Strengthening Local Governance in Africa: Beyond Donor-Driven Approaches

Göran Hydén

ICLD Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

WORKING PAPER NO 12

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ABSTRACT

Under the auspices of the international donor community, decentralization has been pursued in the last couple of decades as a global mantra, albeit often with more attention to prescriptive models than political reality. This is particularly the case with Africa where donor-driven approaches have produced few sustainable outcomes because the context-specific situation in these countries has been ignored. This paper argues that the donors, in addition to failing to take the local context into consideration in their interventions have been inclined to look at decentralization through the lens of a principal-agent model in which institutions have been treated as rules to be learned and adopted. With little to show for itself, this approach is increasingly under criticism in evaluations and research studies alike. The paper argues, in line with other recent studies that time has come to rethink concepts and practices used to promote local governance in African countries. The political parameters of Official Development Assistance limit what can be achieved to realize the principles of the Paris Declaration and more creative approaches are needed to ensure that local governance in African countries are fostered in a democratic direction.

PREFACE

The mandate of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is to contribute to poverty alleviation and to strengthen the individual's freedom and rights by promoting local democracy. In order to fulfil this mandate, we offer capacity-building programmes through our International Training Programmes, mutual cooperation through our Municipal Partnership Programmes and knowledge management through our Centre of Knowledge. The Centre documents key lessons learned from our ongoing activities, initiates and funds relevant research, engages in scholarly networks, organizes conferences and workshops and maintains publication series. Strenghtening local governance in Africa: Beyond donor-driven approaches is the twelfth paper to be published in ICLD's Working Paper series.

In this paper Göran Hydén is critical of the donor-driven approaches to decentralization that pays little attention to political realities in Africa. He argues that the focus during the last decades has been on prescriptive models that have shown few sustainable outcomes due to the fact that they largely ignore the context-specific situation in the countries. Hydén further argues that it is time to rethink concepts and practices used to promote local governance in African countries with more creative approaches to ensure the development of democratic local governance in Africa. For example by making strategic and policy analysis more effectively country- based, supporting feasible initiatives in which African institutions are in the lead, supporting institutional twinning arrangements, rethinking capacity-building and investing in funds for local governance and development that generate both demand and collective action all of which Hydén explores further in his paper.

Sweden, January, 2016

Olov Berggren
Secretary General

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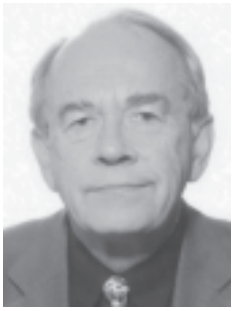

Göran Hydén is a noted expert on development in Africa and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Florida. He studied at the University of Lund, at Oxford University and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He has worked as an academic at various universities in East Africa including the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania University of Nairobi, Kenya and Makerere University, Uganda. His research has focused on the interface between politics and development and on political economy issues related to development in general and Africa in particular. Some of the themes Hydén has explored include: democratization; governance; sustainable development; the role of aid agencies; social capital and human rights. Hyden's approach has generally been critical of an emphasis on a narrowly defined poverty reduction rather than wider societal progress.

In 2015 Hydén received the "Distinguished Africanist Award" for his lifelong contribution to the research on African politics and development.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA: BEYOND DONOR-DRIVEN APPROACHES[1]

Introduction

For now well over two decades, African countries have served as testing grounds for a broad range of reform efforts aimed at making governments more responsive and effective in delivering services. These efforts have been designed within universally approved policy frameworks and with "best practices" or, more recently "best fits", in mind.

In either case, they have been pursued by the international community through donor funding as if what works in Asia and Latin America (or Europe and the U.S. for that matter) also should bear the same results in the African context. This often singular pursuit of specific models and practices has been especially evident in programs aimed at strengthening local governance in Africa (Tilley 2014). Decentralization has been a mantra in the global discourse on development referring to its importance for both improved service delivery and citizen participation. It has been treated as a measure aimed at simultaneously producing development and strengthening democratic practices. If democratic decentralization works for development elsewhere it should generate positive results in Africa too! This premise has proved increasingly questionable. Service delivery has not improved nor has civic participation. Time has come to go back to the proverbial drawing-board.

This paper argues that there are four issues that must be addressed in order to make local governance in Africa more realistic and effective. The *first* is the need to think beyond the formalities of decentralization. Local governance is a broader concept that is intentionally used in this paper to indicate that it entails many more components than merely devolution. Creating the demand for decentralization is as important as supplying the models and tools to do it.

The *second* issue, therefore, is how to ensure that local democratic governance can be built from within taking into consideration rather than ignoring the socio-economic and political factors that make collective action such a challenge. Even if these local conditions are challenges they constitute the inevitable foundation for sustaining reforms. The issue needs to be addressed, therefore, less as a matter of filling a gap and more as filling a glass from the bottom up.

The *third* issue is to transcend limits inherent in the way decentralization – as with other governance measures – has been pursued through a principal-agent lens with donors serving as principals and recipient governments as agents. Through this lens governance in African countries has been interpreted primarily as one of enhancing "voice and accountability". It has overshadowed the fundamental problem of how to get things done in African societies where collective action remains a challenge.

The *fourth* issue is the need to think through how country strategies in the context of official development assistance can be made more context-specific and attuned not only to donor country priorities but also the socio-economic and political realities in which local governance is expected to grow.

The paper begins with a brief historical overview of decentralization in Africa before proceeding to review where the international community has been in promoting governance reforms at central and local levels in the past twenty years. The paper continues by addressing three key questions: (1) why has support of decentralization in Africa yielded such limited results? (2) where in Africa does decentralization work and how? and, (3) what can and should donors do to strengthen local governance in Africa?

A Note on Decentralization in Africa

Decentralization typically refers to two types : (1) *devolution* which entails delegating political power to legally autonomous local authorities,

1 I wish to thank Dr Matts Mattsson and two anonymous reviewers for the International Centre for Local Democracy for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

e.g. district or county councils, and (2) *deconcentration* which is about delegating authority from central to local administrative levels, e.g. from a Ministry to its field staff at district level. Decentralization in Africa is the story about the official efforts to make these two forms shape governance for development. In a historical perspective, the story of decentralization on the continent can be divided into three phases: (1) the colonial period, (2) the post-independence period, and (3) the liberalization period.

The colonial period

Decentralization was an integral part of colonial policy for a variety of reasons. The most commonly cited reason is the cost of keeping colonial officials in African territories. Another is the necessity to administer the multiple ethnic communities that these colonies contained. The British, using Lord Lugard and his disciples, developed a system of "indirect rule" which was based on the premise that native authorities should form part of the colonial system of governance (Buell 1928, Perham 1960). Although they did not succeed fully, the French were more insistent on their own domestic model of governance and demanded that the Napoleonic Code and related institutional features be fully adopted in their colonies (Alexandre 1970). Their policy aimed at gradually assimilating Africans into the French institutional and cultural sphere while the British, in a more pragmatic fashion, accepted native authorities and only aimed at bringing them into the "modern world" step by step.

There is no doubt that decentralization was a strategy adopted by the colonial policy-makers to suit their interests on the African continent. This point features most prominently in the literature that examines the colonial system of governance. Mamdani (1996), for example, focuses on the separation between "citizens" and "subjects" that followed from the adoption of indirect rule. By relying on native authorities they encouraged subordination to political authority that became institutionalized after independence. Nationalist leaders carried forward the political culture that had been established during the years of late colonialism. They had everything to gain from the masses remaining "subjects" rather than becoming "citizens".

While Mamdani´s argument captures an important aspect of colonial decentralization, the story is more complex – and interesting – than his account provides. To be sure, as it was in both French and British colonies, colonial governance policy was tutelary, i.e. meant to educate Africans to become aware of modern systems of rule. British policy was based on a Burkean interpretation of development. In its conservative tapping, it started from the assumption that local institutions matter because they are close to the people; they can be organically developed and modernized; and they may serve as training ground for democratic practices. The latter aspect became especially important during late colonialism when the British, initially grudgingly but later convinced thereof, began to democratize the native authorities, e.g. by introducing locally elected councils. The African chiefs, by and large, adjusted to these changes much the same way as European monarchs did when parliaments began to expand their authority at the expense of royal power.

The other aspect that is often overlooked in accounts of late colonialism is that as the native authorities were democratized and the colonies got their own locally elected councils, these institutions not only served as training ground for democracy but they also constituted the basis from which much of nationalist leadership emerged. Especially more educated Africans around the continent were dissatisfied with being treated in a tutelary fashion and demanded more radical reforms than the Burkean approach permitted. They emerged as the "loyal opposition" groomed to take over power. By putting pressure on the colonial governments to speed up the process, what was conceived as a process that would last decades became compressed into only a decade or less. Calm waters quickly turned into high waves. It is this disruption by the waves of nationalism that explains why not many more Africans got a chance before independence to become "citizens" in the civic sense of the word.

The post-independence period

These high waves did not translate into stronger local democracy after independence. For a variety of reasons, the incoming nationalist leaders moved in the opposite direction. They wanted to

consolidate power at the central level. They did not have much respect for and affinity with the local authorities because in their eyes they were "compromised" institutions having forced the nationalists to go slower than they otherwise had preferred. Moreover, fostering local democracy in multi-ethnic societies had potential dangers of centrifugal politics, Nigeria in the first years of independence providing a convincing example of this threat (Oyugi 2000).

The dominant formula in the post-independence years instead became deconcentration rather than devolution. The main goal was to streamline the state and make it a more effective instrument of development. Popularly elected district councils were abandoned altogether as in Tanzania or left with no power of their own as in Kenya, Uganda and other Anglophone countries. The strong centralist mode of operation in Francophone countries continued with only Senegal really trying to keep a semblance of local democracy (Ribot 2002). Deconcentration led to the establishment of new administrative entities like the Integrated Rural Development Programs that started in Ethiopia with Swedish support and later were copied with donor funding in most other Anglophone countries in Africa. Deconcentration was reinforced in many places by the drive toward socialist one-party rule (Therkildsen 1993).

The African leaders were by no means alone in supporting deconcentration. So did the international community at large in the 1960s and 70s. Donor governments believed in development rather than democracy. Popular participation was an unknown vocabulary in donor circles in those days. Central planning was endorsed and served as a justification for funding development projects and programs. Expatriate experts were expected to fill the capacity gaps and provide necessary advice and training to strengthen government institutions. Consultants like McKinsey & Company in Tanzania during the 1970s were hired to design governance systems based on deconcentrated authority.

Academics had little else to offer in perspective on development. Modernization theorists believed that certain socio-economic conditions such as urban and educated populations, as well as the existence of an industrial base were necessary for democracy to emerge (Lipset 1960). Neo-Marxists who were critical of modernization, nonetheless subscribed to an ideology or theory that assumed the presence of social classes – in historical terms the product of very much the same factors as modernization endorsed. In short, both focused their attention to factors other than democratic governance (Hyden 2013).

The first two-three decades of independence in Africa, as seen from today´s decentralization perspective, was a drastic step backwards from the days of late colonialism. The budding efforts at devolution in the 1950s were quashed and instead governance became permeated by often monstrous deconcentration schemes that were too expensive to maintain and too complex to manage. Other efforts at local governance such as producer cooperatives in the countryside and self-help projects in the villages suffered a similar fate. Cooperatives were so tightly regulated by government that they lost their autonomy and their proven business acumen was destroyed (Hyden 1973). Self-help schemes were seen as standing in the way of planned development, leading one observer to describe them as examples of "preemptive development" (Holmquist 1970).

The liberalization period

Devolution has come back with a vengeance since the 1990s. The fall of Communism and the state-centered model of development provided an incentive for Western powers to move their position forward in the global arena. As the literature confirms, devolution has become an integral part of the agenda of the international donor community. There are essentially three types of literature that provide evidence of what has been attempted in the name of decentralization and with what outcomes.

One lays out the rationale for decentralization as part of a good governance strategy aimed at doing many things: improve service delivery, enhance popular participation, strengthen national cohesion, and so on (Ndegwa 2002, USAID 2010). These publications tend to treat devolution as a "tool" in the hands of the donors and, as Ribot (2002:v) notes: "It should come as no surprise that most of the literature on decentralization focuses more on expectations and discourse than on practice and outcome".

The second type of literature consists mainly of evaluations of decentralization in the context of specific sector programs. These are reports about the nuts-and-bolts issues of implementing decentralization in African countries. They cover such sectors that have been prominent in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) like education and health but include a much wider range. The reports may be critical of what has been attempted but the critique does not question the appropriateness of the model.

Perhaps most damning is the third type – the official reports issued by the Auditor-General in the African countries – which assess devolution in practice with special emphasis on fiscal and financial performance. These documents are produced by trained African auditors. They audit all public institutions and it is clear that misappropriation or poor management of funds is not confined to local authorities. Yet, money disappears especially easily there because the monitoring and accounting systems at that level are especially weak.

None of the literatures really hits the nail on its head. The advocates of devolution argue their case with little attention to difficulties of implementing devolution in contemporary Africa. The evaluators and auditors tend to confine their arguments to specific interventions that, they argue, can be improved with greater attention to particular details. In their case, the "big picture" tends to be lost and lessons are only learnt within what is essentially a closed discourse. Why and how this has been allowed to go on for such a long time is worth more detailed attention.

Decentralization as part of the global agenda

Decentralization is not the only instrument in the donor toolbox. It is an important one but belongs to a wider set of tools that the international donor community applies in order to push its global development agenda. The principal components of this agenda have been the MDGs – now succeeded by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – and the 2005 Paris Declaration (and its follow-up statements from 2008 and 2011) which emphasizes the mutual accountability of donors and recipients for the use of foreign aid as a means of making it more effective. These landmark measures have been largely hegemonic since the early 2000s. The MDGs have forced African countries to adopt priorities set for them by the international community with the donors playing a leading role. The Paris Declaration has made government officials engage in often time-consuming policy dialogue with donors. The evolution of this good governance agenda since its inception is captured in Figure 1 below.

The basic premise for the donor agenda has been that development is best pursued under democratic forms. Thus, development and democracy have been treated as complementary and reinforcing each other. Much scholarly energy has been devoted to trying to establish what the relationship between the two is but one of the most exhaustive and comprehensive comparative study concludes that it is not possible to identify a single causal relation (Przeworski 2000). Above all, beyond showing that there is a positive correlation in developed countries it is not clear in what circumstances democracy can really be said to promote development. These observations notwithstanding, the global agenda has been pursued as if democracy is necessary for accelerated development.

The donors have treated liberal democracy as the core concept of governance and have translated it into a global "good governance" agenda. It has justified a range of approaches that are graphically illustrated in Figure 1. The graph is built around two dimensions, a horizontal scale which captures the distinction between supply and demand driven approaches, and a vertical scale that shows whether the policy focus is central or local.

The *supply-driven approaches* presuppose that government leaders and officials are genuinely interested in the provision of public goods that benefit their people (Booth 2012). They want to see development results that boost their political legitimacy. Thus, donors have provided support for *basic democratic reforms* such as free and fair elections, rule of law, parliamentary oversight, and public sector reforms aimed at making governments better serve an emerging market economy and a citizenry in waiting.

Politics in Africa, however, does not follow this paradigm. Leaders are no doubt interested in getting re-elected but rather than organizing

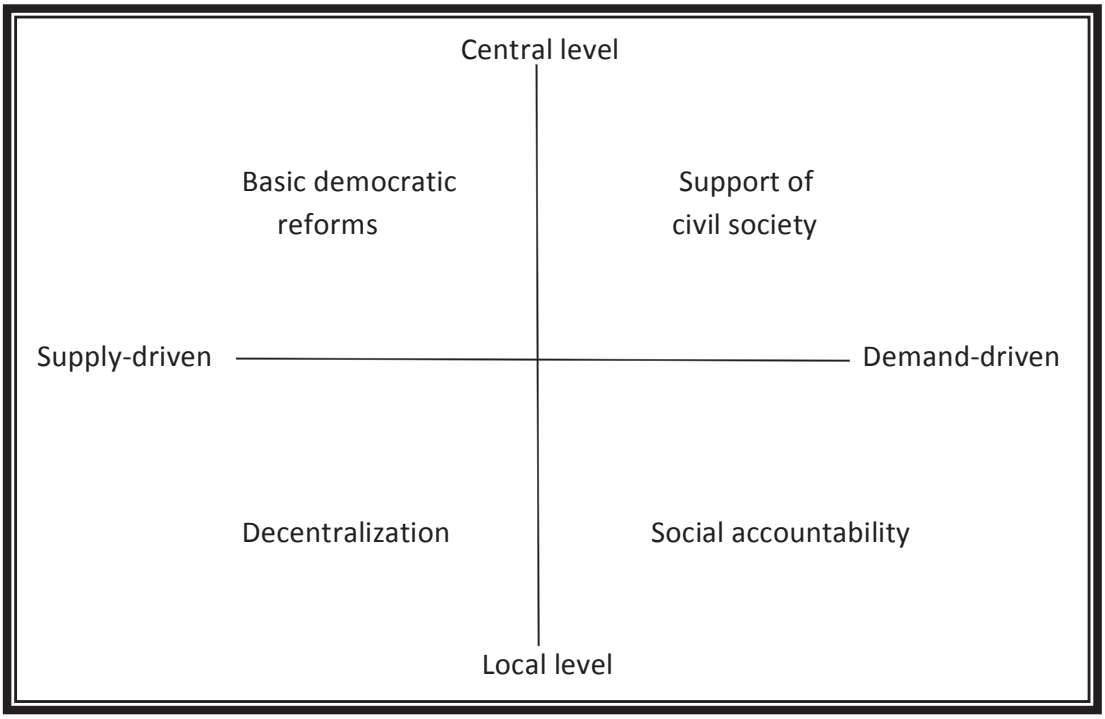

Figure 1. Donor-driven good governance approaches 1990-date.

issue-based political parties, they tend to pursue personal agendas that result in horse-trading over distributional issues based not on objective policy criteria but rather subjective considerations.

Accepting that the reforms at *central level* have fallen short of expectations, donors have generally adopted the position that strengthening democratic institutions at *local levels* may improve policy outcomes. After all, in the context of a principal-agent model, it is assumed that the shorter physical distance between principal (citizenry) and agent (government), the greater the chances that results improve. Where local residents, however, lack civic capabilities and remain dependent on resources and goods that can only be provided from outside their community, leaders turn politics into a patronage game. As Treisman (2007) and the World Bank, in its landmark 2003 World Development Report on making public services work for poor people, have noted: physical distance on its own is not a factor in promoting *democratic decentralization* (World Bank 2003). Empirical work on the impact of decentralization on poverty reduction tends to confirm this: outcomes depend on other factors than decentralization (Crook and Manor 1998; Crook and Sverrisson 2003).

It is no surprise, therefore, that the international community has moved from *supply* to *demand*-driven approaches. If government leaders are not committed to public goods provision, maybe they can be made to change their attitude if people stand up and demand it. This has been the dominant premise for donor interventions in the past ten years with the 2003 World Development Report playing an important role in moving opinions in that direction.

This new approach has been pursued along two lines. The first has been to build *a stronger civil society* with the power to influence policy at central level. The problem that civil society organizations in Africa face is that voluntarism as understood and practiced in Western societies is hard to find. It does not mean that Africans are not ready to help out – they are, but typically in circumstances where someone is suffering or in an exceptional situation. Charities are few and far apart and ordinary people often lack the extra money to donate because the needs of family and other dependents are overwhelming.

The second line (see Figure 1) centers on what is generally referred to as "*social accountability*", a concept that has grown popular in the wake of efforts to promote citizen participation and engagement in policy processes (UNDP 2013). It implies a direct contact between government agencies and citizens in the course of delivering services or obtaining permits. The concept is rights-based and it works well in many developing countries in Asia and Latin America with a civic and democratic tradition. It is more difficult to put into practice in African countries, especially in rural settings where today civic norms are subdued by a patronage form of politics that leave people in subject status.

Decentralization, notably devolution, has been one of the most high-profile components of what donors have promoted and supported in the past couple of decades. The donor-driven approaches that have been attempted under its premises have failed to produce the results that are visible in Asian and Latin American countries. Time has come, therefore, to ask some "hard questions": (1) why have these approaches not yielded better results? (2) is there evidence that decentralization works in Africa but on premises other than those propagated by the donors? and, (3) what can and should be done outside of the principal-agent model used to date?

Why so limited results?

The challenges of implementing decentralization in Africa are both structural and institutional (Olowu and Wunsch 2003). The ones that have proved to be of special significance in the context of a donor-driven decentralization are the following: (1) power granted without capacity, (2) subjects still, not yet citizens, (3) private rather than public goods, (4) informal rather than formal institutions, (5) incentives rather than sanctions.

More power, little capacity

Decentralization in the 2000s means that officially local government authorities have been granted more power but are yet in most instances, especially in largely rural districts, without adequate capacity to match their newly achieved powers. The powers have been granted on the premise that they will enable local governments to improve service delivery and accelerate development. Financial and human resources, however, have been lacking at this level.

It is not unusual that central governments assign more functions to local government level than what can be financed from own sources at this level but the discrepancy is much more drastic in Africa than in other developing regions. For example, in African countries the average local revenue collection is 1% of GDP while it is 5.5% in other developing regions (Shah 2004). As Fjeldstad et al (2014) show, things have not changed in the past ten years. The level of intergovernmental transfers, however, varies widely between countries and also between rural and urban councils within individual countries (Chitembo 2009). In Botswana, for instance, rural councils receive 92% of their total revenues from the central government, compared to 62% for urban areas. In Uganda, local government are heavily dependent on transfers from the central government (88% of total revenues in 2007), while local governments in South Africa, on average, generate the bulk of their revenue from 'own' sources (89% in 2007).

Two factors tend to exacerbate the discrepancy between power and capacity. The first is the global focus on reducing poverty which in African countries has centered on rural areas in particular. This means that the heaviest implementation load has been placed on the weakest link in the chain. It is no surprise that results have been falling short of expectations and the flow and use of donor money difficult to track.

The second factor is that the discrepancy between power and capacity has left people with declining confidence in their local institutions. Because they contribute little to their development they have taken little interest in elections of councilors or holding officials accountable.

The result is that local governments have remained largely funded through grants-in-aid from the national Treasury with accountability being upwards to central government – and the donors – rather than to the local population. The principal-agent dilemma with the latter taking advantage of its position as a reservoir of local information and resources means that centrally funded interventions have often been undermined rather than promoted at local level. Pay-

ment of teachers or health personnel does not reach the presumed beneficiaries on time; textbooks and medical supplies suffer the same fate. Donor insistence on expenditure tracking has not really improved the situation and has often been viewed as an inappropriate infringement.

Subjects, not citizens

Civic education programs have played an important part of the overall efforts in African countries to pave the way for democratic practices. These include making voters aware of their rights in elections, women about their rights in the public place, and so on. These programs have been helpful but difficult to evaluate in terms of impact. They certainly have not eradicated the "subject" legacy of late colonialism altogether. What Mamdani (1996) refers to as the "bifurcated" nature of power continues to characterize much of African politics, especially in countries with a large rural population.

Because of poverty and ignorance people are easily lured by politicians to vote for them regardless of their stand on specific policy issues. Choices are rarely made on the basis of policy issues and tend instead to be based on what the politician can offer in terms of rewards for supporting him. This gives the politicians considerable leeway to use their discretion while in power leading to such impressions as they are in power "to chop (eat)" (Lindberg 2003).

The average voter in Africa is far from the model of the informed and autonomous individual that liberal democracy presupposes. As Bratton and Logan (2006) have noted, Africans go to the polls and cast their vote but they do not do so with a civic awareness that makes a difference in terms of which policies government follows. As they write: "Africans are voters but not yet citizens!"

Democracy is still something that most Africans are encountering for the first time. Most of those who had the benefit of experiencing the "first wave" of democratization during late colonialism are now gone and the countries on the continent are only in recent years beginning to learn what democracy is all about. To mature, democracy takes time and it helps little that African countries are being assessed in comparison with countries elsewhere in the world in terms of how well they adhere to a set of liberal democratic ideals. These global indices tend to trivialize what goes into transforming societies from backward to modern or from autocratic to democratic societies. This is particularly true when it comes to improving local governance in rural Africa where people live in conditions that sustain beliefs in the power of external forces rather in their own ability to change their livelihoods.

Private, not public goods

The liberal democratic model that has been the core of donor-driven approaches rests on the assumption that society is organized into specific interests that pursue their goals in competition with each other. These groups organize collectively to have the power to succeed in this race for influence. This system is the product of years of societal transformation that began in the late 19th Century and in European countries still constitutes the structural backbone of governance. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) provide the best account of how this transformation over time laid the basis for the party systems that we know to this day in Europe.

Although there is some variation among these countries, the basic products of multi-party governance in Europe has been public or common goods that benefit society at large or the specific groups that participate in organized fashion in the political process. It has generated a sense that the public interest stands above the private and that the pursuit of interests common to specific group members does not threaten an overarching public or national interest. Thus, for instance, trade unions may lobby for higher wages but they typically also share awareness that without being reasonable, they are in danger of sinking the ship. This willingness among political actors to compromise between the public and common interests is a hallmark at both central and local levels in these liberal democratic societies. Even though parties compete for power and influence at local levels in these countries, the focus is on practical results. This is particularly evident in Sweden where so much of resource allocation is decided at these local levels (*landsting/kommuner)*.

Where the same structural requisites that Europe has developed are still absent or at best at an incipient stage, it is only reasonable to expect that local governance will be different. It is surprising

how little attention has been paid to these structural differences in the literature on decentralization in Africa. The literature that brands itself as "political economy" typically looks at issues underlying policy-making with a Western market lens, assuming that African economies operate in such a fashion (e.g. Dafflon and Madies 2012). Thus, what is peculiar about the political economy of African countries tends to be lost.

African economies need to be analyzed not only in market terms but how they are organized for productive purposes. African economies are still largely agricultural and even in the urban areas, one-person enterprises prevail. This means that there is little organized interest and most producers compete rather than cooperate among themselves. Small farmers and informal sector entrepreneurs constitute a majority of those that contribute to the economy of these countries but they have few if any incentives to organize to pursue a common interest other than in situations where their livelihoods are threatened, e.g. by local authorities who wish to "clean up the streets" and thus engage in destroying the scant assets these people have.

It is more rational for these people to act on their own, typically by seeking out a person with power and influence. These patrons are the brokers that get results even though the goods they produce are private, i.e. accruing to an individual or a single household, or of a "club" nature, i.e. exclusively benefitting a particular community or group. Because in the political economy circumstances of African countries, there is a demand for these brokers, it is a mistake to reduce clientelism and patronage politics merely to greedy ambitions of individual politicians. These phenomena are an integral part of the political economy and in a local perspective this is not deviant but rational behavior. The international donor community does not do itself a service by just treating these phenomena as illegitimate and condemning them without a sense of why they prevail. It should make a more comprehensive analysis that involves plans to build on what already exists and pursue reform efforts from there.

Informal, not formal institutions

Because decentralization approaches have generally been more prescriptive than analytical, more focused on theory or blueprints than practice and reality, academics and policy practitioners alike have placed their emphasis on the structural rather than the human aspects of institutions. They have treated institutions in a managerialist mode focusing on the needs of those who govern and their own desire for better results.

This rather slanted approach to institution-building overlooks two important dimensions that are especially relevant in the African context, not the least at local level. The first, as Berk and Galvan (2009) argue, is that institutions are not monolithic in nature but made up of often loosely coupled components that can be combined in different, often unpredictable ways. The second is that institutions do not function in a social vacuum but are recreated or reinvented using cultural resources to make them relevant and operative (Kelsall 2008).

Institutions are only partial guides to action, competing with other concerns and interests that human actors have. Life is complex and intricate and typically overflows institutions. People are not cogs in a machine nor do they live in isolation of each other but interact and thus influence what social action is adopted. Rules are adjusted, sometimes intentionally bent, to reflect the interests of those engaged in a certain common venture. In short, human agency does not become habitual and predictable merely because there is a set of prescribed rules that need to be followed in order to achieve a higher end. It happens when actors have had a chance to influence the manner in which rules are adopted and applied. This does not mean that human agency is "free-floating". As for instance Dewey (2002 [1922]) and Bourdieu (1977) from different angles have emphasized, habits reflect social and historical conditions. Institutions, therefore, propel human action that transcend simple ends-means or structure-agency distinctions.

As Berk and Galvan (2009) also argue, institutions are composed of rules that are not enacted schemas, but lived skills. Institutions are not constraints on action, they are made through action. Order is not a prior or necessary condition of institutions, but a possible result of particular forms of experiencing rules in action.

This is a significant modification of the conventional approach that developmentally useful rules

and norms come from the experience of more developed countries. This conventional approach that Evans (2004) describes as "institutional mono-cropping" has implied the replacement of local rules by those derived from more advanced societies. Social change in this approach is the result of borrowing or transferring effective institutions from places where they already work on the assumption that they will create a demonstration effect in their new setting that will trigger improved performance.

Tutelage and transfer of institutions worked in colonial days but in the contemporary context have run aground on the persistence of reinvented living local cultures. The latter have not disappeared with modernity and globalization but continue to serve as the basis for how people organize their lives and pursue common ends. That is why some institutional theorists like North (1981) have concluded that developmentally useful institutions only emerge when informal rules, norms and values support and help engender formal institutions.

African governance institutions are syncretic in the sense that they combine elements of both Western and local norms and values. There is no specific mix of these two elements that make them effective. They are continuously in flux but what policy practitioners – and most academics – have overlooked is that actors do not "live under the rules" as if they constrain action. Instead, they live through the rules, i.e. they are creating them. Similarly, they do not "play by the rules" as if incentives or sanctions leave them without choice. They actually play the rules in the sense of using them in creative ways to solve problems or achieve certain ends.

Incentives, not sanctions

Because the liberal democratic model assumes freedom of choice, it is largely operationalized through the provision of incentives. The premise is that individuals are open to influences and behavior or taste can be shaped by strategic market and state actors. Culture has been neutralized in this scheme. This market model of rational choice has also been transferred to political analysis with the consequence that even in such studies culture has become an exogenous factor. A utilitarian rational choice occurs regardless of location (see e.g. Bates et al 1998). The effort by students of comparative politics to integrate African political phenomena into universally valid indicators has exacerbated this tendency to take culture out of politics.

Donor-driven approaches to good governance, including decentralization, therefore, have relied on the provision of incentives to make African government actors behave the way the donors would like. The rationale behind foreign aid, after all, has been to make African governments use it to promote goals that donor governments can sell to their domestic constituents as legitimate expenses. Thus, for example, in Sweden human rights, gender equality and local democracy are integral parts of its aid policy and recipient countries must sign off that they will respect these principles and implement them in their own policy contexts.

The general experience in African countries has been that political or financial incentives by the donors to steer governance or development in a certain direction do not really produce much result. These incentives tend to be like fitting a square peg into a round hole. They are rarely devised with local conditions in mind. They are "prefabricated" interventions that stand little chance of yielding results in Africa´s largely informal and complex political environment.

Some analysts have been satisfied with accepting that incentives do not produce optimal outcomes or take time to yield results. For instance, some analysts of political transformations have been ready to accept what they call "good enough" governance (Grindle 2007). This is a concession to reality but it is not clear that political decision-makers in donor circles have been willing to make an adjustment along such lines.

Donor-driven approaches to decentralization – as with other components of the good governance agenda – have fallen short of expectations because there has been a reluctance to accept that institutions do not change behavior without complementary enforcement mechanisms. It is well known that, for example, anti-corruption strategies in many African countries have yielded little result with culprits rarely being taken to court for engaging in corrupt behavior (NORAD 2008a). Formalizing informal institutions requires a sanctions regime that African governments have

been reluctant to adopt. Those who intentionally or otherwise mismanage public funds are rarely punished in ways that set an example for others. They are moved "aside" rather than to courts. That the private goes before the public interest prevails not only in countries that rank low on the various good governance scales but also in those that the international community holds in high regard. For instance, a comparative study of civil servants in Botswana and Ghana shows that they accept that giving priority to private over official matters while in office is OK and a majority in Ghana and a minority in Botswana agree that they practice it (Pankani 2014). It is no coincidence that where corruption has been more or less eliminated, as in Rwanda, it has happened through the application of strict sanctions imposed by the political leadership.

Where decentralization is attempted without donor assistance

Despite the many challenges that strengthening local governance in Africa entails, it must be noted that forms of devolution are being practiced with varying degrees of success. What they have in common is that they are less driven by outside models and have evolved from domestic political dynamics. Two factors seem to have been of special significance in generating this favorable environment for decentralization. The first is the overthrow of an old regime and the presence of a power vacuum that needs to be filled. Uganda, Ethiopia and Rwanda are case in point. The second is the successful pursuit of a home-grown constitutional reform process with Kenya and South Africa serving as relevant cases.

Uganda was the first country that engaged in building decentralization from the bottom up. As the National Resistance Movement led by Yoweri Museveni in the first half of the 1980s took over territory in southern and western Uganda it established administrative entities called "Resistance Councils". Once the NRM eventually came to power, it made such councils the decentralized structures across the country. Later renamed Local Councils, these entities have been operative at separate local levels and continue to play an important role in national development. When it comes to measuring political and administrative decentralization, Uganda still counts as one of the more decentralized countries on the continent.

Like Uganda where decentralization was the product of a liberation movement, Ethiopia adopted a federal government system with their own liberation movements leading the way. Both countries have relied on a strong national political movement but the EPRDF (the Ethiopian People´s Revolutionary Democratic Front) has proven more effective than NRM in implementing national development strategies although this prominent role is often pursued at the expense of civic participation. The Ethiopians have put more emphasis on sanctions than on incentives. In this respect, it is less liberal than the system of devolution in Uganda which remains open to contestation between different political factions. As studies from different districts in Uganda show (Ssentongo 2014; Otto 2014) this democratic feature of devolution does not always produce positive results. They tend to become exclusivist giving preferences to the original inhabitants of the district at the expense of those who have migrated to live there. Because of political bickering and a tendency to favor some groups over others, the local councils lose their legitimacy. For example, people prefer to settle disputes through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms rather than going to court.

Rwanda is perhaps the best example of how decentralized structures have become effective mechanisms for development. Following the Genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994, the Rwanda Patriotic Front, led by its military wing (RPA), took over power and in 2001 embarked on a decentralization program that is still functioning. The set-up in Rwanda is reminiscent of that in Ethiopia but because the country is smaller, the government reach via local institutions at various levels tends to be easier and more effective without becoming overly autocratic (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012). The push for development that has characterized politics in post-genocide Rwanda has not always been accepted by local people who have been asked to change their customs and behavior much faster than many are ready to do (Hasselskog and Schierenbeck 2014).

Kenya and South Africa are cases where con-

stitutional reforms have helped pave the way for devolution. To be sure, both countries arrived at these reforms after political violence had broken out, in Kenya after the disputed 2007 elections and in South Africa during the fight against apartheid. In both places, therefore, there was a demand to put in place structures that would prevent further violence and establish justice.

The 2010 Kenya Constitution was the product of a long reform process the demands for which had begun already in the 1990s. Perhaps its most important feature has been the strengthening of devolution. The new "mother law" has triggered a strong move toward creating powerful county institutions that have enough funds to decide development priorities on their own (Cornell and D`Arcy 2014). The constitution stipulates that 10% of the national budget must go to the counties but political pressure has mounted across the country for a much higher percentage. Proposals for a national referendum driven by various political movements (*Okoa Kenya* and *Pesa Mashinani*, in particular) aim at obtaining no less than 45% of the national budget for the counties.

South African decentralization has given more power to local government structures much the same way as in Kenya. In fact, much of their strength comes from being able to raise revenue from local sources. Such a strong local revenue base is largely absent in other African countries which are poorer and where the majority of prospective taxpayers are poor village farmers. Despite having this advantage, many councils in South Africa are rampant with corruption (Corruption Watch 2013).

What these cases suggest is that democracy and development do not always go together in the way that the donor-driven approaches assume. There seems to be a trade-off between the two or, at least, that one might think of them as appearing in sequence. The donor perspective has been based on the assumption that democracy creates development. Wherever the opposite applies, as in Ethiopia and Rwanda, development results have been especially impressive. For example, these two countries were the top MDG performers at the OECD-organized development forum in Busan in 2011 and they feature at the top also in economic growth terms. Together with a handful of others, they have displayed the highest economic growth in the last ten years (*The Economist* 2013).

The other exceptional cases – Kenya and South Africa – are trying to go the democratic route toward development. They arrive at it through political contestation rather than political mobilization. Uganda nowadays falls into this category too. The challenge that they face is that democratic decentralization generates a populist form of politics that is characterized by corruption and lack of financial and other types of discipline to be sustainable.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this overview of cases where donors have had little or no influence on the move toward devolution is that they have their own shortcomings whether it is being too little democratic or overly populist and corrupt. They are different from the donor-supported cases, however, in that they own the process and take pride in refining it from within rather than appealing to the international community.

What can be done?

As this paper has attempted to show there is ample evidence to suggest that the real challenge facing African development is less about voice and accountability and more about choice and capability. The principal-agent model has flourished on the premise that the donors are able to provide solutions to Africa´s problems by providing financial support tied to respect for the principles of democratic governance that they embrace as part of their national aid policies. Political space for reforms aimed at devolution must be created from within the African countries in order to be viable and sustainable. Wherever decentralization is attempted, lack of capability is the critical factor. This means that it is not just technical capacity that is needed but political will that boosts the capability for implementing devolution and strengthen local governance.

This is clearly a challenge, especially for bilateral donor agencies. They have been used to treating foreign aid as a rather uncomplicated business with money being paid directly from government-to-government, in the last decade much of it as general budget support (GBS). Fur-

thermore, they have not really been challenged by other models until the rise of Ethiopia and Rwanda as developmental states. Their ability to show results both in economic and social terms cannot go unnoticed in the donor capitals. If donors are interested in seeing African countries reducing poverty and grow economically, they have to get used to some more uncomfortable living with African realities.

The question is what can and should they do? The list could no doubt be made longer but here are five points that could be considered as means to enhance the effectiveness of foreign aid as it applies to local governance: (a) making strategic and policy analysis more effectively country-based; (b) supporting feasible initiatives in which African institutions are in the lead; (c) supporting institutional twinning arrangements; (d) rethinking capacity-building; and (e) investing in funds for local governance and development that generate both demand and collective action.

a. Making strategy analysis more country-based

The OECD model of government-to-government aid makes it a bureaucratic and official exercise that continuously runs into problems in trying to be relevant and effective. It may have been the right thing to do in the 1960s when it was first introduced and states were seen as the sole engines of change. Since then, the economic and political landscape around the world has changed and the model has increasingly outlived itself. This becomes especially obvious, as this paper has indicated when it comes to how interventions are chosen. The principal-agent model of interaction between donors and recipients has been reinforced in the 2000s by the greater insistence of donor-country parliaments to exercise control of the flow of aid. The result is that development administrators have been forced to produce country strategies that reflect what these parliamentarians consider to be a priority rather than what recipient country authorities prefer and can take charge of on their own.

The design of aid strategy, policy and individual interventions need to be better attuned to local realities, notably challenges and opportunities. The aid strategies and policies that embassies are being asked to prepare tend to lack an independent analysis and instead follow programmatic guidelines provided by ministry headquarters to facilitate the processing of these documents. Not surprisingly, therefore, there is a mismatch between what eventually is proposed and the real problem on the ground in Africa. It should no longer be practice that all the things that are planned for Tanzania (or any other country) treated as if they all go together and there is no problem with applying them all at once.

Time has come to go back to the drawing-board and redesign the aid architecture so as to allow for national ownership, locally relevant support, and support of multiple actors in a more flexible and less bureaucratic funding environment. By "going with the grain" (Kelsall 2008), donors can reduce their reliance on a principal-agent model and encourage a turn toward supporting collective action for development, beginning often at local levels.

b. Support feasible African initiatives

The global agenda with its focus on poverty reduction and the MDGs has encouraged African countries to run without much sense of their own where they are heading. Governments have been nudged into an excessive focus on the social sector – especially education, health and water – without an overall national strategy into which these investments fit. Their performance has been measured by how many schools, health centers or water points that have been constructed. The focus has been on quantity rather than quality. There has been a neglect of the consequences for sustaining these projects over time (Therkildsen and Buhr 2010). The result is that most countries have fallen well short of what could have been achieved in development terms with the same amount of money.

Globalization, the emergence of alternative sources of funding, and the expansion of an African business elite and professional middle class have begun to change things in recent years. There are many new and bold initiatives taken by African actors. For example, at the regional level there is the Pan-African University and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). Not all these initiatives are necessarily feasible although some could become so with support from the outside. Support, therefore, needs to be considered with full attention to both ownership and feasibility.

This is especially true for initiatives aimed at strengthening local governance. Associations of local authorities are a case in point. They can potentially serve as advocates of decentralization and lobbyists for reform, but not all of them are politically ready or administratively capable of playing this role. Yet, such bodies are one way of lifting local governance above the clientelism and parochialism that so often tend to shape the views of local councilors and managers. Encouraging civil society participation in local governance despite often central government reluctance or resistance is equally important not merely for service delivery but for helping to strengthen the local voice and bringing people together in collective pursuits.

c. Institutional twinning arrangements

This approach is already in use especially in the higher education field. African students register for higher degrees, like M.D. or Ph.D, in their home universities but because of shortage of mentoring and supervisory capacity they receive a grant to spend some time at a university in a developed country with better professional and academic resources. The Danish universities with funds from Danida have created a consortium to support such twinning arrangements with African institutions. Sida has been doing it for several years using the term "sandwich" model to describe it.

A much overlooked model that is relevant for local governance is the twinning that takes place when a city decides to adopt another in a foreign place. These mutual friendship arrangements are most often pursued in an informal manner with more pomp than substance. They are underutilized and much more could be done if aid money were channeled to encourage these twinning agreements for strengthening local governance and development. The municipal partnership program run by the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy is a good example of what can be done to foster better local governance without getting entangled in aid bureaucratic formalities. This and other such initiatives make particular sense in the wake of the Paris Declaration and its emphasis on partnership and ownership. It is a deeper and more meaningful arrangement than government-to-government transfers even if its scale is not national but confined to a particular geographic area. Hundreds of such arrangements, if energized, however, would likely make more difference to development at local levels than the ODA can ever achieve.

d. Rethinking capacity-building

The knee-jerk reaction in donor circles when performance falls short of expectations has been to encourage capacity-building. While training and education are important for development, capacity-building is not a "magic bullet", but because it is easy to administer and results (at least in terms of output) are easy to measure, it has been overused. Especially questionable have been all those programs that have aimed at instilling a fresh look at policy through the lens of a pre-conceived model. Reform programs in the public, judicial, and local government sectors are examples where the belief in capacity-building has been, if not misplaced still exaggerated.

The abstractions that are conveyed in these programs rarely stick beyond the class-room. The feeding of information derived from a blueprint module to African trainees has largely been a waste. That is why capacity-building has to be redefined to focus on incremental and practical issues that make sense to those at the receiving end.

The ICLD is an example of what can be done on a large scale. Created by the Association of Local Governments in Sweden, it serves as the institutional mechanism for promoting local self-government in some 20 countries around the world. It organizes conferences and training programs but it also arranges partnerships between Swedish local authorities and their counterparts in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. Some 70 such authorities in Sweden are already involved in this partnership program. These exchanges take place in a political and practical context and provide the opportunity for building local democracy around specific projects. It avoids the pitfalls associated with trying to push an ambitious and extensive reform agenda. Their importance, especially in the African context, cannot be underestimated and is totally missing in the diplomatic context of ODA transfers.

Funds for local governance and development

Improving local governance calls for funds that can encourage and create demand for better local

governance at local levels. This implies thinking how local governance can be strengthened both through organized collective action and greater commitment and understanding of devolution in local government institutions. Such funds should meet the following criteria: (1) have a legal status that ensures as much as possible that management decisions can be made in a professional and politically impartial way; (2) encourage local authorities to view these funds as sources of supplementing their development budgets; (3) be open on a competitive basis for all local authorities (or possibly other local bodies, if so decided); (4) have a board of directors or supervisors that represent resource providers as well as national stakeholders such as the central government and the body representing local authorities without any one party holding a dominant position; and (5) operate on a thematic or sector basis within nationally approved policy frameworks.

This type of formula was approved already some twenty years ago at an expert meeting involving representatives of the international donor community, African governments and civil society (Dag Hammarskjold Foundation 1995). It has been adopted to fund cultural development in Tanzania and agricultural development and decentralization in eastern Ethiopia (Norad 2008b).

These funds take some time to get off the ground in the right way but the payoffs are potentially much greater than projects designed by consultants with little involvement by local stakeholders. At a time when donors talk of the need for harmonization and cooperation among themselves as well as praising national ownership, this fund model fits perfectly into current donor philosophies. What remains is how to put it into practice in a way that fosters collective action and professional management rather than political patronage and a detrimental form of clientelism.

Conclusions

Decentralization and local governance, as one authoritative book argues, remains a field full of unfulfilled promises (Ojendal and Dellnas 2013). The question is why this is the case after so many efforts to promote it. This paper has argued that decentralization in African countries meets with a set of social and political challenges that are unique to the continent. Donor-sponsored blueprint approaches based on what works in other parts of the world have proved futile to strengthening local governance in the African context. There is thus a need to rethink how local governance can be developed from within the structural conditions in which these countries find themselves. These approaches must be context-sensitive. They must encourage effective collective action. They must be more effectively demand-driven. They must involve a new look at the concept of institution. In short, it implies reshaping the conceptual scaffolding that surrounds decentralization interventions.

Moving in a new direction does not mean moving into darkness or unknown territory. As suggested above, there are a number of approaches already familiar to the international community that can be more broadly adopted to foster local governance in Africa. For the donor community it is a matter of being better able to incorporate contextual determinants in their program design and implementation. Creating true partnerships and encouraging a meaningful ownership that goes beyond what the conventional ODA approach permits is only possible with greater humility in front of the crucial yet complex task of democratic governance at the local level.

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