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LOCAL GOVERNMENT:

FACTORS AND REASONS IN FAVOUR OF DECENTRALISATION

Every country makes its own, distinctive choices on its decentralisation. African countries do, however, have the following considerations and rationales in common:



Demand for local services. The existence of local authorities with responsibilities is almost inevitable, because not all services can be delivered by and from the centre. Nearly all countries have local authorities that perform some local services. However, the question is how much power these local governments have, and whether they are locally elected. Depending on the answer, the local governments could merely be performing delegated functions on behalf of the central government, and not as fully decentralised entities (see Fact Sheet #1).



Conflict resolution. Countries emerging from conflict sometimes strengthen local governments in order to give ethnic, religious, cultural, regional or political groups regional or local expression. In Ethiopia, for example, the Constitution empowers ethnic groups to establish their own local governments.



History. The existence of local government systems is often a function of history. For example, many African countries have inherited local government systems from their colonial past. These were often centralised, and local governments were merely performing delegated functions, rather than having a real measure of autonomy. For example, nations such as Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe initially inherited local government administrations that were in place during their times as British colonies, and some elements of there are still present today.



Demand for local democracy. The empowerment of local governments is sometimes demanded by civil society or political movements during times of constitutional reform. For example, pressure by civil society and the opposition resulted in the recognition of local government in Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution. The same can be said of the inclusion of local government in Zambia's 2016 constitutional amendments, and the recognition of local government in Mozambique's 2004 Constitution.

There are also more general reasons that promote or discourage decentralisation to local government:



More effective public spending. People living in different localities have different needs. One community may require more roads, while another prefers better clinics. Giving local governments the power to choose may improve the alignment between what people want and how governments spend money.



Creativity and innovation. Governments regularly design new programmes and policies. When a new policy works well, they continue with it. If it doesn't, they abandon it. In a centralised system, when the national government tries something new the entire country often participates in the experiment, and as such it is the entire country that either fails or succeeds. This is different with decentralisation: a local authority can try a new programme or policy and if it fails, the failure is contained. If it succeeds, however, other local governments can learn from and copy it.



Democratic accountability. Empowering local governments can improve democracy. It is often easier for citizens to identify and reach out to local officials and politicians and ask them to account for their decisions, compared to holding national officials and politicians to account. Local officials should have a closer connection to the citizens of the local government than national officials and politicians.



Tolerance for political diversity. If local governments are locally elected, a local authority could be governed by a different party (or coalition) from the one that is in charge nationally. This has been the case, for example, in South Africa and Zimbabwe where urban centres such as Cape Town in South Africa, and Harare and Bulawayo in Zimbabwe have been governed by parties that are in opposition to the central government. Decentralisation will require that both parties accept these possible outcomes. Even more, it will require them to work together. If this process is managed well, it can contribute to greater political tolerance.



Learning politics. Empowered local governments can function as 'schools' for political leadership. Politicians can learn the art of politics at local level before moving to regional or national positions.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST DECENTRALISATION

However, there are also dangers and disadvantages to decentralisation:



Inequality between geographical areas. Strong local governments can worsen inequality between geographical areas, particularly if they rely on local funding. If one locality is very poor, it receives poor services because the local government cannot raise much money from local citizens. In contrast, a wealthier locality will likely benefit from better services because the local government can raise more funding from its citizens. See Fact Sheet #8 on how this can be overcome.



Economies of scale. Exercising functions locally does not always make sense. It may result in unnecessary duplication. For example, does each town need its own ambulance service?



Regional or national interests. Too much localised power can lead to local governments pursuing only their own interests at the expense of regional or national interests. For example, if local governments impose erratic taxes or borrow uncontrollably, it could contribute to inflation or damage macro-economic stability.

None of these advantages or disadvantages are conclusive on their own. They must all be considered and weighed up, and local circumstances will determine the best outcome. But any system of decentralisation must capitalise on the benefits and minimise the negative effects. This requires careful design and constant adjustment.

