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Decentralisation in Practice

Power, Livelihoods
and Cultural Meaning
in West Africa

Workshop
Highlights
2004

Decentralisation in Practice

**Power, Livelihoods
and Cultural Meaning
in West Africa**

International Workshop
Highlights
Uppsala, Sweden
May 4-6, 2004

In collaboration with
Sida and DANIDA

IIED's Drylands Programme

Promoting better and more sustainable livelihoods for people in Africa's drylands – that is the objective of IIED's Drylands Programme. Our priorities are:

- to strengthen the capacity of local people to manage their resources sustainably and equitably;
- to promote policies and institutions that enable participation and subsidiarity in decision-making;
- to influence global processes that further the development needs of dryland people.

In partnership with African and European organisations, we carry out research and foster informed debate on key policy issues of direct concern to poor people.

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The Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, builds on a longstanding tradition of international ethnographic research. The Department's scholars and doctoral candidates research issues of critical relevance in today's world. Merged with the Department of European Ethnology in 1996, we have been recognised internationally for our:

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The international workshop on **Decentralisation in Practice**, convened jointly by the Department of Cultural Anthropology & Ethnology at Uppsala University and the Drylands programme of IIED took place in Uppsala, Sweden on the 4-6 May 2004. Over fifty people participated from institutions as diverse as the universities of Bamako (Mali), Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), Douala (Cameroon), Roskilde (Denmark) and Stockholm, Gothenburg and Uppsala (Sweden). Policy research institutes in both the Sahel and Europe, notably the LASDEL in Niger, the CEK Kala-Saba in Mali, the ACE-RECIT in Burkina Faso, the Observatory of Decentralisation Municipal Development Partnership in Benin, the Nordic Africa Institute in Sweden and IIED in the UK, and bilateral and multilateral aid and development organisations (Sida, FAO, Swiss cooperation) participated. Sida and DANIDA funded the workshop as part of their support to IIED's regional programme *Making Decentralisation Work*.

Through presentations and plenary discussion, workshop participants debated those factors determining how policy commitments to devolved forms of government actually work in practice and their effects on local people's livelihoods. The workshop demonstrated how the decentralisation processes in West Africa are essentially political requiring major shifts in power relations between different actors at different levels, and that to understand these processes both a livelihoods and a cultural perspective are essential. Over the two and half days, twenty papers were presented stimulating debate on five thematic areas:

- The Context and Stakes of Decentralisation in West Africa;
- Decentralisation, Institutions and Local Powers;
- Participation, Citizenship and Governance;
- Decentralisation and the Good Governance of Natural Resources; and
- Decentralisation from a Swedish Perspective.

Here we present the highlights of the event, focusing only on key issues raised by the papers and the debate following their presentation. The attached CD-Rom contains the final versions of all the papers presented at the workshop. They are also available from www.iied.org/drylands.

SETTING THE SCENE

Margareta Fahlgren, dean of the Faculty of Arts at Uppsala University, opened the workshop welcoming participants to Uppsala and its university. In her speech, she particularly stressed the importance of using a cultural perspective to further our analysis and understanding of the complex issues at play in society today.

Sten Hagberg, in his introductory speech, explained how the successive waves of decentralisation to have swept West Africa over the past fifteen years have their origins in a growing awareness and demand for democracy, often culminating in national conferences (also see paper by Charles Mback).

Decentralisation became a means by which the over-centralisation of political decisions at the top of the state could be altered. Yet, too little attention has been paid to the practices of decentralisation. Instead of describing how decentralisation *should be, ought to be, or, once problems arise, should have been*, there is a need to focus on the mundane, everyday exercise of devolved power sharing. And it is this attention to detail that reveals how the practice of decentralisation

has to address political, economic and cultural dimensions currently at work in local political arenas across West Africa.

Decentralisation, if it is to work for the benefit of all citizens and the nation, requires a major redistribution of power and responsibility from the state to its citizens. Institutional frameworks provided by national policies and legislation are important, in that they define the contours within which power sharing will take place. But they are not enough. There has to be a genuine commitment by those in power to relinquish control and to transfer meaningful authority and resources to lower levels of decision-making. Citizens too have to appropriate the process and “take power” in a responsible and just manner according to their values, and develop the skills and confidence to hold their leaders to account.

SETTING THE SCENE

Papers presented

- Key note speech: *Political, Economic and Cultural practices of decentralisation in West Africa* by Sten Hagberg
- *Introducing IIED's Making Decentralisation Work programme* by Ced Hesse, and Bara Guèye

The success of decentralisation also hinges on the degree to which local government bodies can apply principles of good governance and deliver appropriate and cost-effective services to their constituents. Failure to deliver on all these issues will compromise the legitimacy and ability of the decentralisation process in West Africa to contribute to the furtherance of democracy and poverty reduction in the region. There are cultural meanings attributed to decentralisation which need to be taken into consideration. Decentralisation may enable a re-appropriation not only of local resources but also of local cultural identities and values. It could allow for local arrangements building on local rules and institutions.

The reshaping of state-society relations encouraged by decentralisation is not merely a manifestation of power but concerns the fundamental relations between citizens and the state. It presents new ways in which the postcolonial state is locally appropriated and in this respect, the cultural dimension of decentralisation needs further conceptualisation. Greater scrutiny and careful analysis of how decentralisation works in practice on a day-by-day basis is essential to ensuring rhetoric turns to reality.

The introductory session ended with a presentation of the IIED-programme *Making Decentralisation Work*, funded by Sida and DANIDA. In recognition of the political and social dimensions that contribute to poverty and social exclusion, particularly at the local level, Phase 1 of the programme (2000-4), focused on two critical areas: the design of a set of tools and methods to strengthen local government processes of social accountability and inclusion; and the establishment of sustainable mechanisms for informed debate and policy influence at local, national and regional levels. A second phase of work is in preparation to consolidate and broaden activities.

SESSION 1: Context and stakes of decentralisation in West Africa

Is decentralisation just another development fad, foisted upon Africans by western donors and financial institutions as a precondition for aid? Does this explain why decentralisation is slow in taking root in many West African countries, as many observers from Africa would have us believe? Not so, says Charles Mback arguing that regardless of whether or not there was external pressure, civil society and opposition political parties have been vocal in demanding for a radical redefinition of the relationship between the State and its citizens. These demands came to a head in the late 1980s through a series of national conferences following periods of social strife and political instability.

CONTEXT AND STAKES OF DECENTRALISATION IN WEST AFRICA

Papers presented

- *The national conferences & the issue of decentralisation in Africa during the 1990s* by Charles Nach Mback
- *Les opportunités des rendez-vous manqués des processus de décentralisation en Afrique de l'Ouest* by Antoine R. Sawadogo
- *De la démocratisation à la décentralisation: Etats des lieux d'un processus encore inachevé* by Saidou Halidou

Saidou Halidou goes further arguing that most Sahelian governments had no option but to adopt a process of decentralisation given the failure of a succession of governance models, vesting strong powers in a central and often single-party State, to bring prosperity and peace to the region. The issue is no longer whether decentralisation is an option, but how in practice it needs to be implemented if it is to realise its potential. But both he and Antoine Sawadogo in highlighting a number of challenges demonstrate that this is no easy task. Key issues include the articulation between

customary authorities and newly elected government bodies and the concern that decentralisation has to address poverty if it is to make a difference. As one participant said, "*one can not eat decentralisation*". A fundamental prerequisite, however, is for the state to create the conditions whereby citizens are empowered to find collective responses to their development needs and problems, designing laws and institutions tailored to local specificities.

The papers incited much discussion. One issue raised concerned two ways in which people view decentralisation. On the one hand, there are the reformists and idealists, while on

the other hand, stand the cynical. Yet, this dichotomy appears to ignore the relationship between local forces and intervening outside forces. How is the relationship between 'the local' and 'the central' mediated politically and to what extent is it merely the old political elite that is redirecting attention to 'the local'?

SESSION 2: Decentralisation, institutions and local powers

Hubert Ouédraogo addressed the problem of local legitimacies and looked at the place of customary chiefs in decentralisation. Drawing on examples from Burkina Faso, he asserted that chiefs are deeply involved in the politics of decentralisation and that many have even participated in elections and become mayors. The involvement of customary authorities in these newly created political spaces, represents, according to Ouédraogo, an appropriation of the democratic process by the "old guard" effectively denying villagers their civic rights as citizens.

Mats Hårsmar's paper addresses the dual character of peasant organisations on the Mossi Plateau in central Burkina Faso. Typically, these organisations are characterised by a leadership that draws legitimacy from its relations with customary authorities while also claiming to uphold principles of western democracy in order to secure northern funding and support.

Syna Ouattara highlights the issue of security through a presentation of the emergence of the *dozow* hunters' movement in Côte d'Ivoire (and elsewhere across West Africa). But instead of merely looking into the politics of the *dozow*,

DECENTRALISATION, INSTITUTIONS AND LOCAL POWERS

Papers presented

- *La décentralisation et pouvoir traditionnel : le paradoxe des légitimités locales* by Hubert Ouédraogo
- *The dual character of local power structures: peasant organisations in Burkina Faso* by Mats Hårsmar
- *Société civile, Etat et pouvoir à l'heure de la décentralisation : le cas de l'association des Dozow en Côte d'Ivoire* by Syna Ouattara
- *Local powers awaiting decentralisation (Niger)* by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan
- *Democratisation and decentralisation process in Niger: the black box of local party politics* by Erik Hahonou
- *Political dimensions of Sida's support to decentralisation in West Africa: personal comments* by Helena Bjuremalm

Quattara raises the issue of how their spiritual and political powers are represented in public discourse in contemporary Côte d'Ivoire. Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan reports from the work carried out by the LASDEL team observing decentralisation in 15 study sites in Niger. A number of tendencies can be identified in this nation-wide study, including the diversity of local situations, the challenges of customary chieftaincy, tenure issues and the ambiguities surrounding 'projects'. Olivier de Sardan further indicates that local public debate on decentralisation has increased with the participation of the educated elite seeking to obtain a political platform for future local elections. Eric Hahonou adds to the Nigerien case by addressing local party politics with particular reference to "political nomadism". What has been called localism (i.e. belonging to the locality) rather than political positioning between political parties seems to characterise local politics in Niger. But in the attempt to find consensual solutions, marginalized and servile groups continue to be bypassed by the political process. The Nigerien case also highlights that decentralisation is at various stages of implementation. Despite years of debate, development actors, politicians and other significant actors, including researchers, are still "waiting for decentralisation to happen". Helena Bjuremalm's paper on Sida's power analysis in West Africa summarises some main findings in the Swedish strategy for West Africa.

SESSION 3: Participation, citizenship and governance

For decentralisation to deliver results in an effective manner, citizens have to be given the rights and develop the capacity to participate fully in the decision making process. Throughout West Africa, many initiatives are being taken to provide citizens with the tools and methods to help improve their participation. These range from participatory budgeting by local government authorities in Senegal and Mali (Bara Guèye and Ousmane Samaké) to the design of a training programme in *Pulaar* on Pastoralism in the Sahel to enable pastoral and agro-pastoral communities better understand and articulate the rationale of their livelihood systems to local and national government authorities (paper by Ced Hesse). But as both Ousmane Samaké and Oussouby Touré point out, the success of such tools are heavily dependent on the "representative-

ness” and legitimacy of the elected leaders, and the level of power and responsibility that the central government is willing to transfer to them, particularly for the management of land and other natural resources. Lars Rudebeck, while stressing the role that civil society organisations can play in strengthening local communities’ capacity to demand greater participation in decision-making, warns of the dangers of a patron-client relationship developing between these actors thus preventing a genuine decentralisation of the democratisation process.

PARTICIPATION, CITIZENSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Papers presented

- *Democratisation and “civil society” in a West African village (Guinea-Bissau)* by Lars Rudebeck
- *Pastoralism and decentralisation* by Oussouby Touré
- *Giving pastoralists a voice* by Ced Hesse
- *Auto-gouvernance et décentralisation : problématique de la participation citoyenne* by Ousmane Samaké
- *Budget participatif* by Bara Guèye

SESSION 4: Decentralisation and governance of natural resources

In much of West Africa, land and natural resources constitute the main source of livelihoods for a large portion of the rural population. In several countries, decentralisation entails the transfer of natural resource management responsibilities to local governments. This creates new opportunities for secure and equitable resource access and for sustainable resource management, as it reduces the distance between “managers” and “users”. However, it also provides new opportunities for rent seeking and resource grabbing by local elites. Also, newly established local governments must come to terms with an array of pre-existing local institutions that are already involved in land and resource management. Getting these issues right is a key for decentralisation to make a difference to the everyday lives of citizens.

These are some of the questions discussed during this session of the workshop. On the one hand, Serigne Mansour Tall presents a tool – “local conventions” – that local governments and other local actors can use to manage resources on the basis of agreed rules and in an equitable and sustainable way. On the other hand, Moussa Djiré explores the opportunistic and rent-

DECENTRALISATION AND GOVERNANCE OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Papers presented

- *Mythes et réalités de la gouvernance locale : l'horizon indéterminé de la décentralisation au Mali* by Moussa Djiré
- *Decentralisation by default: local suppliers and re-traditionalisation of regulation in the wake of privatisation of water provisioning in Kano, Nigeria* by Gunilla Andrae
- *Conventions locales* by Serigne Mansour Tall

seeking behaviour of different players – from government officials to local councillors – during the public sale of lands held by a commune in the outskirts of Bamako. While the first paper shows the potential for positive change that decentralisation embodies, the latter raises concerns that decentralisation may result in the “devolution of bad governance”.

Drawing on a case study from Nigeria, Gunilla Andrae shows how state failure in service provision and multiple local institutions and service providers (both formal and informal) may result in a situation of “decentralisation by default” even where decentralisation is not explicitly entrenched in the regulatory framework. Finally, Paul Mathieu broadens the scope of the debate from decentralisation to “deconcentration”, and analyses the experience of the Land Commissions in Niger.¹ These show how local-level, low-cost institutional arrangements may be relatively effective mechanisms for land management and administration where they enable transparency and local participation.

SESSION 5: Decentralisation in Sweden

The Lord Mayor of Uppsala, John-Erik Thun, gave a very interesting presentation of how local government works in practice in Uppsala. Despite the many differences between Sweden and West Africa, Thun's presentation nonetheless confirmed that many problems and challenges of a similar nature exist, including the difficulties of levying of local taxes, the potential conflict associated with drawing up and formalising territorial boundaries and the often problematic relationship with the central state.

1. Paul Mathieu's paper is not included in the attached CD Rom. If you would like a copy please contact him at Paul.Mathieu@fao.org.

SESSION 6: What future for decentralisation in West Africa?


That decentralisation is a credible and appropriate policy to support poverty reduction and socio-economic development in West Africa is not in doubt. But whether there is a future for it depends on a number of critical issues debated by all the participants in the last session of the workshop.² Some of these issues are presented here.

Funding is critical. In practice, the legitimacy of the decentralisation processes in West Africa largely hinges on local government bodies making a tangible difference to people's lives. In the immediate term people want to see improvements in health, education, marketing, employment, water, etc.; otherwise, in what way is it different to central government systems? But paying for the cost of local development is a major challenge. External funding from donor countries is not the solution. Not only does it fail to build local capacity for resource mobilisation, it often reinforces patron-client relations between the donor and the host country and has, in certain cases, reinforced political and ethnic divisions within countries.

Programmes of **decentralised cooperation**, which foster genuine North-South partnerships to build capacities in democratic governance and business enterprise, are potentially useful and should be encouraged. Yet while being sympathetic to the idea, several participants indicated that practical experiences are negative. A key area of support could be helping local government bodies design ways in which to raise funds locally, particularly in the richer areas of a country. The problem is not so much a lack of funds, but inappropriate fiscal systems, a lack of financial accountability and local attitudes towards paying taxes as well the economic viability of certain rural councils.

Power relations are determining. Decentralisation is a power struggle between different interests groups. It is not just a technical or institutional issue. The implementation of decentralisation has seen the re-emergence of local elites or customary authorities as local people use cultural references to support or demand their claims to power. Dominant political

2. See also comments by Déo Nyamusenge on the CD-ROM.



parties have in certain countries successfully used decentralisation to infiltrate local government and control all aspects of public life right down to the level of the village, thereby consolidating their power base and denying citizens genuine democratic choices. **Exclusion** of certain categories, particularly women, in the affairs of public life is a clear indication of where the balance of power resides, and is a major challenge facing society in much of West Africa. Positive discrimination through the legal enforcement of a minimum number of women occupying positions of public office is showing some signs of success in certain countries.

Harnessing the cultural dimension of decentralisation is central to its success. While decentralisation reforms offer a wonderful laboratory to observe and understand the dynamics of local politics in West Africa and how they are contributing to the emergence of a new elite and political culture, these processes are not necessarily benefiting ordinary citizens. Decentralisation as practised across much of West Africa today is often no more than a reinvention of tradition where the chiefs, notably the chefs de canton, are using the reforms to consolidate or further extend their powers.

Addressing this trend is complex, highly politicised and culturally driven. Yet, the cultural dimensions of decentralisation and its links to local and national power, remains largely unexplored. What happens in the process of appropriating decentralisation? How can local powers be harnessed to act as a counter-balancing force to control the elected? How do citizens perceive their relations with the state as well as the local community? Even though these issues were debated during the workshop, participants agreed that further work is needed on the cultural dimensions of the social and political change as a result of the transfer of powers and resources to locally elected government authorities.

Making Decentralisation Work

Decentralisation offers real opportunities for local people to have a say in the decisions that affect their everyday lives. But will this opportunity be realised? IIED, together with a range of partner organisations, is striving to *make decentralisation work*. The goal is pro-poor economic growth and social development through more equitable and sustainable management of the natural resources on which so many people depend. This programme responds to a major change in policy among Sahelian governments. Decentralisation – the transfer of decision-making powers and resources from central government to elected local government bodies – is being pursued throughout the region.

The *Making Decentralisation Work* programme is designed to support these changes in three key areas:

- Building the capacity of local people and their organisations to influence the local and national level decisions that affect their lives.
- Building the capacity of local institutions, particularly elected government bodies, to be inclusive and accountable in the management of local affairs.
- Building the capacity of central government to create a broad policy environment, which empowers local level decision-making and authority, while ensuring principles of equity and sustainability.

For more information about the programme please go to our website www.iied.org/drylands or contact us at IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London, WC1H 0DD, United Kingdom, email: drylands@iied.org.

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