

Why decentralisation makes sense

By Dr Muna Ndulo
Chair, GL Board



Recently, Gender Links completed a ground breaking study on Local Government in the SADC region. The study's findings underscored the importance of devolution of power to local communities if we are to improve delivery of goods and services.

Decentralization stresses the delegation of central government functions to lower levels of government (regional or local units), to which may then be granted a sphere of autonomy protected from the supremacy of national government. Many countries worldwide are devolving political, fiscal, and administrative powers to sub-national tiers of government.

The shift toward devolution reflects the political movement toward more democratic and participatory forms of government to improve the responsiveness and accountability of political leaders to their electorates. Its premise is the fundamental belief that people can govern themselves peacefully and with dignity in pursuit of their collective well-being once they are entrusted with control through the medium of popular local democratic institutions.

It is only through participatory and representative democracy that any form of government can legitimately formulate its priorities and programs. In economic terms, devolution permits governments to match the provision of local public goods and services with the preferences of recipients. Not only does it provide additional checks and balances on central government, but also a degree of security for constitutional order and social stability that are vital for economic order and development.

A devolved system allows the opportunity to formulate and implement local economic development plans within the context of national goals. This enables development strategists to more accurately target the specific needs of particular communities and areas of the economy. Local plans also permit and encourage a greater sense of popular involvement in the work of economic development by bringing that work closer to the people. Furthermore, devolution can play a vital role in creating conditions for balanced growth within the different areas of the country.

It improves productive efficiency through the greater accountability of local governments to citizens, fewer levels of bureaucracy, and better knowledge of local costs. Local formations can help maximize the benefits to be derived from intra-national comparative advantages, backward and forward linkages, and economies of agglomeration, and enhance the optimal utilisation of resources.

However, much remains to be done to strengthen local government. Wrongly structured sub-national entities can provide an opportunity for division on the basis of ethnicity or religion, with potential consequences of political oppression, intolerance, and, at the extreme, secessionist movements. Regional systems may make government less transparent and accountable by creating a mass of interlocking bureaucracies and an exorbitantly expensive government.

A devolved system might tend to preserve or shore up existing economic inequalities between regions and districts, and frustrate the redistribution of wealth that is needed to create a balanced and united nation.

Devolution can also frustrate the implementation of a coherent national economic development program by creating a host of competing economic policies. Where the economic differences among regions are substantial decentralisation can lead to undesirable internal migration, as well as social and political pressures.

For devolution of power to be successful, it must institutionalise the balance of power between the national government and the sub-national entities. These rules need to be determined as a system, taking into account the interaction between fiscal, political, and administrative institutions. The most difficult and controversial issue of all is deciding which tier of government controls which resources.



Photo: Susan Tolmay

Balance of power: Talking local government in Lesotho