the support mechanisms adopted. There is a general acceptance of decentralization as a policy in the Southern African region, however, the efficacy of the adopted forms of decentralization in promoting LED is very doubtful. The case of these four Southern African Countries illustrates some of the contributions and challenges of decentralization that impact LED in the region.

RESULTS

The results of the analysis of each of the four cases are presented in the following paragraphs. The democratic reforms and their contribution to LED in each case study are discussed, exposing the challenges and potential for LED.

Decentralization and Local Development in Malawi

Malawi is rated as one of the world's least developed countries with a heavy dependence on agriculture and home to a large rural populace. Donor funds account for forty percent of the country's budget (<http://www.imfmetal.org>). According to Tambulasi (2009: 29), democratic local governance is a new phenomena in Malawi with local government elections held only once in 2000. Msewa (2005:3) opines that decentralization in Malawi was by default as it came as a result of pressure from donors. However, the government later owned and spearheaded the process. The move to decentralization as covered in the Local Government Act 1998, was bent towards furthering the constitutional order based on democratic principles, accountability, transparency and participation of the people in decision-making and development processes.

Following this policy move, district councils were established in 28 districts, as legitimate centers of implementation of responsibilities for the delivery of services at the local level, with the aim of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of development interventions (Chiweza 2010:4). Sub-districts structures were also formed to promote bottom-up development. The government of Malawi engaged in a two-phase decentralization program over the period 2000-2010. According to the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLG and RD) Review Report of 2004:2, the decentralization process has been widely viewed as a vehicle of facilitating economic growth processes in local economies. It is seen as a way of enhancing the income and employment opportunities of ordinary people through the promotion of public investment in infrastructure and private investment in business enterprises. Tambulasi (2009:29) argues that the first five years of democratic local governance in Malawi have demonstrated that poorly designed decentralization is a breeding ground for increased conflicts rather than an instrument for peaceful participation and development.

The first structural problem with regards to Malawi's decentralization is that it did not transfer real power to the local level. Instead it vests powers in line with ministries in the central government and in many cases, does not recognize devolution of authority to districts (Ferguson and Mulwafu 2004:26). As argued by Hussein (2004:121) in Tambulasi (2009), the undermining of local authorities is confirmed by a number of provisions in the Local Government Act of 1998 that ensures the central government's unlimited control over district assemblies, this undermines the local government system's goal of ensuring a bottom up approach to development. Essentially this scenario makes deconcentration the prevalent form of decentralization in the country. The unclear roles of local structures like the traditional leadership and the elected councilors hinder a healthy collective effort for LED. Chiefs who in the colonial era were given administrative, judicial and development functions and powers to collect revenues supervised by the District Commissioners have to coexist with elected councilors (MLG and RD 2004: 5).

The other demise of decentralization in Malawi has been the dysfunctional state of sub-district structures like the Area Development

Committees, Area Executive Committees and Village Development Committees due to lack of coordination (Chiweza 2010: 7). These decentralized structures fail to function as expected due to poor feedback on development priorities, weak coordination among the different structures, little supervision from the district and lack of capacity (Chiweza 2010: 7).

Decentralization and Local Economic Development in Zambia

In line with the popular perception that a decentralized public service is more responsive to local priorities and is better positioned to facilitate local development, Zambia launched a National Decentralization Policy in 2004. Like its neighbors, one of the challenges the country faced when it obtained its independence in 1964, was to transform the inherited governance structures into dynamic local governance frameworks that would facilitate sustainable public participation in the socio-economic development strategies envisaged by the new regime (Chikulo 2009: 1). The country's decentralization is a mix of deconcentration, delegation and devolution (Mukwena 2009: 2). At independence Zambia had 8 provinces, 44 districts and a number of Native Authorities in rural areas, which were abolished by the new regime. The new government that took after the colonial rulers established a total of 67 local authorities under the Local Government Act of 1965. Further reforms took place, which saw an introduction in 1968 of what the then President Kaunda termed decentralization in centralism (Chikulo 2009: 2). These reforms saw the introduction of the District Governor to lead each of the 53 districts with political and administrative functions. Through the enactment of the Village Registration and Development Act of 1971, village productivity committees, ward councils and ward committees were established. These local structures were meant to champion local democracy and participation in governance. Although the intention was to devolve functions and authority to local level structures for purposes of increasing popular participation, Maurice Mbolela the Executive secretary of Local Government Association of Zambia (LGAZ 2012) argues that this actually turned out to be a way of strengthening the influence and role of the political power at the local level. This was justified by the then President Kaunda as a way of upholding unity.

The Local Administration Act of 1980 was an effort to assimilate local government, central government and the party (Chikulo 2009: 4). This was later dissolved in 1990 with the introduction of political pluralism that sought to strengthen democratic control over administration and ensure accountability. The 1991 Local Government Act saw the establishment of 72 authorities, 56 District Councils, 12 Municipal Councils and four City Councils (Chikulo 2009: 5). The new reform further entrenched wide participation by ensuring that the district (composed of smaller rural-based local authorities) has two representatives appointed by chiefs so as to involve traditional rulers in local governance.

Despite the decentralized system that positions the councils at the forefront of development facilitation and management and the devolution of resources to this sphere, there are several obstacles to effective local development. The efforts to promote popular participation in development activities below the district level through the formally institutionalized village and ward committee system failed as the network of these committees and became tools of political control rather than of participation (Hampwaye 2008:37). Some of these include financial constraints further worsened by the erratic disbursement of grants from the central government and unfunded mandates. There is lack of a holistic and coordinated development planning and management despite the presence of a District Development Coordination Committee (DDCC). The representatives from the central government departments remain primarily responsible to their parent ministry and the DDCC roles are ineffective because it has no legal authority to back up its operations (Chikulo 2009:9). Under the 1991 Act, ward development committees and village productivity committees are not formally linked to local authorities rendering them dysfunctional. As observed by Chikulo (2009:9), this effectively means that there is no forum for community participation in decision-making.

Decentralization and Local Economic Development in Zimbabwe

An analysis of governance in Zimbabwe indicates that although decentralization has been in the government's agenda since attainment of independence in 1980, little effective power has been decentralized (Conyers 2003:1). The enact-

ment of the Urban Councils Act (1980) repealing an old one brought some opening of the democratic space in local governance, allowing African Townships inclusion in the municipal system and granting lodgers the right to vote (Mutekede and Sigauke 2007: 24). Following independence the government restructured the former African councils into 55 larger District Councils in rural areas falling under the Ministry of Local Government. The continuing reforms saw the establishment of sub-district structures in the form of Village Development Committees (VIDCOS) and Ward Development Committees (WADCOS) with elected members. This move was bent towards widening the democratic space to ensure wide participation on local development and governance.

Currently the country has 10 provinces, 60 rural councils and 32 urban councils. The organizational structures for popular participation in development planning in the Prime Minister's Directive on Decentralization (1984 and 1985) provided the basis for a hierarchy of representative bodies at the village, ward, district and provincial levels (Chigwata 2010: 30). The local government in Zimbabwe operates in a delegated capacity, performing functions conferred upon it by the central government.

One of the positive results of decentralization in Zimbabwe has been the local involvement in natural resource management under the Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE). Through CAMPFIRE the local populace has been able to participate in the management of local resources like wildlife and the program has had a significant impact on development planning and management at both district and local levels (Conyers 2003: 2).

Decentralization has not so much contributed to LED despite the existence of local structures partly because of a policy vacuum on the functions of subnational levels particularly the role of the District Development Committee (Mutekede and Sigauke 2007: 26). Ashely et al. (2008:4) argue that the transfer of functions from the central government as provided in the 1998 Rural District Councils Act was not effective due to the fact that these structures lack power and resources to achieve this mandate. Instead the move was discredited as phony decentralization used by the government as an instrument of exerting control over the rural majority and at-

tracting money from donors. The challenges of local development should be understood within the broader decentralization process in the country. Lack of a constitutional provision for the local government has seen the central government dither between a devolution thrust (administering local affairs by locally elected officials) and a delegation one (performing tasks transferred from, or assigned by, the center) (Chatiza 2010:8). As a result, the local government, which is strategically positioned for LED has its functional autonomy impinged by ministries, government departments and state enterprises.

The political concerns on the aspect of decentralization have drawn serious debates among the political parties in the current constitutional reforms. From a political point of view, Zimbabwe's decentralization is not far from Kaunda's "decentralization in centralism" discussed in the Zambian case. The then Minister of Local Government, Joseph Msika in a 1992 rural development conference brought out two seemingly contradictory statements in defining local government as, "the administration of local affairs by local people elected by the registered residents of a given locality", and "the final accountability of local Councils remains with central government which created local government in the first place." (Chatiza 2010:8). Local government operates as a lower level of government and its functions are open to central government variation and reassignment to other state agencies. This has resulted in an unresponsive local government system with an upward accountability to the central representatives rather than to the communities it serves. Party politics has had a great influence on decentralization and the local governance, which has resulted in voter apathy in council elections with voters justifying their actions on the grounds of unfulfilled promises, lack of meaningful choices, lack of economic democracy and despair at the widespread abuse of power (Mutekede and Sigauke 2007:25).

Decentralization and Local Economic Development in South Africa

South Africa is one of the only two countries with high levels of administrative decentralization in Africa (African Economic Outlook 2015). South Africa is perhaps one of the near-

success stories of decentralization and LED of the four cases studies and in the SADC region. The obvious justification for this observation lies on the fact that the country has a constitutionally recognized local government. The constitution articulates that '...in the Republic government is constituted as national, provincial and local spheres of government which are distinctive, interdependent and interrelated' (Section 40(1)). The autonomy of the local sphere is constitutionally safeguarded as the constitution states that the national or provincial government may not compromise or impede a municipality. The local sphere is made up of municipalities. Structurally the country is decentralized into 9 provinces and about 283 municipalities. The Constitution of the Republic categorically states that each local government has to ensure that it carries out its obligations in a manner that will promote the development of communities and their participation in this endeavor.

The promotion of citizen participation in development is the key role of local government as outlined in the Local Government Demarcation Act No. 27 of 1998. The Decentralization Policy provides for the establishment of local government. Chapter 3 of the constitution spells out the relationship among the three spheres of government and their organs. The aspect of cooperative government holds that the spheres of government are interdependent, distinct and interrelated and should among other things ensure that they preserve national unity. The position of local government is not at the bottom last of a hierarchy instead it is an equal partner together with provincial and central spheres. Furthermore, a democratic LED is a constitutional mandate of local government and it has also been in the political agenda of the ruling ANC as expressed in its Reconstruction and Development Program of 1994 (ANC 1994: 2).

Decentralization has positioned the local sphere of government to be in the forefront in as far as LED is concerned. The local government's developmental role is spelt out in the constitution, Acts and White Papers. Local government is designed to be developmental as articulated in the 1998 White Paper on Local Government. The local government sphere is required to facilitate Integrated Development Planning (IDP), which is a five-year plan. This is a participatory tool, which helps local communities identify development needs and set priorities in terms of

tackling the identified needs. The plan ensures the integration of local government activities with other tiers of development planning at the provincial, national and international levels (Edoun and Jahed 2009:13). The decentralized structure of government in South Africa has its own challenges too, which have a bearing on the success of LED. Malan (2015) notes that the challenges are linked to the tension between national direction and locally preferred choices. Through the central government's deployments of key personnel at the local sphere accompanied by the resource allocation role, the local sphere's independence to priorities local preferences is thereby curtailed.

Despite the positives of decentralization, the country has to grapple with local development challenges, which still reflect historical developmental patterns with areas lying in former Bantustans lagging behind. One of the challenges facing local government is incapacity. Weak LED units and the general human resources incapacity can stifle the local government in fulfilling its developmental mandate (Khumalo 2010:180). The local government continues to be the least resourced, yet it occupies a very integral place in South Africa's development. While there is an existent structure in the form of Intergovernmental Relations Forums provided for in the Intergovernmental Relations Act of 2005, there are challenges in its proper functioning.

DISCUSSION

The results of the four cases further confirm the complexities associated with the paucity of empirical evidence in drawing measurable linkages between decentralization and LED. As observed by Beck et al (2001:165), the lack of data is a serious limitation to better understand numerous areas of political economy particularly the political conditions under which governments choose policies that promote rather than retard economic development. Nevertheless, the LED potential and challenges associated with the decentralization policies can be gleaned from the literature reviewed.

Setbacks in Decentralization and Local Economic Development

The four cases discussed above show that at varying degrees decentralization has been

implemented in the region and in many cases it is an ongoing process. Hybrid forms of decentralization are adopted in the region with an inclination to keep some level of central control. As observed by Mukwena (2001: 2), when decentralization is undertaken governments justify it on the grounds of improving performance, yet in many cases it is advanced to cover up for unstated political reasons, which in most cases are more important than the improvement of administrative performance. Decentralization has been widely accepted internationally. It is however, the finding of this paper that the ruling elite are most often than not uncomfortable with decentralization especially devolution as it threatens their control of resources and the political landscape. In many cases devolution is resisted in the name of preserving unity when it is all done for political dominance and control of resources. Southall (2013) while discussing state transformation and the liberation movements in Southern Africa observed that some notion and practice of deployment is at the center of any party driven transformation, which is true of the countries under study. This has a bearing on the independence of decentralized structures by preserving unity when it is all done for political dominance and control of resources.

An evaluation of the few cases in Southern Africa show that there is a discrepancy between what decentralization is meant to achieve and what has been achieved to date. This agrees with Edoun and Jahed's (2009:10) observations that the outcomes of various forms of decentralization have tended to be unsatisfactory in most developing countries. A number of reasons are put forward to explain this state of affairs. The transfer of resources to the local sphere still suffers a blow, which in many cases is associated with the subservient position that the sphere occupies in the government structure of a number of countries. In some countries as discussed above, the process of decentralization was engaged on under pressure to meet the conditions set by the donor community, which in a way hurried the process without the assessment of the capabilities of the resultant structures to handle the devolved functions.

While decentralization has the potential to empower citizens, the poor synergy between political and sectoral decentralization results in democratic local political structures undermined by sector governance. This situation is worse in

countries like Zimbabwe where the local government does not have constitutional provisions that safeguard its position and functions. As observed by Matovu (2002:126), the failure in most decentralization attempts to realize LED goal in Southern African region has resulted from institutional and policy gaps in the implementation of the decentralization programs.

CONCLUSION

The paper has outlined the factors behind decentralization and its impact on LED in the four southern African case studies analyzed. It is the conclusion of the paper therefore that while decentralization is no panacea for all developmental problems, it provides a platform within which democratic LED can be pursued. The paper indicates that the regional block has hybrid forms of decentralization with a high tendency towards deconcentration than devolution. Challenges of unfulfilled mandate are replete due to the forms and status of decentralized units. It is however, evident from the discussions above that the process of decentralization should be well constituted and should be clear on weightier goals like empowering the sub-units to facilitate a people-led LED than simply attracts donor funding. The paper recommends that decentralization be tackled as a learning process with a continuous improvement on the structures and legal provisions to ensure that intended goals are achieved. The work also concludes that while the link between decentralization and LED is not a direct one, the former, besides it being a positive factor in itself, provides an enabling environment for LED to strive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper underlines the importance of strengthening the role of the local sphere through legislation and the necessary resources to ensure that decentralized LED obligations are met. Furthermore, the policy options that can enhance decentralization's impact on LED include the promotion of partnerships, encouraging participation of local stakeholders, anti-corruption policies and strategies, accountability, and responsiveness to the public. The paper also recommends a synergy in the functioning of the local sphere and sectoral entities.

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