

**STRATEGIC LOCAL EMPOWERMENT IN THE SIERRA LEONE DECENTRALIZATION PROCESS:
A CASE FOR INSTITUTIONALIZING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**

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INTRODUCTION

Participation has in the past three decades provided a significant shift in “development thinking” (Long, 2001). It has been increasingly considered a vital ingredient that augments community development. Participation is believed to make plans more relevant, give people more self-esteem, and it help legitimize the planning process and the state as a whole (Conyers, 1990). For decentralization reforms to be meaningful and sustainable, it is widely believed by many that participation must be institutionalized. This is predicated on the general assumption that participation indicates the involvement of poor people as integral part of sustainable development. These people live in communities, a refined word for villages, and there’s hardly any funded development project without a bottom-top participatory approach of involving ‘indigenous’ knowledge to ‘empower local people’ (Henkel and Stirrat, 2001).

This paper argues that decentralization is the vehicle through which effective participation of the poor and marginalized can be fully harnessed in the decision-making process. The main issues to be explored are institutionalizing participation in political decentralization using Sierra Leone as example; concrete reasons why strategic public participation guarantees effective service delivery resulting to development, building capacity to match changing roles and responsibilities and exploring the quest for an accountable public service.

Is Participation institutionalized in the Sierra Leone Decentralization Process?

Sierra Leone officially introduced decentralization in February 2004, with a view to re-establishing local governance, reducing resource gaps and income inequalities among regions, promoting administrative accountability/transparency and reducing poverty. To support decentralization and institute the legal/regulatory framework and the necessary structures to get them functioning, the Institutional Reform and Capacity Building Project (IRCBP) was established as a technical and professional outfit linked to the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Finance. Three technical units constitute this project; the Decentralization Secretariat (DEC-SEC), a directorate of the ministry of internal affairs is responsible for technical implementation of decentralization and is the principal advisor of the ministry on decentralization. The other unit is the Local Government Finance Department (LGFD), a directorate of the ministry of finance responsible for fiscal decentralization and the third being the Public Financial Management Reform Unit which is also an outfit of the finance ministry responsible for improving public financial management and accountability.

The IRCBP received an initial IDA grant of USD 25 million for the period July 2004-June 2008 to carry out the implementation of the project as spelt out in the Project Appraisal Document (Decentralization Secretariat, 2010). In handling this authority, capacity building, on-going infrastructural support and basic logistics have so far been provided to councils which have all

now recruited administrative and technical personnel. Fiscal transfers have also been customised, while internal auditors and monitoring officers now undertake periodic auditing and monitoring. The Local Government Service Commission has been supported and is now preparing Human Resource Management Guidelines for local councils and serves as a recruitment regulatory framework. Primary and secondary health, primary and junior-secondary education, agricultural extension services, rural water and solid waste have all been transferred to the councils (NACS, 2010).

A property cadastral and business licenses register have been developed for four city councils and one district council with the purpose of them being used to strengthen their local revenue generation capacities. In 2010, similar support was extended to two new district councils while a comprehensive local government performance assessment system (CLOGPAS) has been designed and implemented annually (Decentralization Secretariat, 2010).

Notwithstanding progress made, Sierra Leone's decentralization process is unfolding with great but surmountable challenges. Research has shown that most of these challenges come as a result of using a top-down decentralization/development strategy. There is a lot more to be done in shaping the Sierra Leone decentralization process, eight years after its introduction, and this is urgent if the gains already recorded are to be sustained; the major obstacles are; (a) the controversial role of traditional leaders (Paramount Chiefs), (b) mining and (c) a fragmented legal framework.

Jackson's commentary on this problem portrays the pivotal role of the administration of chieftaincy in Sierra Leone's decentralization process, emphasizing the need to not only establish a clear relationship with local elites but as well the need to clean it of corruption and the desire to mismanage local resources. Because chiefs are elected for life from 'ruling houses', they have systematically been abusing power through forced community labour, control over marriage and excluding the poor (Jackson 2006, 4).

Fanthorpe (2001) also explores the alienation of a significant number of rural people by the bureaucratic power of chiefs whose inheritance dates back to foreign invaders of rural communities and later using locals as their subjects. People move to rural settlements to acquire privileges such as voting rights, tax receipt and to gain general citizenship status, by working for their chiefs. Those who could not penetrate and with low inheritance inevitably become isolated and readily provided a fertile recruitment base for the rebels when the civil conflict erupted. Fanthorpe refer to these as 'neither citizens nor subjects' (Fanthorpe 2001, 385). He insists that such alienation and corruption was deeply supported by the political history of over centralized one party dictatorship that encouraged resource loot culminating to the civil war. Verdi Hadiz calls these "local strongmen' (Hadiz, 2010)

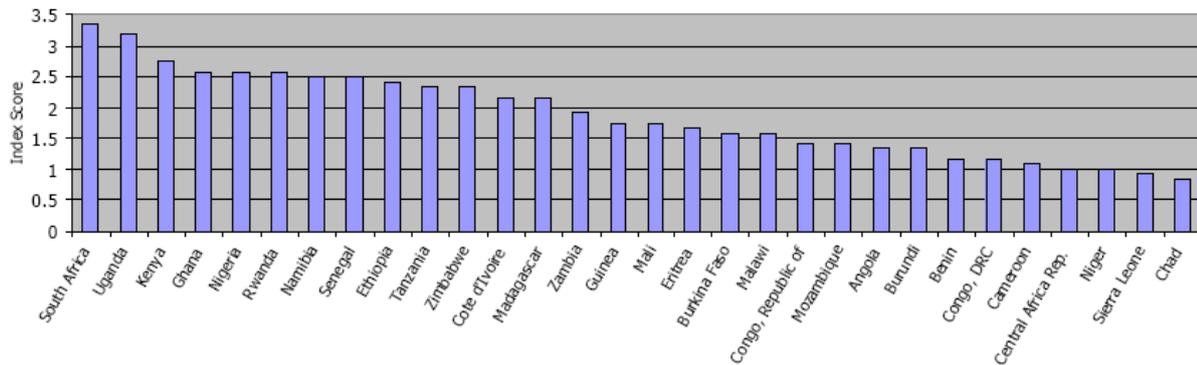
Despite the uncertain future left for chieftaincy administration by the 2004 Local Government Act, Sawyer firmly subscribes to the argument of Fanthorpe and Hadiz on the need for institutional reforms to enable chiefs become less bureaucratic, accountable and more responsive as "chiefs are better placed to protect their citizens than politicians are" (Sawyer, 2008).

In regards to mining, Jackson claimed that decentralization faces a serious threat from the activities between local land owners, traditional leaders, diamond traders and some government officials who condone industrial mining taking place outside regulation. These few hands have been able to benefit from the country's resources due to the highly centralized local government reforms in the post-conflict period (Jackson 2005, 2-3). This is made plausible by the Local Government Act which precludes local governments from taxing industrial producers of diamonds, limiting their taxation function to only artisanal production. However, the requirement for NGOs to now present in Council meetings and report on Council activities will make this game more difficult to sustain.

Maconachie (2008) establishes the tight link between corruption/mismanagement of diamonds and underdevelopment in Sierra Leone. Responding to donor calls for reform, using studies undertaken by NGOs and government and in adherence to the global economy's quest for resource management to trickle down to local communities, Sierra Leone introduced and internalized three mutually accountability approaches. The Kimberly Process-Certification Scheme for rough diamonds has invariably forced illicit diamonds out into official channels (Maconachie 2008, 74) while the Diamond Area Community Development Fund has ensured that government directs diamond proceeds to projects within host communities and supporting locals to monitor mining activities. A third one is the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative which would facilitate auditing of all transactions in the mining sector (Maconachie 2008, 77).

A fragmented legal framework is another problem associated with the Sierra Leone decentralization reform; enactment of a Local Government Act (LGA) in 2004 without a clear cut strategy to guide the intended process is a major defect. In the quest to achieve complete devolution of functions, there arose serious conflicts between this Act and existing policies of Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) that are required to transfer functions and personnel to Local Councils. Wunsch (2001) views such omission as a recipe for 'recentralization' whereby loopholes are often left in decentralization legislations so that local authorities remain handicap to make own decisions. No wonder only half of the 81 functions that were supposed to have been devolved by 2008 were actually transferred by 2010 when a policy was being developed. The new policy has now clearly outlined the legal and regulatory mechanism through which decentralization can successfully be implemented. Amendment of the LGA to reflect the Decentralization Policy concentrating on the manner of electing Councillors, their qualification and disqualification, tenure of office and procedures to fill vacancies is a key provision worth noting. Additionally, Local Councils are now empowered to delegate appropriate functions to other bodies and make by-laws that are in consistent with the National Constitution (Decentralization Secretariat. 2010)

In addition to the Sierra Leone peculiarities, John-Mary Kauzya explored the extent to which different African countries have decentralised their governance using Ndegwa's graphical analysis.



This illustration places Sierra Leone's decentralization reform at the bottom, ahead of only Chad from among thirty surveyed countries in Africa.

Looking at these underlying problems, judging from the huge investments and on-going efforts directed to the decentralization process, the low ratings on decentralization reforms, it is high time local participation is strategically prioritised in the Sierra Leone decentralization reform and a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework supported to guide the process.

Hypothesis

Establishment of local governance and ensuring that the Sierra Leone decentralization process positively impacts on the ordinary citizen has not been fully realised since 2004. Therefore, the need for adjustments and realignment of priorities becomes intrinsic in ensuring that the intended purpose is fully met. This call for a redirection can only occur with the comprehensive review, development and enactment of vital legislations to guide the whole process.

Undoubtedly, the strategic involvement of local people at all stages in the redirection venture and the collaborative initiative of successful decentralization programmes in the sub region would ensure that service delivery is improved and those who deliver services are able to resist and reject corruption temptations.

In consequence, the IRCBP should be left with no doable option but to ensure that the way forward has the absolute buy-in of people in the communities, those who constitute 70% of service delivery recipients.

Objectives

My proposed study will endeavour to analyse political decentralization and what change it has created since 2005. It will critically evaluate the progress of political decentralisation in Sierra Leone. It will identify and explain the major flaws and make recommendations to resolve these. The objectives would thus be;

1. To examine whether the IRCBP has been unified in its responsibility of guiding the decentralization process and analyse the level of participation by stakeholders involved in the process (Impact, benefits and challenges of political decentralization)
2. To establish concrete reasons why public participation will enhance effective and efficient decentralization that can guarantee improved service delivery nationwide

3. To suggest the need for government to embrace a comprehensive monitoring mechanism for all decentralised functions (for improved service delivery) for all devolving MDAs and local councils (Way Forward).

Decentralization as a vehicle for effective community participation

In the following analysis, this paper continues with critical highlights supporting the argument that decentralization is a vehicle through which effective participation of the poor and marginalized can be fully harnessed in the decision-making process. Many African countries today increasingly favour decentralised governance as a suitable path through which “poverty reduction interventions can be conceived, planned, implemented, monitored and evaluated” (Kauzya 2004, 286). After electing leaders, what is most crucial is the full range transfer of decision-making from central government to local communities allowing locals to take over problem analysis, priority setting, planning and constantly demanding accountability from their local and national leadership. Kauzya (2007) maintains that South Africa’s Integrated Development Planning and Rwanda’s Community Development Committees are prominent cases that illustrate institutionalization of participatory development planning in local governments. This process correlates Barber’s advocacy for expressive and enduring community participation in all deliberations of public decision-making as an evolving democratic correlate to be merged with present liberal democratic dictates (Barber 1984, 151). Rudqvist’s argue that participation is in general “..... a basic democratic right that should be promoted in all development projects” (Rudqvist, 1992).

Like East Timor Sierra Leone as a post-conflict nation embarking on poverty reduction through decentralized service delivery did not pay great attention to local participation and community capacity building (Patrick 2001, 48). Given the initial signs of achieving the Project Development Objective (PDO) of the IRCBP, both the EU and DFID contributed a further USD 25 million for the period September 2006 – January 2011 to address emerging issues, such as chiefdom governance, legislative review, introduction of service providers’ schemes, gender, etc. However, the IRCBP’s focus has been to ensure that local councils have the “capacity to respond to development needs of their locality and also have the capacity to generate, increasingly over time, substantial, sustainable and autonomous own-source revenues and to manage these effectively, in combination with fiscal transfers from central government” (Decentralization Secretariat, 2010).

The project on a flip side seeks to capacitate central government ministries and agencies to respond to the institutional transformation and to develop their new policy, monitoring and coaching roles. Primarily the IRCBP achieve this through training, organizational and institutional development, physical infrastructure, tooling (Logistics and Equipment), information, education and communication. It is believed that such mechanism will provide sustained decentralized governance for effective delivery of services, promote participatory democracy, accountability and transparency. Correspondingly, Long’s firm call for organizational change to internalize participation within the World Bank and other donor agencies on the one hand, and transforming Government Implementing Agencies on the other through decentralization for instance (Long 2001, 139-142), is a detected source for the IRCBP’s top-down capacity building initiatives .

Unlike where the centrality of capacity building stems from its influence to strengthening civil society, placing it at the apex of development practices (CDRA Annual Report, 1994/95), the IRCBP processes seems stuck within “organizational development, with all the baggage of managerialism, and little room for genuine community participation, engagement or control” (Ife 2010, 71). In this regard, it is worthwhile to acknowledge Edwards et al. (1999) who argues that “local capacities in areas such as building coalitions, promoting dialogue on issues, and promoting public participation in development planning are crucial” (55). In post-conflict Sierra Leone meeting immediate needs and incorporating civil society and communities was not simultaneously undertaken as noted for East Timor (Decentralization Secretariat, 2010) (Patrick, 2001).

Since 2002 when the 11 years conflict ended, NGOs and communities were not strategically incorporated into the 2004 decentralization process until 2010 when some effort is made to recognize them in the developed decentralization policy. The policy explicitly endorses a symbiotic accountability mechanism between state and non-state actors through effective checks and balances. For instance it is now required of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)/NGOs to hold local leaders accountable with a view to build trust in the local councils; while encouraged to attend local council meetings and deliberations where they can make statements on critical issues affecting their localities. They now also report council’s activities to the people to enhance greater participation. In addition, CSOs/NGOs have access to and are allowed to monitor and track council’s activities such as bid openings, contract agreements, development plans, etc. from the inception to the end (National Decentralization Policy 2010, 11).

From the state angle, NGOs according to the policy are required and are now sharing their Development Plans with local councils before operating in any locality. Councils now issue a Certificate of Compliance and the policy authorizes the levy of a minimal administrative fee on the advice of the ministry responsible for local government in consultation with the Ministry responsible for Finance. To strengthen this arrangement, the central government is legally positioned to enforce the requirements that CSOs/NGOs share their development programmes with local councils, as a means of ensuring local ownership and in order to improve on monitoring and coordination of their activities (National Decentralization Policy 2010, 11).

Critically, these processes enshrined in the policy are yet to be evaluated to determine efficacy, especially where they seek to strengthen links between local NGOs and the communities they profess to represent (Patrick 2001, 63). A predictable collusion is the non differentiation between local and international NGOs in the 2010 policy. Where it clearly recognizes NGOs as part of local community development, Patrick is specific in arguing for local NGOs as an expression of civil society empowerment and local population representation (Patrick, 2011). In recognizing capacity building as “...an important and ubiquitous concept within development”, Kaplan (1999) consider local NGOs in the South as vibrant civil society promoting social transformation and provide voice for the marginalized (12).

Apparently, the signs of sustaining institutional participation in the Sierra Leone decentralization process are quite revealing but for a comprehensive redirection of resources and additional external support. Institutionalized response to intertwined environmental, social and economic problem is seen from the perspective of providing a forum for deliberative conflict resolution, producing and disseminating valuable knowledge and information, providing opportunities for organizational learning (Pattberg, 2005)

Addressing the synthesised element of “not one size fits all”, the Sierra Leone Decentralization Policy increasingly draws on the participation of non-state actors, tightly bringing them together with state actors. The policy identifies the Private Sector and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)/ Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as key partners in enhancing successful implementation (National Decentralization Policy. 2010:11). The private sector is now playing an active role in economic development as producer of goods and services for export or local consumption and local councils creating the enabling environment by outsourcing activities to the private sector. CSOs/NGOs are similarly now cooperating with local councils to ensure integration of their activities within the councils’ development plans.

Decentralization has been analysed differently by theorists, scholars, public servants and the donor community, specifically the World Bank which is supporting states in diverse ways to enhance local participation. Sarkissian et al argues that participation indicates an active role of community people in the development process (Sarkissian et al. 1999, 6). In this manner it gives voice to the community and increase their decision-making roles in each step of the programme planning process (Belansky et al. 2009, 443). Notwithstanding, Wunsch is appalled that all African states undertaking decentralization reforms are bound to suffer major setbacks as a result of reluctance of central authorities to fully transfer functions noting that even when transferred, there are always manipulations to recapture through control exerted over local authorities. Where functions attracting local participation are reluctantly held by elites in central governments, community development stands threatened as Craig (2007) claim that community participation is partly synonymous with “community development” and that the concept has taken a shift to now becoming “community capacity building” (71) .

In order to enhance public accountability and reduce the influence of the all-powerful elites, Gaventa firstly endorse the maintenance of an animated civil society that can play a watch-dog role and hold government accountable for its actions. Though not without criticisms, Carothers’ underlying point to have a vibrant civil society is to create an autonomous force that is capable enough to provide checks on community leaders (Carothers, 1998). Like Carothers, John-Mary Kauzya, note in his discussion paper on that the first sense of political decentralization refers to the vote while the second one refers to the voice and that it is a combination of both that enhances the influence of local people on decisions that concern them (Kauzya, 2007). This paper firmly supports a local consensus scheme that weakens central powers from direct interference into the governance of local councils in Sierra Leone.

A deeper focus on result-based monitoring

Symbiotic monitoring of local councils by NGOs and NGOs by authorities provided for in the 2010 Decentralization Policy may sound promising, but the apparent absence of a robust and comprehensive framework for all sectors kills the purpose and may likely result to collusion between corrupt local officials and dishonest NGO operatives. The prevailing dominance of

Paramount Chiefs within local communities continues to provide blurred boundaries in sustainable community development. Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) in this regard argues that the claim of NGOs to enhance community capacity for participation is “opaque and complicated” in the sense that they themselves are incapacitated to teach capacity while the fear of “radical transformation” and “genuine accountability” precludes a comprehensive framework involving the people (CDRA Annual Report, 1994/95).

Nevertheless, it can be argued that all is not lost, when the National Anti-Corruption Strategy monitoring framework is considered. Located within the Anti-Corruption Commission, it brings together every pillar of integrity, those institutions within the state that make up for good governance (Executive, Judiciary, Legislature, Ministries, Departments and Agencies, Local and International NGOs, the private sector and wider civil society). The NACS provides a platform for planning, monitoring and evaluation. In line with its strategic policy matrix, all MDAs developed several actions with specific timelines to be implemented so that quality service is delivered to the people in a transparent and fair manner that is devoid of all corrupt practices. This planning takes place in the first month of each year while implementation kicks off simultaneously; the generated document become known as the ‘entity of focus action plans’ (Anti-Corruption Commission, 2008).

Progress is tracked with the aid of a designed indicator performance tracking table (PTT) submitted to the NACS Coordinating Secretariat on a quarterly basis. Subsequently, civil society moves in to monitor what is reported. Its core principles are “comprehensive approach to the process of reform”, “zero tolerance”, “multiple measures”, “partnership” and “adherence to the rule of law”. In its implementation architecture, civil society is mandated to provide the independent voice through periodic monitoring of the process. Representing the District Budget Oversight Committees (DBOC) and various reputable NGOs (Local and International), the crafted Civil Society Monitoring Groups (CSMG) received logistical and technical support from the Commission and partners to undertake independent nationwide monitoring of implementation. Crucial to the work of civil society is the community code of conduct outlining their dos and don’ts while monitoring MDA progress on NACS implementation.

For most local councils in Sierra Leone however, implementation of planned activities is seriously hampered due to the late disbursement of funds by the Ministry of Finance. A joint Civil Society/National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) monitoring report of July 2010 revealed that the delay in remittance for some local councils has not necessarily been the problem of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED). Rather in most cases, it is the councils themselves that default; for instance as at the time of the exercise only six councils had received their 3rd quarter remittance. The thirteen other councils did not receive funds on time due to problems such as non submission of Procurement Plans, delay in Subsidy Returns and Progress Reports for devolved sectors etc. While this excuse maybe legitimate, it is also ironically reported by the Ministry of Finance that revenue for allocated resources in the annual budget is sometimes not forth coming from the National Revenue Authority which is mandated to collect revenue in all Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). (NACS, 2010). This dilemma considerably undermines the work of Council Development Planners while distorting the plans themselves, thus creating mistrust between the community and

local authorities where projects are stalled. It also affects quality, with contractors supplying substandard services.

By and large we see a solid foundation being laid here by the NACS for institutionalizing participation in the decentralization process therefore compelling the IRCBP program budget to be stretched thus far. Not only does it provide an advocacy forum with a national grassroots character and valuable opportunities for growth and information dissemination, the “entity of focus action plans”, “performance tracking table”, monitors “code of conduct” and “validated monitoring reports” have all evolved to have a critical influence on service delivery. Expanding the PTT to cover allocation and expenditure of quarterly MDA remittances, and revenue generation points is a great initiative to curtail diversion of resources.

CONCLUSION

We can observe from the issues outlined that African states have sought to undertake community development through decentralization of key governmental functions to local people thereby regularizing their participation. Clearly, effective involvement of the marginalized can better be assured through decentralized governance, where the legal safeguards for strategic local involvement are institutionalized. From the Sierra Leone experience it is safe to conclude that post-conflict capacity building initiatives like in post-conflict East Timor subconsciously alienated the poor and marginalized, especially their claimed representatives, local NGOs.

With over \$50m donor funds provided to the IRCBP since 2004 when the decentralization process commenced, the outcome is still a top-down institutional, infrastructural and personnel support provided to local councils purposefully done to prepare them for implementation of key service delivery functions within their localities. Consequently, this outlook defeats the purpose of sustainable bottom-top development of including and empowering local knowledge in decision-making.

Nevertheless, this paper is tempted to suggest a comprehensive monitoring mechanism like a Sierra Leone Resources Watch Programme (SLRW) but the stakes are just too high to establishing a civil society voice of this magnitude. Keeping this dream alive, efforts to strengthen the NACS/CSMG appears plausible, due to its potentials for institutionalized growth.

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