DECENTRALISATION AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN AFRICA:
THE POLITICS OF LOCAL–CENTRAL RELATIONS

RICHARD C. CROOK*

Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

SUMMARY

Decentralisation advocates argue that decentralised governments are more responsive to the needs of the poor than central governments and thus are more likely to conceive and implement pro-poor policies. Recent evidence from a selected group of sub-Saharan African countries is reviewed in a comparative framework that highlights factors associated with success in poverty reduction. It is argued that the degree of responsiveness to the poor and the extent to which there is an impact on poverty are determined primarily by the politics of local–central relations and the general regime context—particularly the ideological commitment of central political authorities to poverty reduction. In most of the cases, ‘elite capture’ of local power structures has been facilitated by the desire of ruling elites to create and sustain power bases in the countryside. Popular perceptions of the logic of patronage politics, combined with weak accountability mechanisms, have reinforced this outcome. The conclusion from these African cases is that decentralisation has not empowered challenges to local elites who are resistant or indifferent to pro-poor policies. Thus, decentralisation is unlikely to lead to more pro-poor outcomes without a serious effort to strengthen and broaden accountability mechanisms at both local and national levels. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION: DECENTRALISATION, POLITICS AND POVERTY

Are decentralised forms of government more responsive to the needs of the poor and hence more likely to conceive and implement pro-poor policies? Decentralisation advocates argue that, because decentralisation brings government closer to the governed both spatially and institutionally, government will be more knowledgeable about and responsive to the needs of the people.¹ This tendency to conflate decentralisation with democratisation and enhancement of participation at the ‘community’ level underlies the belief that decentralisation will lead to greater responsiveness to the ‘poor’. Insofar as the majority of the population in developing countries is both poor and excluded from elite politics, any scheme that appears to offer greater political participation to ordinary citizens seems likely to increase their ‘voice’ and hence (it is hoped) the relevance and effectiveness of government’s policy.

In this article, evidence from a group of selected sub-Saharan African countries with recent experience of decentralised government is reviewed in a comparative framework which takes account of cases where decentralisation has indeed successfully contributed to poverty reduction.² The focus is primarily on political and administrative decentralisation, that is, the allocation of power amongst territorially defined and nested hierarchies.³ It is argued that the degree of responsiveness to the poor and the extent to which there is any impact on poverty are determined primarily by the politics of local–central relations and the general regime context—particularly the commitment of the central political authorities to poverty reduction.
Different governments have different political purposes and motives for introducing decentralisation. These intentions are embodied in the structure and form of decentralisation or, more subtly, are revealed in how the system functions after it is introduced. But political variables determine decentralisation outcomes (in terms of greater responsiveness and poverty reduction), not only because of variations in formal structure or technical failures of implementation, but also because decentralisation is essentially about distribution of power and resources, both among different levels and territorial areas of the state and among different interests in their relationship to ruling elites. The politics of central–local relations explains what interests might gain or lose from any set of institutional opportunities, policy initiatives and resource allocations and relates these factors to the political purposes of decentralisation. As Boone has noted in her analysis of state-building in West Africa, decentralisation schemes cannot be treated as technically neutral devices which can be ‘implemented’ without constraint, as if there were no pre-existing social context: ‘Governments may have important stakes in established powerbrokers and in established, local-level social and political hierarchies that can extend beyond the reach of the state’ (Boone, 1998, p. 25). Apparently similar decentralisation reforms could have diametrically opposed purposes according to whether they aim to reinforce vested interests in existing patterns of patronage and central–local linkage, or involve challenges to local elites from groups using decentralised institutions to ‘draw down’ central resources to bolster local power struggles. In the African context, the politics of ethno-regional conflict is particularly important in shaping the structure of decentralisation and indeed the extent to which it is accepted at all by the ruling elite.

DECENTRALISATION AND POVERTY REDUCTION: REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE

Finding systematic evidence for decentralisation outcomes in Africa or elsewhere is difficult. Some comparisons have been made using degree of decentralisation as the independent variable, but the measure normally used—sub-national expenditures as a proportion of total government expenditure—is so flawed as an indicator of the character and functioning of decentralisation structure that the results obtained can only be suggestive at most (see Huther and Shah, 1998).4

Most data are derived from partial case studies that are not systematically comparable. Few case studies satisfy even the minimum requirements for a valid internal measure of performance: base-line and longitudinal data to enable comparisons to be made of the situation before and after decentralisation was introduced; some sense of the overall significance and scope of local expenditures both in relation to local needs and to the national development programme; and some representative assessments of impact. In the absence of this kind of information, much of the evidence is anecdotal.

Given the need for rich case-study evidence to assess the performance of such complex political and institutional processes, the analysis here is based primarily on the ‘best documented’ African cases: Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania, although others are referred to where relevant. South Africa’s post apartheid reforms have also attracted much attention, but the setting up of the new local governments is so recent that much of the research is based on early indications of performance.

In order to facilitate comparison of available evidence, the dependent variable—‘poverty reduction’—has to be broken down into more precise sub-types. ‘Poverty’ is a complex, multidimensional concept, the very causes of which are contested. As Webster notes, if poverty is understood as the product of unequal social and economic relationships then it is not a ‘condition’ which is easily or mechanically dealt with by a single ‘remedy’ such as decentralisation. He proposes a four-fold breakdown of the concept (Webster, 2000, p. 318). In this article, a five-point categorisation is used, distinguishing more clearly between political/relational, social and economic factors:

1. Empowerment of the poor, as measured by responsiveness of government and amounts/effectiveness of participation of the poor.

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4The figure is misleading in the most basic sense in that it aggregates locally—determined spending and spending on sectors or programmes for which the finances are simply transferred to local governments for them to implement (Litvack and Seddon, 1999, p. 19).

2. Pro-poor growth, or changes in levels of economic activity, wages or prices which increase incomes of small farmers, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, small traders or urban workers particularly in the informal sector.

3. Social equity or extent of income redistribution or reduction in inequality levels.

4. Human development or improvements in quality of life and hence life chances of poor people, as reflected in access to health, education, sanitation or justice.

5. Spatial or inter-regional inequality or the extent of redistribution of resources or growth between deprived and economically more wealthy areas of a country.

**Empowerment and responsiveness**

Institutional responsiveness has been defined as the achievement of ‘congruence between community preferences and public policies’ such that activities of the institution are valued by the public (Fried and Rabinovitz, 1980). Insofar as one is interested in responsiveness to the poorer strata of the ‘public’, it is best measured by representative surveys of how those strata perceive local government outputs. Unfortunately few such surveys have been done with the exception of Crook and Manor (1998) for Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire and Mukandala (1998) for Tanzania.

The extent to which decentralisation is associated with more participatory governance can be measured to some degree by changes in the ‘quantity’ of participation (numbers participating in elections, representative bodies, associations etc.) and by changes in its social scope (which groups participate and whether it has become more inclusive of the poor and disadvantaged). But it cannot be assumed that empowerment and policy responsiveness automatically follow either from increasing participation or from increasing representation of the poor and disadvantaged. For the former to happen, participation must be ‘effective’, which is a question of accountability and changes in organisational behaviour within relevant government bureaucracies. In other words, it is not enough to encourage ‘citizen voice’; citizens’ voices must be ‘heard’ by those who hold governmental power (Goetz et al., 2001). Tracking the impact of participation involves assessing the operation of accountability mechanisms, both internally within local institutions (e.g. accountability of bureaucrats to elected representatives) and externally in relations between local institutions and the public (e.g. fairness and competitiveness of elections or representativeness of elected councillors).

Although there are examples of decentralised government in Africa enhancing participation, there is very little evidence that it has resulted in policies that are more responsive to the ‘poor’—or indeed, to citizens generally. The Ghana case is particularly interesting as it illustrates clearly the proposition that ‘participation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for greater responsiveness’.

Ghana’s District Assemblies, introduced in 1989 under the military rule, were initially successful in enhancing electoral participation and giving access and representation to normally excluded groups, such as the uneducated, farmers, traders and artisans. The social composition of elected Assemblies remains distinctly dualistic, with predictable over-representation of the well educated, but nevertheless substantial representation of less privileged groups, (except for women, who accounted for only 1.6% of members of the first Assemblies).4

At the local level, participation in activities and public meetings, although limited, was typical of the population in terms of age, occupation and education in the two cases studied by Crook and Manor (Crook and Manor, 1998, p. 228). As in most of Africa (Uganda and South Africa excepted), however, women remained generally excluded with the interesting exception of village Unit Committees where there was almost equal participation of women—mainly younger and better educated. But by 1998, their influence was fading. Indeed the populist aspirations of the original 1989 reform were least successful at the village level.

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5 Some analysts relate such behavioural changes to the ‘learning capacity’ of an organisation, or its ability to listen to both its own staff and the public and then alter behaviour accordingly (Korten, 1984; Moris, 1991).

4 Forty-five percent of all elected members nationally in 1989 were teachers or civil servants and in the poor northern district studied by Crook and Manor it was 74% as of 1992–1993.

7 This was due mainly to the influence of the 31st December Women’s Movement, a ‘revolutionary’ organ loyal to President Rawlings.
The Unit Committees were meant to embody the revolutionary aspirations of the Rawlings regime in the 1980s and initially were associated with organisations loyal to Rawlings, including the women’s representatives. Perhaps because of this, when the long delayed popular elections for Unit Committees were held in 1998, 65% of the elections were uncontested, reflecting both apathy and alienation caused by conflict, intimidation of rivals and administrative chaos (Crook, 1999). On the other hand, local participation in ‘self-help’ community development associations—an activity which elected Assembly members are legally bound to encourage and support—has continued to thrive, not surprisingly as they are a well-established element of Ghanaian society. But these associations, in spite of their ‘community based’ character, do not necessarily enhance representation of the poor; they are run by local elites and attempt to raise funds through encouraging patronage of successful (absentee) sons and daughters of the town or village. Decisions taken in public meetings called by such an association might well respect ‘traditional’ Ghanaian procedures for achieving consensus through exhaustive discussion, but would rarely challenge existing social hierarchies.8

In spite of the positive effects on popular participation that Ghana’s District Assemblies have achieved over the past 12 years, their responsiveness to popular needs, particularly the most underprivileged in rural areas, has not been good. In the two districts surveyed in 1992 by Crook and Manor, 70% of respondents felt that the DA did not respond to their needs and only 22% felt it was better than the previous (unelected) system (Crook and Manor, 1998). In spite of real extra resources received by districts after introduction of the District Assemblies Common Fund in 1994–1995,9 similar results have been reported in other districts, including urban areas (Acheampong, 1995; Ayee, 1995; Kessey, 1995). A survey of Kumasi City Council residents, for instance, found that the majority of respondents ‘strongly disagreed that the City Council was sensitive to residents’ needs (Kessey, 1995, p. 157),10 and Schiewer’s study of three rural districts in Brong-Ahafo and Western Regions reported that ‘community- level aspirations were completely ignored’ in drawing up district plans (Schiewer, 1995, p. 304).

Such critical popular assessments reflect the lack of congruence between District Assembly-funded outputs and popular preferences for road repairs, health facilities, water supplies and electricity. Assembly policies tend to reflect either government pressure to mobilise local revenues or centrally determined programmes and priorities, the costs of which have been pushed onto districts.11 This was particularly the case in the 1980s when a national educational reform required construction of junior secondary schools throughout the country; another was ‘setting up’ costs of office buildings and equipment, official housing and the like for the new Assemblies.

The richness of evidence available on the lack of responsiveness of the Ghanaian system demonstrates clearly the need to go beyond increasing participation for its own sake to making participation effective. Yet in comparison with other African countries, Ghana’s Assemblies look relatively good in terms of participatory achievements.

Côte d’Ivoire’s sytem of communes, based upon single ‘urban’ settlements, mostly with populations of less than 20,000, should in principle have encouraged a popular community-based government. But local and national structures of power and the logic of Ivorian politics have produced a very elite dominated system. As in Ghana, electoral participation did increase as a result of opportunities offered by local democracy, particularly in the context of liberalisation of the single party regime in the 1990s. But the communes have been dominated by Mayors, mainly elite politicians who often continue to reside in Abidjan. Fifty-eight percent of respondents in a 1993 survey could not even name a councillor, although most could name the Mayor! (Crook and Manor, 1998, p. 162).

The responsiveness of communes to their citizens generally, let alone the ‘poor’, has therefore been low; only 36% of respondents in the same survey felt that the commune could satisfy their development needs (Crook and Manor, 1998). The preferred developmental outputs of communes—‘town halls’ and secondary schools—had little congruence with respondents’ preferences for roads, social facilities and water supplies. Even with projects that

8Cf. Schiewer’s similar comments on ‘consultative’ public meetings between Assembly representatives and villagers in three other districts of Ghana (Schiewer, 1995, p. 305).
9The Fund, drawing on 5% of national government revenues, represented a ten-fold increase in the amounts which had formerly come from central government ceded revenues (Ayee, 1995).
10The average score on an agree/disagree scale of +2 to −2 was −0.47.
11The allocation of the Fund is tightly controlled by a new department—the Office of the Common Fund Administrator—and by the Ministry of Finance which issues the funds only in accordance with specified earmarked items of expenditures (Ayee, 1995).
had popular resonance, the record of *communes* in consulting citizens was dismal; many projects, particularly schools, were stalled because political leaders were unable to persuade people to contribute to special funds. Overall, it can be said that elected *commune* councillors and officials failed to establish strong relationships of public accountability with their electorates.

The Tanzanian system, which was re-established in 1982, has perhaps an even worse image in that local people see it primarily as an instrument of the ruling Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party for obtaining the compliance of rural people. Council chairmen have a reputation for ‘haranguing peasants’ and there is a deep suspicion of relationships between Councillors, rich traders and land speculators, which is even worse in big cities such as Dar es Salaam (Munkadala, 1998, p. 47). Munkadala also reports a big difference between richer, more urban districts and poorer, more rural districts in degree of contacts and consultations between elected politicians or officials and the public, in favour of the former. In rural districts, poverty, lack of education and distances prevent constituents from making such approaches successfully. It is therefore not surprising that only 29% of respondents in a survey of attitudes to decentralisation felt that elected representatives had real influence and only the same percentage saw any increase in popular participation. When asked which groups ‘benefitted from decentralisation’, 32% agreed that the peasantry had and only 28% named workers and labourers (Munkadala, 1998, p. 53).

In Tanzania there is, however, a popular sentiment in favour of decentralisation. In other words, people do not want local government to be abandoned, they want it to be made more democratic and effective (Munkadala, 1998, p. 64). In Uganda too, after the 1993 reforms, which changed the NRM-dominated Resistance Councils into a multi-tier local government system and devolved major elements of the line ministry budgets to districts, there is interview-based evidence of popular support for the setting-up of district governments. Opening up passable roads and provision of basic health facilities have undoubted benefits for poor farmers in the rural areas (Sverrisson, 1999; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001, p. 13).

Bottom of the list in terms of reputation for responsiveness would be the ‘decentralised’ systems of Kenya, Zimbabwe and Nigeria. The first two are examples of systems devoted to sustaining the power of the governing party at the local level, whilst Nigerian local government has been used since 1983 as an instrument by successive military regimes to create loyal local ‘bosses’ and agencies for the distribution of central patronage which by-pass the federal states. It is difficult to find any positive assessments of these countries in the research literature.

Kenya’s District Focus for Rural Development system, introduced in 1983, incorporates representatives of lower tier elected local government councils, but it is essentially a deconcentration of central ministries tightly controlled by regime officials. Researchers report that local MPs in collaboration with Presidentially appointed District Commissioners make decisions on local development and resource allocations routinely on the basis of political patronage and access to centrally controlled networks. In the process, rules set by tender boards and the work of district treasuries and auditors and the District Development Committees (DDCs) count for little. Political influence even undermines the revenue system in that there is a reluctance to enforce tax payments, extract user charges for water or electricity or pursue evictions against people known to politicians or officials (Smoke, 1993; N’gethe, 1998). Representation of the poor is weak and heads of DDCs can ‘delete proposals without recourse to democratic procedures’. N’gethe sees popular participation as an illusion, quoting a District Officer as saying: ‘to say that ordinary people participate in making decisions is a joke; they have to be guided by the elite or at least energised to participate’ (N’gethe, 1998, p. 44). Even the elected local governments have a reputation of being non-responsive to the electorate in making decisions over which they have some autonomy from the DDCs (Smoke, 1993).

Even before the recent crisis in Zimbabwe, local governments were seen as organs of the ruling party, their main role being to ‘co-operate in pre-packaged government programmes or other outside sponsored initiatives’ and help mobilise villagers for communal labour on development schemes. Brand gives one particularly evocative example from the village level: the party and government authorities apparently complained that representatives elected by villagers onto the development committees (VIDCOs) did not ‘understand’ government policy well and the VIDCOs were thereafter ‘encouraged’ to elect better-educated and receptive representatives—including government employees, such as Village Community Workers employed by the Ministry of Community Development and Women’s Affairs (Brand, 1991).
Nigeria under military rule provides an even more depressing example of local governments run by ‘Presidential’ style chairman who acquired a reputation for behaviour which was corrupt, dictatorial and lacking even ‘minimal’ popular consultation (Olowu, 1994; Awotukun, 1995; Gboyega, 1998). Elected Councils are still unable to exercise any restraining influence on them and as a consequence have abused the impeachment process, for instance in an effort to influence resource allocation (Awotukun, 1995). A study of decentralisation of primary health care concluded that: ‘community awareness of PHC as a system and organisation to influence it was minimal to non-existent’ and local governments generally lacked both upward and downward accountability (Wunsch and Olowu, 1996–1997, p. 72). Olowu’s balance sheet of Nigerian local government in the 1990s concludes that they have lost basic mechanisms of accountability (including local taxation) and he rates them (somewhat generously) at ‘three out of five’ for equity in basic service provision (Olowu, 1997, p. 177).12

Pro-poor growth

There is little need here to spell out the severity of the African economic crisis of the past two decades. By the mid-1990s, 60% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa lived in absolute poverty (World Bank, 1994). Many decentralisation reforms reviewed here have been launched in this context and have shared, sometimes disproportionately, in its effects. It is also evident that tackling the material base of poverty in such struggling, predominantly agricultural economies heavily dependent on foreign aid, requires improving the productivity of and the returns to agriculture, as well as increasing urban employment, basic facts often forgotten in the new emphasis on human development and community empowerment. There is little evidence that purely local programmes, which ignore the need for macro-economic investments and at least regional technical support, can do more than scratch the surface of rural poverty (Belshaw, 2000, p. 100).

The record of the countries already analysed tends to support this view. One telling statistic from Nigeria reveals that most local governments, in a country where 80% of the population depends on agriculture, have no agricultural development programmes; most expenditure is on urban headquarters infrastructure and recurrent costs (Akpan, 1990). In sectors where significant economic impact is possible, Nigerian local governments act as (ineffective) implementation agents for major federal programmes under the Federal Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (Olowu, 1989).

In Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire, expenditures also tend to be limited to physical infrastructures of little or no relevance to improving agriculture. And in the case of infrastructures that are of crucial importance to the local economy, such as roads, water and electricity, local governments have neither the capacity nor legal powers to take action. In comparative terms this is not unusual since it is well established that local government outputs, in Africa as elsewhere, tend to concentrate on physical infrastructures, particularly small-scale construction and social amenity, educational or health projects.

Social equity and human development

The expectation that local-level government will be more concerned with social equity has to confront deeply rooted popular expectations about local representation. Unlike in South Asia and in some Latin American political systems, local government representation of disadvantaged groups in Africa is not part of popular political discourse, except perhaps in South Africa, even if it now figures in the official rhetoric of governments pressured to prepare a national Poverty Reduction Strategic Plan. On the contrary, electors tend to seek the association of well-connected, urban-based elite groups with the politics and development of decentralised authorities, in order to increase the effectiveness of their community’s representation and thereby increase potential for beneficial patronage and capital investment. This is in many respects simply a recognition of political realities in systems where patronage networks are deeply entrenched. (In Cote d’Ivoire, 30 years of stable single-party rule made this an

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12 Some positive cases of Nigerian local government have been reported, e.g. Onitsha town council in Anambra state during the 1980s, where strong revenues from local commerce and a good relationship with the community provided a more good basis for a viable government. But Olowu admits that its expenditure was mainly devoted to the needs of the headquarters town itself and neglected the surrounding rural areas (Olowu, 1992).
especially powerful logic, one which persists even after the fall of the Parti démocratique de la Côte d’Ivoire (PDCI) in 2000. The difficulty in finding local governments with any systematic ‘poverty strategy’ is noted by Belshaw (2000), but it is hardly surprising.

In his study of local government and the provision of primary education in Tanzania, Therkildsen (1998, p. 6) notes that discussions of equity only figure in local political debate in relation to fairness among different areas or wards. This is a function of expectations that elected councillors will act as patrons to bring projects to their home village, such that planning allocations are matters of horse-trading among elected councillors. Of course, this is not unique to Tanzania or Africa, but typical of rural societies where councillors are seen as delegates of their communities and it simply illustrates the logic of patronage politics. Nor should one see this as entirely negative; the political pressure to ‘do something’ for one’s electoral base is a kind of responsiveness, even though not necessarily one that relates to ‘poverty alleviation’.

The extent to which decentralisation has resulted in improvements in human development outputs has, therefore, been largely a matter of the resources and systems for allocating funding, primarily by central governments. As Therkildsen points out, local government budgets have been particularly badly hit during the long crisis and local expenditures tend to form only a small proportion of total government expenditure, usually less than 15%; although Kenya at 3.5% is more typical of sub-Saharan Africa (Therkildsen, 1994; World Bank, 2000). In Nigeria, where local governments are 90% funded by the Federal government, they were made responsible for primary education in 1990, but were not given adequate funds for teachers’ pay, leading to strikes and a continuing crisis in education (Olowu, 1997, p. 171; Gboyega, 1998, p. 28). The same crisis occurred in primary health care (Wunsch and Olowu, 1996–1997).

In Tanzania, Therkildsen notes that nominal decentralisation of primary education produced a situation in which by the late 1980s, a third of all school funding came from parents and communities and most of the rest from central government and donors. Local government was marginalised (Therkildsen, 1998, p. 12). The minor ‘success story’ reported by Sverrission’s study of health services in two very poor districts of Uganda (Kibaale and Rakai) shows that 80% of funding came from donors and most of the rest from central government and much of the improved access was due to better communications from road improvements (Sverrisson, 1999). The same dismal story holds in other cases: in Cote d’Ivoire, a severe financial squeeze caused by the 1990s economic crisis led to a virtual collapse of most communes’ development programmes, and in Ghana, before implementation of the District Assemblies Common Fund, two typical districts in the south and north were spending only US$ 0.45 and 0.18 per capita respectively on development for the period 1989–1991 (Crook and Manor, 1998, pp. 249–251).

Spatial equity

Insofar as decentralisation enhances political and fiscal autonomy of territorial sub-units, it is by definition likely to exacerbate uneven development between richer and poorer areas unless balanced by central equalisation schemes. As African local governments are generally not very dependent on local revenues, there should be plenty of scope for redistribution. In states dependent on oil or mineral producing enclaves, redistribution is politically crucial, but also very difficult, as Nigeria continues to demonstrate.

This is one area where some positive results for decentralisation have been reported, in the very basic sense of allocating new resources to poor, remote areas that previously had few or no services. In other words, where it is a question of moving from ‘nothing’ to ‘something’, decentralisation can be positive. This was certainly the case with the initial Ghanaian and Ivorian systems; in Cote d’Ivoire between 1985 and 1996, 159 small towns of the ‘interior’ were given commune status, each receiving basic central grants and the political opportunities that accompanied creation of an administrative and elective institution. In Ghana, the effect was increased by setting up the District Assemblies Common Fund (see above) (Crook and Manor, 1998).

In Uganda and Nigeria, the continuing sub-division of districts and consequent increase in overall numbers is part of a similar logic. Popularly supported campaigns have resulted in the doubling of the number of districts in Uganda since 1986, and in Nigeria, the number of local governments increased from 301 to 589 by the early 1990s (Olowu, 1989, 1997). Such actions are easy to understand as yet another version of the pursuit of centrally funded patronage. There is also the problem that in a situation of financial crisis it is simply spreading the jam too thinly; is
it an effective use of scarce resources to create large numbers of under-financed and ineffective authorities which ultimately produce only disillusion with the government? And where decentralisation is accompanied by withdrawal of or squeezes on central services and shifts to user fees for education or health (as in most of our cases), then the net gains may even be negative.

In Kenya, District Focus resulted in definite redistribution to poorer areas because of a slightly different political logic, which was to strengthen President Moi’s political base in the so-called ‘minority areas’ outside the rich Kikuyu heartlands (Barkan and Chege, 1989, p. 449). In this respect, the strongly deconcentrated character of the system, which dispose of 5% of sector Ministry budgets, has the potential to be effective, dependent of course on the actual aims of centrally directed policy (Belshaw, 2000).

Beyond the simple allocation of resources from central to peripheral areas, is there any evidence of actively managed redistribution? In Ghana, the new District Assemblies Common Fund uses a needs-based equalisation formula to redistribute 5% of national revenues and spreads resources more equitably (within the limitations of ‘project’ based infrastructure development, which as noted above has doubtful relevance to poverty alleviation). In Tanzania, Maro argues that benefits targeted remoter, poorer areas, but Semboja contests this (Maro, 1990; Semboja and Therkildsen, 1994). Much of Maro’s analysis actually refers to Tanzania’s discredited ‘villagisation campaign’ and derives from statistics on distance from formally constituted ‘villages’ to health, education and water facilities. Semboja and Therkildsen argue that insofar as social services were improved and more widely distributed in the 1970s, this cannot be attributed unambiguously to ‘decentralisation’, but was more linked to central provision and donor funding, particularly in the water sector. Inadequate recurrent funding for maintenance may in fact have reintroduced inequities! (Semboja and Therkildsen, 1994, p. 809).

In Uganda, the recent more radical devolution of funding and shift to more local tax raising is making (as predicted) equalisation more difficult and fragmenting the investment capital needed to have a real impact on poverty, for example, by reviving certain export crop industries (Belshaw, 2000). This is another example that should suggest extreme caution in predicting the effects of decentralisation.

Finally, it is as well to remember that in culturally plural societies like Uganda or Nigeria with a history of ethno-regional conflict, even attempting to equalise the spatially inequitable effects of ‘real’ decentralisation is fraught with potentially dangerous political tensions, once they have become transparent.

**EXPLAINING POVERTY REDUCTION OUTCOMES: THE POLITICS OF LOCAL–CENTRAL RELATIONS**

Why has decentralisation in these African cases had so little impact on poverty reduction? It is helpful to compare them with cases where such a link has been established, although there are in fact only a few in the developing world, most notably the Indian states of West Bengal and Kerala and the Brazilian states of Ceara, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul. In West Bengal, democratic decentralisation is associated with a programme of radical agrarian reform, which over a period of more than 20 years has produced significant benefits for the poor in terms of participation, growth of agricultural production and human development (Webster, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001). Kerala is best known for its successful human development programme, although the link with decentralisation is questioned by some (Bandyopdhyay, 1997; Datta, 1997; Heller, 2001). In Brazil, in spite of radical autonomy given to local government by the 1988 Constitution, the most positive anti-poverty outcomes have been associated with either federally funded rural development programmes (most notably the North East Rural Development Programme) or state and city level programmes launched by progressive reforming parties—the PSDB (Brazilian Social Democratic Party) and the PT (Workers Party)—in Ceara, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul (van Zyl et al., 1995; Tendler, 1997; World Bank, 1997; Heller, 2001). In Ceara, highly successful and innovative rural preventive health and employment-generating policies were implemented whose performance was primarily the result of a ‘three-way dynamic between local government, state government and civil society’ (Tendler, 1997, p. 145).

The critical difference between this group of cases and the African would seem to lie in the kinds of relationships which obtain between central and local ruling elites and, more specifically, the political goals of decentralisation reforms themselves.
The political goals of decentralisation

What might be termed the ‘West Bengal’ model suggests that decentralisation is most likely to result in pro-poor outcomes where it has been designed by a central government (including a state within a federal system) intent on challenging conservative local elites, and which has a strong ideological commitment to anti-poverty policies. In West Bengal and Brazil, therefore, pro-poor outcomes were a product of the synergy between local and central factors: poverty-relevant programmes often implemented with the help of central funding in cooperation with local governments and given a strong ideological and organisational impetus at the local level from the commitment of local employees and political activists. A particular impetus comes from the political motivations of a strong political party intent on mobilising electoral coalitions in favour of such policies, or from ‘counter-elites’ who, in the process of competition, see the policies as a way of constructing a new political base.

In most of the African cases, by contrast, the linkage between the central government’s decentralisation scheme and local leaders had an entirely different purpose. Here, central governments were using funding either to create *ab initio* a dependent local elite or to consolidate an alliance with local elites based on availability of patronage opportunities. In Nigeria, the military aimed to undermine state government challenges to its hegemony and to create dependent, local government-based elites who would be its henchmen throughout towns and rural areas nationwide. The political need to construct such alliances and clientelistic power bases in turn explains the lack of accountability and corruption that characterised the behaviour of local council chairmen, who were unrestrained by any viable control mechanisms, let alone political restraint from a government with any conception of popular accountability (Gboyega, 1998).

In Ghana, the military regime of Jerry Rawlings initially set out on a ‘revolutionary’ trajectory, which, had it survived, might have produced a ‘West Bengal’ scenario, although it lacked a mass political party comparable to the West Bengal Communist Party. But by the late 1980s, the revolutionary organisations were little more than ‘Rawlings loyalists’ and once they were converted into a conventional political party after 1992, they continued as part of a centrally controlled power and patronage system, using District Assemblies to co-opt local elites where possible, and exclude opposition elites where necessary. Ghana also lacked (and still lacks) competitive party elections at local level, a key factor in forcing the kinds of alliances seen in the successful cases.

The ‘party regimes’ of Cote d’Ivoire, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Kenya have all engaged in similar exercises: using decentralised structures to renew or consolidate ruling party power and influence at the local level. In Cote d’Ivoire during the 1980s and 1990s, a long-established, dominant ruling party was seeking to renew itself by offering openings to new cadres and allocating resources to small towns in rural areas, but in a way intended to diffuse broader political challenge to the regime from the multi-party opening it had permitted at national level. Mayors were predominantly linked to the ruling party network and local reform was virtually guaranteed to remain a conservative, elite-based exercise. In Tanzania this strategy succeeded, in that the CCM remains in control even after years of multi-party democracy. (The PDCI in Cote d’Ivoire only lost power after a contested election sparked a *coup d’état* in 2000). Moi’s strategy in Kenya has been slightly different in that decentralisation was a critical element in shifting power relations within the KANU ruling party, using redistribution to build new regional power bases.

Even in South Africa, where conditions might seem to be propitious for a ‘West Bengal’ outcome (strong, dominant leftist party with central control and highly developed discourse of social equality and anti-poverty), recent analyses are pessimistic about the impact of the new local government system introduced under the 1996 Constitution. Local government in ‘black’ areas was always an arena of contestation that lacked legitimacy and popular resistance to paying fees or charges remains high. At the same time, the ANC’s instinct is either to control civil society or demobilise those who still resist and it clearly sees local governments as a device to by-pass the political challenge of the provinces. This is not in principle bad for implementing an anti-poverty programme, but the regime is not presently disposed to push funds through decentralised structures that it still fundamentally distrusts (Mokgoro, 2000; Heller, 2001).

A final factor of particular importance in the politics of decentralisation in Africa derives from particular configurations of ethnic and regional pluralism. African states are predominantly multicultural, and some such as Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe, have suffered violent internal conflict based on mobilised ethno-regional
identities. In states that have avoided major violence, such as Cote d’Ivoire or Ghana, ethnic identities nevertheless form an element in ‘winning coalitions’ of political power (Crook, 1997). If a regime is nervous about providing an institutional base for sub-national, regional or ethnic political rivals or even potential separatists (e.g. if the regime depends upon maintaining a fragile coalition of ethnic interests or is based on a single dominant but not demographically majority group), then it will often adopt a decentralisation scheme that deliberately fragments potential local power bases into smaller, weaker, politically insignificant units. This is often combined with central funding and control mechanisms that permit spatial redistribution and/or centrally focused patronage linkages. The Nigerian military regime’s use of local governments to undermine state-based ethnic challenges and to transfer resources from oil-producing areas, and the extreme weakness and fragmentation of the commune system in Cote d’Ivoire, are classic examples. It is highly significant that the new government of President Gbagbo in Cote d’Ivoire, whose power base is in ‘minority’ areas of the southeast and southwest, should be the first regime in Ivorian history to countenance decentralised regional and ‘départementale’ authorities (albeit under control of central government Prefects) with elected councils (conseils généraux) at départementale level.14

In Uganda, decentralisation was not intended to assuage ethnic nationalisms, but on the contrary to cut across and fragment important geo-political areas. Combined with a powerful Presidency and a ‘no-party’ ruling national ‘movement’, decentralisation has been a device for consolidating central power by enabling the President to manipulate and fragment rival ethnic claims, and head off demands for a multi-party system. It is no accident that the trend for minorities at the district level to demand creation of new sub-districts has been encouraged by central government (Crook, 2001). And in Kenya, the decentralisation structure was seen by Barkan and Chege (1989, p. 21) as illustrating the proposition that ‘the probability that decentralisation will serve the political interests of the regime varies inversely with the power and resources of the ethno-regional base on which the regime rests’. In other words, the deconcentrated character of the Kenyan system serves the need of a regime based on poorer areas to control and redistribute resources, rather than permit revenue autonomy to benefit wealthier areas.

CONCLUSION

In none of the African countries reviewed in this article is it likely that decentralisation will empower any real challenge to local elites who are resistant to or uninterested in development of pro-poor policies, except possibly South Africa if the regime sees a political advantage in using local government for this purpose. On the contrary, in most of the African cases, ‘elite capture’ of local power structures has been facilitated by the desire of ruling elites to create and sustain power bases in the countryside. Popular perceptions of the logic of patronage politics reinforce this outcome. Even where the interests of underprivileged groups and of the rural poor have achieved some representation through democratic decentralisation, accountability mechanisms are in general not strong enough to ensure that these interests are represented effectively in policy making. These are the political realities that have a shaping influence on the outcomes of decentralisation policies in Africa. Any prospect of using decentralised governance to develop more pro-poor policies must depend upon a real effort being undertaken to strengthen and broaden accountability mechanisms, both horizontal and vertical, at both local and national levels.

REFERENCES


13Tanzania remains an exception to this pattern.
Decentralisation and Poverty Reduction in Africa


