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Decentralization in Africa: Emerging Trends and Progress

Stocktaking Survey

Decentralization, defined broadly as the transfer of public authority, resources, and personnel from the national level to sub-national jurisdictions, has been a recurrent theme in African countries since independence. In the last decade or so decentralization has gained prominence as an expressed goal or as an actual programmatic pursuit in the context of or as a consequence of two prominent movements affecting the African state. One consists of structural adjustment programs that sought to reform the public sector starting in the 1980s while the other is the ongoing transition toward more democratic and competitive politics. In nearly all African countries, structures of local administration exist but are often subordinated in their legal creation, mandate, and operation to the central state, especially the executive. As elsewhere in the developing world, political and economic liberalization have opened possibilities or at least revived claims for greater decentralization. Major development donors have also pushed decentralization as a pathway to improving governance and service delivery in developing countries.

This paper summarizes a larger report, *Decentralization in Africa: A Stocktaking Survey*, which provides

a detailed overview of decentralization in Africa based on the assessments of World Bank specialists working on each country covered. The report catalogs the status of decentralization based on a number of indicators for each country as reported in response to a survey administered in 2002.

Progress on three fronts

Progress on decentralization was measured by three indices to reflect the three defining aspects of decentralization: *political, administrative, and fiscal*. Assessing decentralization at this disaggregated level helps better clarify the component structures underpinning claims to decentralization as well as point to the limits of such claims.

Thus, a *political decentralization* index was computed from the mean of the following: the number of elected sub-national tiers, the score for the existence of direct elections for local governments, and the score for turnout and fairness of such elections. Thus a country was likely to score high (i.e., 4) if it had more levels of sub-national government that were elected rather than appointed, where local governments in particular were elected, and where

local government elections were adjudged free and fair. The highest score attainable was 4, while the lowest was 0. Of the 30 countries analyzed, eight scored high (at least a 3 on the index) indicating a high degree of political decentralization. These were South Africa, Uganda, and Namibia (all above 3.0) and Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, Ethiopia and Cote d'Ivoire. A second set of countries indicated a moderate level of political decentralization, with scores ranging from 2.0 to 2.9; these included seven countries (i.e., Nigeria, Rwanda, Madagascar, Zambia, Tanzania, Mali and Malawi). The rest of the countries (15) indicated very low levels of political decentralization, although four of these at least held elections in part of the territory.

Administrative decentralization was tracked using three indicators whose mean produced the index. The index consisted of the score for the clarity of roles for national and local governments provided by the law, the score indicative of where the actual responsibility for service delivery resided, and the score indicative of where the responsibility for (hiring and firing) civil servants resided. Thus a country with a very clear legal framework demarcating local and central government roles and institutionalizing the principle of *subsidiarity*, with actual service delivery delegated to and performed by localities, and with civil servants responsible to local authorities, would have scored highest on this index (i.e., 4). Those with no legal framework, and with persistent centralization in service delivery and in civil service oversight (hiring and firing) would score low on this index (i.e., lowest score 0). On

this score, two countries indicated a high degree of administrative decentralization (South Africa and Uganda) while ten others indicated a moderate degree of administrative decentralization (Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Ghana, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Burkina Faso and Eritrea). Of the sixteen countries that showed very low degrees of administrative decentralization, six had practically made no effort to decentralize administrative systems.

Finally, *fiscal decentralization* was measured using two indicators: the score given for the arrangements for fiscal transfers from the central government to localities and the score corresponding to the proportion (offered as a range) of public expenditure controlled by the localities. The index was simply the mean of these two scores. Thus, a country with an established and often-used formula for fiscal transfers and in which locally controlled expenditures account for a high proportion of overall public expenditures would have scored high on this index (i.e., highest score 4). A country whose fiscal transfers to localities were ad hoc and whose localities accounted for a minuscule proportion of national public expenditures would score low on the fiscal decentralization measure (i.e., lowest score 0).

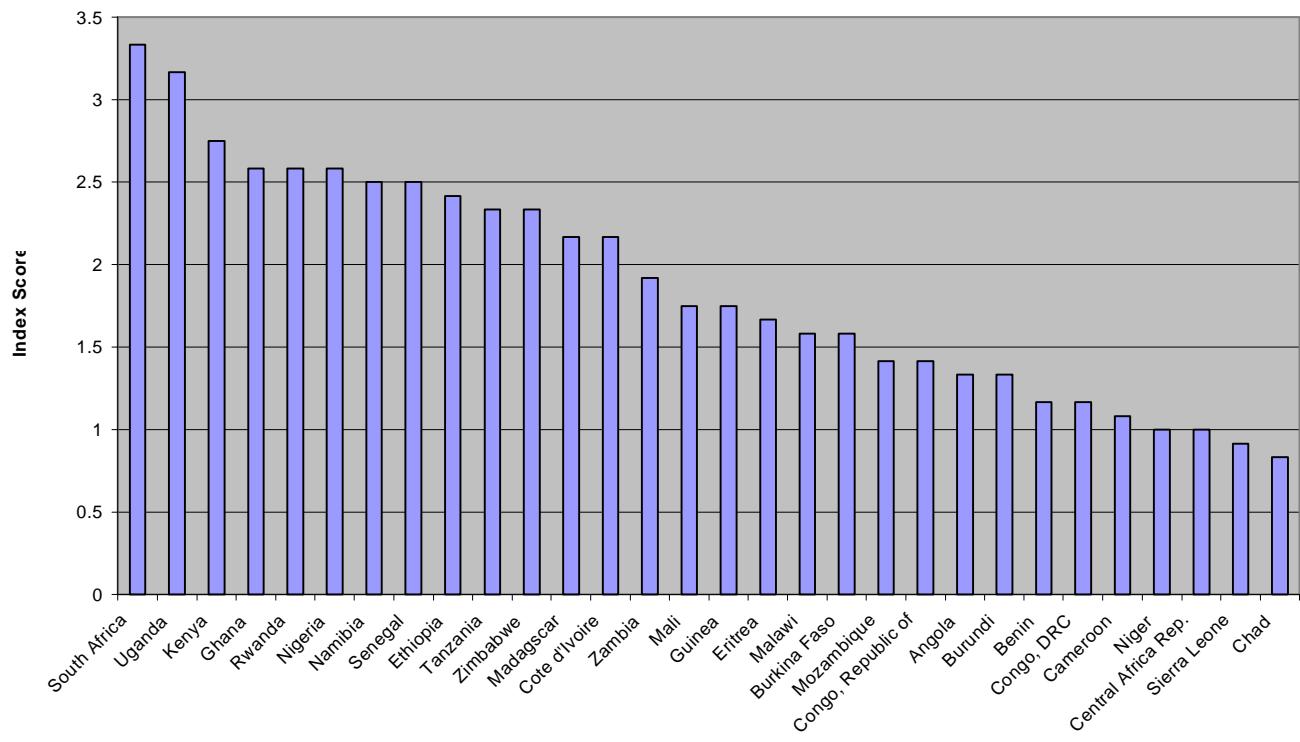
The degree of fiscal decentralization across the continent is very low as revealed by the fact that in 19 of the 30 countries analyzed local governments control less than 5 percent of the national public expenditure. Only South Africa was assessed to have a very high degree of fiscal decentralization (i.e., more than 10 percent of public expenditures are controlled by sub-national governments). The coun-

tries that scored high (i.e., where local governments control 5–10 percent of public expenditures) are Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Countries with moderate levels of fiscal responsibilities anchored at the local level (i.e., where 3–5 percent of public expenditures are controlled by local authorities) included Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana, Senegal, Burundi, and the Congo Republic, and Congo DRC.

These rankings of fiscal decentralization should be approached with care. First, the proportion of public expenditures controlled by the local authorities is very small such that even the “high performers” are marginal in their performance compared to the global trends. Moreover, the proportion of public expenditures controlled by the local authorities is only one dimension of fiscal decentralization, which ought to include rules of fiscal control and revenue collection—almost always reported in interviews to be in favor of the central state and excessive.

Taken as a whole, data indicated that the degree to which the various components of decentralization have been achieved varies markedly such that one component may be rated very high while another quite low. That *political decentralization* was the most advanced component of decentralization was not surprising. First, political decentralization is the local manifestation of the democratic reform that swept the continent in the 1990s. However, although widespread it is not necessarily deeply ensconced. Second, *administrative decentralization* appears as often and is often rated high because administrative reform was the preferred pathway to decentralization (in particular, deconcentration) before democra-

Fig. 11. Overall Decentralization Score



tization. That fiscal decentralization lags behind these other variables is not surprising. Even where it seems much further along it belies the small proportions that are used for comparison to the national public expenditures rather than the advancement of fiscal responsibilities at the local level.

Overall progress

A composite index was created to rank countries on their overall decentralization, taking into account structural and performance factors. The index consisted of twelve distinct indicators used in the analysis of components of decentralization.

Overall, the data indicates a moderate degree of decentralization in the Africa region for the thirty countries for which data was complete and analyzed (Figure 1). On a scale of 0 to 4, with 0 indicat-

ing the lowest level of decentralization and 4 the highest level possible, only two countries (South Africa and Uganda) scored in the top range (3.0–4.0). The next level (2.0–2.9) indicates countries with a moderate degree of decentralization. Eleven countries were in this category: Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Namibia, Senegal, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, and Madagascar. The third group of countries, those with low levels of decentralization (1.0–1.9), had the largest number of countries (13): Zambia, Guinea, Mali, Eritrea, Burkina Faso, Malawi, Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Angola, Burundi, Benin, The Democratic Republic of Congo, and Cameroon. The final group, with nominal or no decentralization (range 0–0.9), included four countries for which data was complete (The Central Africa Republic,

Niger, Sierra Leone, and Chad), but could conceivably include nearly half of the fifteen countries for which complete data was unavailable.

In relation to overall decentralization, it is notable that only four of the 13 countries in the upper levels (high and moderate) of overall decentralization are francophone (Senegal, Rwanda, Côte d'Ivoire and Madagascar). Of these, two (Rwanda and Madagascar) have overhauled their administrative systems substantially and can be considered to have had a major break with the established francophone patterns. Indeed, except for four countries (Sierra Leone, Eritrea, Zambia, and Malawi), all the countries scoring in the lower half (low and no decentralization) of the overall index are either francophone (11) or lusophone (2).

Conclusion

Our findings indicate decentralization in Africa is progressing but unevenly both in terms of regional spread and in terms of the aspects of decentralization that are installed. Overall, the pace and content of decentralization in the region can best be described as moderate and, where it has effectively been installed, in need of deepening. Among the thirty countries analyzed, a little less than half have high or moderate levels of overall decentralization, with the least decentralization occurring in francophone countries. Considering most of the countries excluded from analysis were anecdotally noted to have minimal or no decentralization, we can assuredly say that only about a third of African countries have effective decentralized structures of governance.

While these findings suggest decentralized authorities in Africa are short on the requisites for effective administration and development response to local community needs, it is critical to recognize that these authorities are in the midst of immense change. This change is indeed in the right direction—toward deliberate creation and enhancement of local authority structures and in particular responsive to the changed context of democratic politics. It is significant to note that in no country was the claim to *centralization* as a preferred organizational model made or implied, nor was decentralization considered undesirable, only difficult to effect and sustain. Significantly, political decentralization, which is often the critical first step toward effective decentralization, has only recently taken root. There is therefore legitimate

promise in the decentralization of the African state, although there are also many challenges that confront the process and, beyond it, service delivery and poverty reduction.

This article was written by Stephen N. Ndegwa, a Young Professional formerly attached to the Africa Public Sector Reform unit. It is based on Decentralization in Africa: A Stocktaking Survey (Africa Working Paper Series #40, November 2002). Please direct comments or requests for the full report to sndegwa@worldbank.org.

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