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## **Decentralisation and local governance: Country experiences of India, Nepal, Uganda and Ghana\***

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**The decentralisation experiences of four countries are reviewed - India and Nepal in Asia, and Uganda and Ghana in Africa. In India and Nepal, decentralisation policies have suffered in the past because of the absence of sufficient political and bureaucratic will, imperfect planning mechanisms and weak local government structures. While in India, which has the longest history of experience with decentralisation policies, recent constitutional amendments have been geared towards the revival of local government, political uncertainties in Nepal have, by contrast, affected continuity in decentralisation policies. In Uganda and Ghana, central control has been a striking common feature of the decentralisation scenario, with little evidence of the autonomy that characterises local self government. The effective functioning of the local government system in these countries has, furthermore, been hampered by serious inadequacies in logistic support, housing, transport facilities, office accommodation, and the like, to the point where, in Uganda, government staff posted to district offices had to return to national headquarters.**

In recent years, many countries have felt a need to pursue decentralisation policies and programmes more seriously than in the past. The number of functions decentralised; range of decisions assigned to local authorities; ratio of local government revenues to total revenues; degree of financial independence of local authorities; how far responsibilities are delegated to field personnel; how much of inter-departmental coordination there is; and the ratio of local government employees to employees of central agencies are all key concerns. The issues are complex and call for detailed study. The limited aim here is a bird's eye view of achievements and shortfalls, as well as the problems and constraints that parts of Asia and Africa have encountered on the path to decentralised development.

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Country experiences of India and Nepal in South Asia, and Uganda and Ghana in sub Saharan Africa, are highlighted and critically examined<sup>1</sup>. Such an overview throws up many important lessons.

### THE CASE OF INDIA

Of the four countries, India has had the longest history of experimentation with decentralisation, through different impulses and routes. Decentralised planning was advocated from the fifties, but it was only in the late sixties that positive steps were taken by the central government to decentralise planning and development activities to the State level. From the seventies, the States started to respond; they had to first attune their planning machinery at the State and district levels, with which task they were assisted by the Centre. Progress towards decentralised district planning has however not been uniform. A state of the art survey carried out in 1982-83 by the Planning Commission (Working Group Report on District Planning) revealed that only six out of the 22 States in the country - Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal - had made some innovations in the field of district planning.

There is no dearth of critics who refer to the failure of *panchayati raj* Institutions (PRIs) and to the sluggish progress towards district planning in many States, and who point out that decentralisation in India did not spontaneously emerge from below, except in the case of a few isolated success stories at the micro-level. Even the Seventy-Third and Seventy-Fourth amendments to the Constitution, by which devolution has been sought to be extended below the State level, are interpreted in some quarters as the 'pressure tactics' of the central government. Another view is that in the federal democracy of a vast country like India, the Centre's legitimate role is to push, advise, prod and pressurise in order to improve upon the performance of planning at the sub-national levels. Looked at from this perspective, what-

1. Other countries whose decentralisation experiences this author has had opportunities to study are : Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines and Fiji in Asia and the Pacific; and Ethiopia, Zambia, Kenya and Tanzania in Africa. The decentralisation scenarios here have been dealt with in two publications authored by him for the FAO : *Toward Improved Multilevel Planning for Agricultural and Rural Development in Asia and the Pacific*, FAO Economic and Social Development Paper 52, Rome 1985, and *Decentralisation of Agricultural Sector Planning in Sub-Saharan Africa*, FAO Rome July 1992. The author has also reviewed the regional decentralisation experiences in agricultural development planning of the following countries of the Near East and north Africa for the FAO in 1988 : Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria and Turkey. (See *Regional Decentralisation for Agricultural Development Planning in the near East and North Africa*, FAO Economic and Social Development Paper 73 FAO / UN Rome, 1988).

ever has been achieved to date in the States in relation to decentralised planning is due to the effective advisory role played by the Centre.

The catalyst role of the Planning Commission through its Multilevel Planning Division in the seventies has been particularly commendable. Various efforts, from the detailed guidelines issued for district level planning in 1969 and subsequently in 1982, combined with the continuous thrust to strengthen planning capabilities at the sub-national level, have stimulated district planning activities country wide, while gradually pushing forward the frontiers of district planning methodologies. Currently much attention is being paid to improve the data base for district planning by developing the District Information System in the National Informatics Centre. Similarly, in order to promote improved performance in district planning, a number of centrally sponsored training programmes are being conducted by the country's apex training institutions. Indeed, there is much to be learnt from the Indian experience of how a central government can guide, stimulate and strengthen efforts aimed at decentralised planning at the sub-national levels. This is not to deny bottlenecks and shortcomings. Public participation, for instance, both as a grassroots movement as well as an in built mechanism of government in planning and development, is yet to take off in most States, though the experience of one State, Kerala, is unique and stands out.

The three major lessons that we learn from the Indian experience of decentralisation are :

- Attention to certain essential prerequisites is basic, if a decentralisation strategy / programme is to succeed. These include political and bureaucratic will; functional, financial and administrative decentralisation; establishment of organisational mechanisms and planning machinery; and provision of technical assistance and training.
- Decentralisation has to be pursued in stages as a gradual incremental process, for the many obstacles in the way of decentralisation are overcome only gradually.
- Continuity of policies is necessary for progress along the centralisation-decentralisation continuum. Decentralisation policies must be consistently and continuously pursued without major shifts and set backs.

In some States, decentralisation, after gaining initial momentum, showed tendencies 'to reverse' or back-track, a phenomenon referred to as the 'pendulum effect'. Even when powers and functions were initially given, something was held back for parallel implementation through competing agencies, creating situations of potential conflict. In an overall assessment, however, it may be said that decentralisation has taken root. Several institutional structures and coordination mechanisms are in

place. Yet, many grassroots level participatory structures are still to evolve. On the theoretical front, quite a few methodologies have been experimented upon and tools and techniques of micro-level planning have been refined.

There are, it is true, success stories of decentralisation in a few States. However, even Karnataka's *panchayati raj* system, which was hailed as a model of democratic decentralisation, while no doubt breaking new ground, has still visualised the role of the elected *panchayat* bodies as confined to limited planning and implementation aspects only. Law and order functions were vested with the Deputy Commissioner (District Collector), who is outside the direct *panchayati raj* institutional framework and continues to represent the State government at the district level.

Nirmal Mukherji (1989) and others who have advocated the idea of District Government, are of the view that district governments should look after the totality of district governance with the district bureaucracy coming squarely under them. One viewpoint, brought out in an occasional paper of the Government of India, is : 'Ultimately, what matters is, who wields the *lathi* [stick] - and if that remains with the district officer, district government will be just as unable to deliver genuine development as the PRIs (GOI 1992). In sum, local government should have total control over the large variety of functions performed by the regulatory departments and also developmental organisations, which are presently outside the purview of the *panchayati raj* institutions but whose actions impinge upon the life of the rural people. A key issue for consideration is, therefore, whether it is possible to move to a system of *panchayat* / village governance, which will encompass all the governmental functions at the local level. Undoubtedly, India's experiment with democratic decentralisation has many achievements to its credit. But there is still considerable scope for improvement.

## THE CASE OF NEPAL

Although a number of initiatives by His Majesty's government of Nepal in the 1960s and 1970s attempted to draw the district political bodies into development planning and execution, focus and integrate line agency<sup>2</sup> efforts at the district level, and encourage local resource mobilisation, these did not bear fruit. This is because of a relatively muted political response and a mixture of sustained line ministry opposition, weak technical and administrative capacity of officials at the local level and the generally disappointing local revenue mobilisation efforts. It was only in the 1980s, after the promulgation of the Decentralisation Act of 1982 and the rules

2. Line Agencies are the vertically organised sectoral departments of the government and other parastatal agencies established by them.

framed under it in 1984, that concerted efforts were made towards decentralised planning and development. The Act prescribed an important technical support role for the regional offices of His Majesty's Government (HMG) and provided for the establishment, in each *Ilaka* (service area), an integrated rural service centre from which the sectorial departments were to extend technical advice and material services to the village *panchayats*. It also gave an important role to Local User Groups and User Committees in the planning, execution and maintenance of local projects. The Decentralisation Act and Rules were under implementation for hardly five fiscal years when the Revolution of 1990 replaced the *panchayats* with the multiparty system. Since then, because of the constant flux in the political matrix, the dynamism and continuity of the decentralisation process have been considerably affected.

One major constraint is the fact that about half of Nepal's development efforts are being financed through donor aid. Donor agencies as well as the line departments circumvent the decentralisation process, by according central status to their programmes. 'Central projects', which do not fall within the purview of decentralised district planning, account for about three quarters of public development allocations. This being the current state of affairs, decentralisation involves only a limited devolution of real authority to the districts. Unless aid commitments are linked to the government's decentralisation strategies, the prospects for the implementation of decentralisation policies are bleak. As of now, political uncertainties, imperfect planning mechanisms and weak institutional structures hamper the decentralisation process in Nepal.

## GHANA AND UGANDA

In Ghana, decentralisation is one of the policies being implemented in the context of a package of structural adjustment measures, as part of the Economic Recovery Programme. With the National Development Planning Commission not fully empowered, and a systematic planning process not operational, everything was in transition at the time of this author's visit to the country in 1991. The Regional Coordinating Councils with their Regional Planning Coordinating units had not been entrusted with the preparation of Regional Plans; they were required only to perform monitoring, coordinating and evaluating functions. Planning at the district level had not yet started. In sectorial ministries, planning and budgeting were centralised with no involvement of the regions and districts. As for people's participation, it is, no doubt, an article of faith in Ghana. At the time of my visit in 1991, the People's Participatory Programme of the Food and Agricultural Organisation was active, and participatory groups had been formed around activities geared to priority needs like maize farming, *cassava*<sup>3</sup> processing, brick making and the

3. Cassava is a tropical root crop.

production of baskets and beads. But widespread people's participation at the grass-roots as part of a decentralised system of planning and governance was not very much in evidence at the time.

As in Ghana, in Uganda too, economic development planning and decentralisation efforts are in transition. Here, the Presidential Economic Council (PEC), the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MPED) and the Ministry of Finance engage in national planning activities. The National Resistance Council (Parliament) with its hierarchy of Resistance Councils and Committees play a significant role in sub-national level development matters. But decentralised planning at the district level is yet to take off, and the only accomplishments are the establishment of the District Development Committees and the introduction of staffing arrangements. In the sectorial ministries, the planning process is mainly concentrated at the national level. At the district level and below, serious inadequacies in logistic support - housing, transport facilities, office accommodation, office equipment etc. - hamper the effective functioning of the staff in position. This is, it is true, a problem common to other developing countries seeking to decentralise planning and development functions; but it has proved to be a serious bottleneck in the case of Uganda, to the point where the country's ambitious programme of placing a modicum of planning machinery at the disposal of district bodies was thwarted. Thus, staff posted to the districts had to return to the national headquarters as district offices could not adequately provide a working environment in terms of office space, equipment, furniture and so on.

In these two Sub Saharan African country experiences, what we find are certain "weak" forms of decentralisation imposed from above. The Sub Saharan African (SSA) situation is burdened not only by conditions reflecting their stage of underdevelopment, but also by serious policy distortions. An issue like decentralisation is affected by political factors, such as who is in the policy-making circle and how much political will is exercised for parting with powers. Most States in Sub Saharan Africa are authoritarian, and the character of the ruler influences the process substantially. The ruler cannot afford to take any risks that may cause political instability and therefore, may have to tread cautiously. In the sub Saharan African situation, defence and the police are no doubt controlled by the State. Yet, there is an inherent fear psychosis among heads of governments that if greater autonomy is granted to locally elected representatives who are former tribal chieftains still wielding considerable influence, they will become quite powerful and may indulge in activities that could destabilise the government. The history of these countries is replete with such happenings.

Grossly inadequate institutional structures and their inefficient functioning, underdevelopment of human resources, weak statistical systems, highly discouraging government wage structure, poor career development opportunities for staff, poor

working environments, lack of essential logistic support like housing, transport, office accommodation and office equipment, poor financial management and accountability in local administration, are other impeding factors in the African situation. Many of these weaknesses can be overcome, given time and willpower. In such situations, devolution of authority to local bodies must be an incremental or gradual process.

An important aspect of the gradual approach is the need to push ahead first and foremost with the administrative aspects of decentralisation (or 'deconcentration' as it is otherwise known). This implies the breaking down and delegation of some functions and powers from the headquarters of the government at the national level to its branch and field offices below, located at various levels. In this way, the 'reach' and 'access' of the governmental administration is improved. In contrast to democratic decentralisation, which is marked by local autonomy, deconcentration is a matter of delegating some functions and powers to the lower echelons and yet retaining control at the top. Under democratic decentralisation, on the other hand, the setting up of local self government institutions, holding elections to them, empowering elected representatives and ensuring that they work in partnership with the administration, are tasks that need to be planned and operationalised meticulously. Since all this takes time and governments in these parts are halting and hesitant when it comes to parting with powers and delegating them to lower echelons, at least administrative decentralisation should come about quickly and pave the way for democratic decentralisation.

In the Sub Saharan African context today, authoritarian regimes and the dominance of patron-client relations are likely to continue till such time as political stability is assured. If the past is any indication, changes that usher in a democratic political culture are likely to take a long time, perhaps decades, if not generations. Meanwhile, it is important to assess what reforms are feasible in the context of the existing stage of political development. The grim reality is that there is a social and political time preference for such reforms as decentralisation. In the context of political centralism which obtains today, administrative decentralisation and increased people's participation must be pursued irrespective of other considerations. By at least decentralising administration in ministries, line agencies and departments, government functionaries at the lower levels and will be capacitated and exposed to a planning concept that requires a greater taking into account of local conditions and a wider participation in the development process. Administrative decentralisation will assist in streamlining government operations, mainly through simplification of administrative process and procedures, to improve access of the public government services and to effect the expeditious implementation of priority programmes and projects. It will also effect better coordination of all development efforts, including the effective integration of government corporate programmes within the mainstream of national government activities. In this



way, the administrative preparedness for greater decentralisation or devolution (characteristic of democratic decentralisation) can be ensured. This is a point of view counter to the extremist one that nothing short of absolute devolution is needed in decentralised development.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the country experiences reviewed here, it is apparent that several aspects of decentralisation will require the attention of governments both in Asia in Africa in order to consolidate the progress made thus far. Among these, one of the most important relates to capacitation. Ultimately, the success of decentralisation will depend, to a considerable extent, on the capacities available at the local level and on an appropriate set of assigned responsibilities. The key to generating and sustaining the momentum for decentralisation will lie with the growth of properly motivated and empowered participatory groups at the grassroots level. Another consideration relates to the role of voluntary agencies. In none of the countries under review has any serious and systematic effort been made to incorporate their operations into the government's decentralised planning framework.

We may conclude this discussion on the critical lessons emerging from our case studies with a few observations. Most of these would seem to be restating the basic and obvious conclusions which have been debated again and again in many forums. Yet, these need to be restated, as the gap between how things should be and how they actually are does not seem to have been bridged over the years. One inescapable conclusion is that the emergence of a legitimate representative local government keeping pace with the historical changes taking place in social systems and in the light of a desired agenda of transformation is still a far cry.

Ideally, a democratic local government system in any country should be characterised by the following features :

- separate legal existence.
- power of adopting own budget.
- authority to allocate resources to schemes perceived as priorities by the local people.
- efficient performance of a comprehensive i.e. a significant range of functions dealing with local development.

- popular mandate.
- powers to exercise choice in all local development matters i.e., comprehensive localism.

As against an ideal situation such as this, most developing countries project a poor image of local governments with limited powers and functions, limited authority and poor resources (both financial and personnel). Most local governments, both in Asia and Africa are financially weak local authorities, palpably incapable of managing even the limited social service functions entrusted to them such as public health and sanitation, primary education and primary health care. Conditions, particularly in some of the African countries, are highly deplorable. During his studies of some African Countries, this author noted that the quality of the performance of local governments was so poor that some of the rural people who were interviewed seemed least enthusiastic in securing democratic control over local policy making functions and implementation of services. In most countries, local government is not a recognised limb of the total government structure. Even in India with about half a century of democracy, it was only recently that constitutional recognition for the third tier of government became a reality.

Apart from fiscal debility, lack of powers to exercise administrative control over the staff working in local bodies, and above all, vulnerability of local governments to the Damocles sword of supersession at any time by the higher level bodies, render local government in developing countries one of the weakest links in the organisational chain. It is in this context that issues like decentralisation, local autonomy, sustainable institutional structures and participatory development continue to remain pressing policy problems. □

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