

Administrative Decentralisation and Economic Development: the Sudan's Experiment with Devolution

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IN his classic study of decentralisation and development, Henry Maddick argued that economic growth and social modernisation depend in part on the ability of Third-World governments to diffuse responsibility for development planning and administration, to expand participation in economic activities, and to promote new centres of creativity within society. Over-concentration of administrative authority stifles development, Maddick insisted; it leads to waste and corruption, delays action, and creates irrational and inefficient management practices, the costs of which developing countries cannot afford.¹ To illustrate his point, Maddick cited the effects of the centralised supply system in the Sudan in the late 1950s, through which 'shoes made in Fasher were sent 400 miles by rail to Khartoum where the whole shoe supply was concentrated. When Fasher wanted shoes for school children and government personnel it had to send to Khartoum for them.' He also noted that school desks and equipment for the provincial city of Juba had to be ordered from Khartoum, which was 900 miles away and connected only by inefficient river transport, even though the wood from which the furniture was made originally came from Juba.²

Since the time that Maddick wrote in the early 1960s the arguments for decentralisation have been taken up and extended by development theorists, international assistance agencies, and political leaders in many developing nations. The assumption that administrative decentralisation is a precondition for, or a concomitant of, economic growth and social modernisation is now widely held. But the results of various experiments in developing nations have often been disappointing, and the conditions for implementing decentralisation programmes successfully have not

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¹ Henry Maddick, *Democracy, Decentralization and Development* (London, 1963).

² *Ibid.* p. 36.

been widely explored. The Sudan, for instance, in the years since Maddick observed its highly centralised administrative system, has attempted one of the most extensive schemes of devolution ever undertaken in a developing nation, and the results provide important insights into the relationships between decentralisation and development generally, and the problems of implementation in the poorest countries, such as the Sudan.

Thus, this article reviews the arguments offered by development theorists for promoting decentralisation, describes the rationale for and procedures of devolution in the Sudan from 1969 to 1980, identifies and analyses the difficulties that the Government faced with implementation, and offers propositions about the prerequisites for successful decentralisation in the Third World based on the lessons of the Sudan experience.

THE ARGUMENTS FOR DECENTRALISATION

The rationale for promoting decentralisation in those developing countries where power and authority for planning and administration are highly concentrated is manifold. First, it is argued that decentralisation can overcome the severe limitations of multi-sectoral national planning by delegating responsibility for planning to officials who are working closer to the problems. Research indicates that the impact of multi-sectoral, macro-economic planning in most developing nations has been weak; central planning has neither directly improved investment decision-making nor significantly affected policy implementation.¹ Moreover, the recent concern of many governments with achieving economic growth with social equity implies the need for more decentralised procedures of planning, stronger ties between planning and implementation, and diffusion of administrative capacity among a wider range of public and private institutions in order to reach those people who had previously been excluded from the benefits of economic growth. Decentralisation of authority to plan and manage development projects to the regional or local levels would allow governments to meet the needs of heterogeneous groups and areas.

A related argument is that decentralisation is a means of cutting through the enormous amounts of 'red tape' and the highly bureaucratic procedures characteristic of planning and administration in developing nations that result, in part, from the over-concentration of power,

¹ See Dennis A. Rondinelli, 'National Investment Planning and Equity Policy in Developing Countries: the challenge of decentralized administration', in *Policy Sciences* (New York), 10, 1, August 1978, pp. 45-74.

authority, and resources by the central government. By decentralising development functions to the field offices of ministries, or to subordinate levels of administration, more public servants will become knowledgeable and sensitive to local problems and needs because they will be working at the level where these are most visible and pressing. Closer contact between local populations and government officials would also allow the latter to obtain better information with which to formulate plans and programmes than could be obtained in their national capital.

Decentralisation is also seen as a means of increasing political and administrative 'penetration' in rural areas, where the policies of the government are often unknown by the local population or undermined by local élites, and where support for the central régime is often weak.¹ Regional or local administrative jurisdictions, it is argued, can be effective channels of communication between government and the local population for mobilising political support for development policies. Areal decentralisation, especially, can promote national unity by giving groups in different sections of the country the ability to participate in planning and decision-making, and thus to increase their 'stake' in maintaining political stability. Decentralisation would allow greater representation for various geographically-based political, religious, and ethnic groups in development decision-making, which in turn would lead to greater equity in the allocation of government resources among them, and allow local communities to develop greater administrative capacity.

John Montgomery argues from his study of decentralisation of land-reform administration, for instance, that where it was successful it 'seems to work because of a combination of certain factors that come with public participation in programme implementation: (a) easier access to knowledge, (b) more powerful motivation, (c) better communications, and (d) increased community solidarity.'² And the creation of greater administrative capacity among local organisations would also increase their ability to maintain infrastructure and services. In many countries the lack of maintenance capability at the local level allows infrastructure and services to deteriorate within a few years after their construction or creation, thus contributing little to development in the long run.

¹ The concept of political 'penetration' is discussed in detail in Lionel Cliffe, James S. Coleman, and Martin R. Doornbos (eds.), *Government and Rural Development in East Africa: essays on political penetration* (The Hague, 1977), passim.

² John Montgomery, 'Allocation of Authority in Land Reform Programs: a comparative study of administrative processes and outputs', in *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Ithaca, N.Y.), 17, 1972, p. 73.

Decentralisation is also prescribed as a way of increasing the efficiency of central agencies by relieving top management of routine, detailed tasks that could more effectively be performed by field staff or local officials. The time released from routine administration would free political and administrative leaders to plan more carefully and to supervise implementation more effectively. Decentralisation would also provide a means by which the diverse central ministries and agencies involved in development could co-ordinate with each other, and with local government officials and private organisations within specific jurisdictions. Regions, or provinces, provide a convenient geographical base for co-ordinating specialised programmes and projects that many developing countries are undertaking in rural areas in an integrated and co-ordinated manner.

Devolving responsibility for development planning and administration, moreover, is considered essential for increasing citizen participation. This process requires organised channels for exchanging information, and for making needs and demands known to those in authority. As analysts within the U.S. Agency for International Development have argued:

Increased popular participation, to be sustained and effective, requires the mobilization of local actors and the *institutionalization* of their activities. Decentralization is necessary to increase the scope of decisions, and thus incentives available to participants, as well as to build institutions to encourage, structure, focus and stabilize such participation.¹

Advocates also contend that decentralisation and widespread participation can offset the dominant influences or control over development decision-making of local élites, who are often unsympathetic to national policies, and insensitive to the needs of local residents, especially the poorest groups in rural areas.

Finally, decentralisation through regional or area development allows planners to integrate programmes spatially. Decentralisation on an areal basis provides a better mechanism than national or sectoral planning for identifying projects that are important to local residents, for selecting and locating them in a way that will strengthen functional and spatial linkages between urban and rural areas, and for integrating regions into the national economy. Spatial planning requires a geographic base for decision-making that administrative decentralisation can provide.

Yet many of these advantages are often cited as potential benefits

¹ U.S. Agency for International Development, Office of Rural Development, 'Managing Decentralization' (Washington, 1979), mimeographed, p. 25.

rather than as the results of past attempts at deconcentrating or devolving authority. In reality, governments in East Africa, and in other developing regions, face a host of problems when implementing decentralisation policies. Analysis of specific attempts raise profound questions about the overall commitment of national bureaucracies to decentralisation; about the political motivations for this goal in some countries, and the implications for achieving socially equitable economic development; about the apparent conflicts between the desire of central government leaders to control the economy and the policies calling for widespread participation in development management. The decentralisation schemes in some developing nations have proved more, rather than less, costly – in manpower, equipment, and financial resources – and new sources of money and personnel must be found for their implementation. Evidence also suggests that decentralisation requires certain preconditions and supporting policies that many governments cannot or will not provide.¹

Ironically, many of the weaknesses that decentralisation policies are designed to overcome are often the strongest obstacles to their successful implementation. The experience of the Sudan is, therefore, instructive because the Government has attempted since 1969 to introduce an extensive programme of devolution and regionalisation that has raised many of these issues, and that provides insights into the conditions essential for implementing decentralisation policies.

DEVOLUTION AND REGIONALISATION IN THE SUDAN

The principles of administrative decentralisation and widespread participation in public decision-making were inherent in the socialist philosophy of the leaders of Sudan's 'May Revolution' in 1969, justified by the military as the only means of changing the old political order, in which 'the people were denied their basic and legitimate rights as 'makers of the political life of the country'. The system of native administration, inherited from British colonial rule, had given religious, tribal, and influential family élites substantial control over local affairs. Narrowly-based political factions and a traditional civil service maintained a near stranglehold on national politics. The powers of provincial and local governments were undermined by central ministries and

¹ See Dennis A. Rondinelli and Kenneth Ruddle, 'Political Commitment and Administrative Support: preconditions for growth with equity policy', in *Journal of Administration Overseas* (London), xvii, 1, January 1978, pp. 43–60; and Dennis A. Rondinelli, 'Administration of Integrated Rural Development: the politics of agrarian reform in developing countries', in *World Politics* (Princeton), xxxi, 3, April 1979, pp. 389–416.

public corporations. A bureaucracy concerned with regulation, rather than with development or with providing services to the people, controlled the technical and administrative agencies in Khartoum. The activities of the various ministries and public corporations – which ran much of the industry in the Sudan – were unco-ordinated and often conflicting. Many provincial governments were controlled by local political factions that used them as channels for pressing special interests with the central Government. The boundaries of provinces and local units had often been drawn to encompass a single tribe, or to allow district *omdas* or paramount sheikhs (*nazirs*) to dominate the areas, or local religious leaders (*Imams*) to exercise influence, thus rendering provincial commissioners and executive officers powerless to carry out their administrative functions without political interference.

The inability of local administrators to solve problems, and the fragmentation of political power within provinces and districts, inevitably pushed those problems, and with them increasing decision-making power, towards the ministries in Khartoum. Delegations from the provinces travelled regularly to the capital to urge central authorities to settle local disputes. Administrators at every level were generally recognised by the Sudanese, as well as by foreigners, as being corrupt, inefficient, and ineffectual. Moreover, the inability of the central Government to resolve the bloody civil war between the largely Islamic northern provinces and the predominantly black African southern region added to the difficulties of maintaining political order and pursuing economic development. In 1969, the military claimed that neither the central Government nor the local political factions were responsible to the Sudanese people, and that both had become remote from, and unresponsive to, the needs of the majority of citizens, especially those living outside the capital.¹

For the Sudan, decentralisation was seen as more than a practical necessity in a country that is greater in size than Western Europe, and where sub-national regions are larger than England. The ability to govern from Khartoum meets severe physical, political, and organisational constraints. Decentralisation was considered by President Gaafar Mohammed Nimeiry and the leaders of the Sudan Socialist Union (S.S.U.) – the country's only political party – as a precondition for political stability, and as a fundamental principle of socialist ideology. As one Sudanese official pointed out, decentralisation was essential for creating a 'system of government in which power is vested in the masses'.

¹ See Musa Mahgoub Hamad El-Nil, 'The New System of Local Government', in *The People's Local Government Journal* (Khartoum), 4, 3, December 1979, pp. 1–26.

For the socialist revolutionaries, 'Mobilisation of the masses for the maintenance of this power in their own hands and for the reconstruction of their own country and destiny' was an integral part of the concept of development. Achieving an acceptable balance between central authority and regional autonomy, between public guidance of the economy and promotion of an incipient private sector, and between national unity and local governance, was considered a prerequisite to establishing a political system in which 'every section and every major and minor interest group in the society [has] a direct or indirect representation in the conduct of our government'.¹

The leaders of the 1969 revolution promised 'a new democracy based upon the principle of enabling the people to exercise all their will on all levels - political, social and administrative - in a sober and responsible way'.² The charter of the Sudan Socialist Union sought to establish a governmental system in which the power of local councils, which expressed the opinions and interest of the people, would be supreme over the executive, 'in furtherance of popular leadership and in keeping the interest of the people away from the maze of [bureaucracy], and placing it under the security of the masses'.³

1. *Creating a System of Local Administration*

The commitment of the revolutionary régime to decentralisation was most clearly reflected in the People's Local Government Act, promulgated by President Nimeiry after the Sudan became a Republic in 1971. The major thrust was to strengthen the authority and administrative powers of the provinces, and to establish a system of local participation in development planning. Chapter III of the Act established provincial administrations, consisting of a 'Peoples's Province Executive Council' and a Provincial Commissioner. By strict definition, however, the title of the Act was a misnomer, because the law really created a system of local administration. That is, each Provincial Commissioner was less a local 'governor' than a representative of the Government who was charged with co-ordinating central activities. The Commissioner, appointed by the President and responsible to him, was expected to be a political agent of the central régime and its ruling party, the Sudan

¹ Omar el-Haq Musa, 'Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Development Efforts in Southern Sudan', in *Middle East Journal* (Washington), 27, Winter 1973, pp. 1-6.

² Sudan Socialist Union, *Charter for National Action*, p. 13; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 22.

³ Quoted in Democratic Republic of the Sudan, The People's Assembly, *Final Report of the Select Committee for Study and Revision of People's Local Government* (Khartoum, 1976), translation, mimeographed, p. 12. Referred to hereinafter as *Final Report*.

Socialist Union. This was clearly noted in the 1971 Act stipulating that each appointed Commissioner would be a person of administrative ability, 'and of political consciousness and an ardent supporter of the aims of the May Revolution'.¹ They were to serve simultaneously as the 'chief representative' of the Government, responsible for promoting, coordinating, and executing national policies, and as head of the S.S.U. in the province. The thrust of their activities, at least as originally stated in the Local Government Act of 1971, was not to represent a local constituency as much as to organise local residents to be 'responsive to the general policy of the Government'.²

The Commissioners were charged with the general supervision, co-ordination, and control of all government officials - local and central - operating in the province. In addition, they had to maintain order and security with the co-operation of the Ministry of the Interior, and together with the Provincial Executive Councils to prepare annual operating and development budgets.

The duties of the Councils as described in the Local Government Act of 1971 also pointed to a system of local administration rather than of local government. They were established by warrant from the Council of Ministers and could be amended at any time. The Provincial Commissioners were *ex officio* the chairmen of the Councils, and in addition were granted veto power over a number of decisions - for example, if judged to be 'contrary to public interest or the general policy of the state or [that] threatens the security or prejudices the rights of citizens or the principles of equality'.³ The Executive Councils were to be made up of members of 'functional organisations' - women's groups, youth organisations, political party members, and representatives from district, village, and town development committees - as well as officials from various ministries working in the provinces.

The duties of the Councils combined political mobilisation with general administration. Broadly, the Local Government Act of 1971 charged them with responsibility for 'political enlightenment, people's mobilisation, economic and social development, and consolidation of national unity', and with the promotion of the socialist ideology as defined by the S.S.U. The political overtones were strong - the Councils were expected not only to help the central authorities combat traditional political influences that dominated local and national affairs prior to the 1969 revolution, but also to help mobilise political support within

¹ Democratic Republic of the Sudan, *The People's Local Government Act, 1971* (Khartoum, 1971), ch. III, sec. 6(1).

² *Ibid.* ch. III, sec. 6(6).

³ *Ibid.*

the provinces by organising village development committees and 'May legions' for men, women, and youth.

The administrative duties of each Council were specified in a warrant from the central Government, and included a broad range of local activities, only excluding five reserved functions: national security, posts and communications, foreign affairs, banking, and the judiciary. Typically, the warrant of the Provincial Councils includes all of the following duties outlined in the Local Government Act of 1971, to: (1) issue orders establishing and regulating the imposition of local taxes and fees; (2) establish regulations and laws concerning public order and security; (3) create temporary taxes on recreational activities or commodities in order to finance any public project in the province; (4) prepare annual budget proposals for the province and approve expenditures to local councils; (5) recommend proposals for development projects and schemes to appropriate central government ministries; (6) suggest improvements to appropriate ministries for the operation and administration of institutions within the province; (7) establish, administer, or participate in any commercial or development projects that are self-sustaining and consistent with the national development plan; and (8) oversee the work of ministries and government departments performing functions in the province, and carry out any other duties specified in the warrant for the Council.

Undoubtedly, the most important function of the Provincial Councils was to prepare their annual budgets. They were required to estimate their revenue and expenditure each year, to calculate tax levies, and to determine the amounts needed from ministries. The sectoral requests were to be prepared in co-operation with the ministries having jurisdiction over those functions, and the final budget recommendations would be approved by the Council of Ministers.¹

The Provincial Councils could employ staff, but most of the technical posts were filled by civil servants seconded from the ministries. On average about 15-20 were to be assigned to each Council, working under the supervision of the Deputy Commissioner for Administration. The major institutional channel for extending services to, and eliciting participation from, the localities was through the 'People's Local Councils'. Under the provisions of the Local Government Act of 1971, the Provincial Councils could establish local councils for districts, towns, rural areas, and villages, as well as for nomadic groups. A map showing the boundaries of each had to be filed with the Provincial Council, which would delegate some of its duties through a warrant to the local

¹ *Ibid.* ch. v, secs. 19-26.

committees, and then supervise their activities. The Act required that local council seats be filled by election, and that one-fourth of the membership be women. A local government inspector headed the district administration which had responsibility for primary and secondary education, health, co-operatives, clerical and accounting activities, and public works. The district councils generally had few direct administrative duties; they acted primarily as links between the Provincial Councils and local councils to co-ordinate local budgets.¹ As a result of the 1971 legislation all former local government units were abolished, and only provinces were given corporate status. But the creation of local councils drastically increased the number of administrative units within the provinces from 86 to more than 5,000.

2. *From Deconcentration to Devolution*

The implementation of the Local Government Act greatly increased the administrative responsibilities of the provinces, but also created serious problems for the provincial and local councils, notably because of inadequate finance. Although the President had transferred many functions previously performed by central ministries to the Provincial Executive Councils, national budgetary allocations for their performance did not necessarily reflect the shift in workloads and responsibilities. Instead, a dual budgetary system emerged in which provinces earmarked some funds for local activities, and worked with the ministries in budgeting for projects and programmes that the ministries would undertake in their jurisdictions. Provincial governments were responsible for formulating their own annual budgets, of which about 12 per cent could be devoted to development projects. Although the Executive Councils were required to specify the sources of revenue for budgeted expenditures, their limited tax base and collection capacity meant that their main source of revenue would continue to be the central Government through deficit financing – a form of ‘revenue sharing’ which provided the difference between provincial incomes and expenditures.

In addition, the central ministries also placed line items in their own budgets for capital construction and equipment purchases which would later become part of the provincial budgets. The maintenance costs and staff salaries for all projects undertaken by the central ministries were passed to the provinces after their completion, and became recurring

¹ See K. M. Zem, ‘The Practice of Public Administration in the Sudan: a study of a district center’, Ph.D. dissertation, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, 1978, ch. 7.

local expenditures. This increased the financial burdens on the provinces, and the amounts that were needed each year from the central Government through deficit financing. But reimbursements for deficits could only be obtained after item-by-item approval by the Ministries of Finance and Local Government. This left the provinces with little flexibility or discretion in using funds, and virtually no capacity to plan ahead. It also greatly increased the financial dependence of provincial and local councils on the central Government. Approvals often took a long time to obtain, and were sometimes subjected to arbitrary cuts by ministry officials in Khartoum.

As a result, the provinces lacked adequate facilities, equipment, supplies, and trained personnel to perform their newly assigned duties. Although the central ministries were required to assign field staff to the provinces, many Commissioners complained about the insufficient numbers and poor quality of those sent to provincial posts. High rates of turnover, resentment on the part of some employees who were involuntarily transferred from Khartoum, and frequent changes in postings made stable administration in the provinces difficult.

Since most supplies continued to come from the headquarters of the ministries in Khartoum, the serious logistical, transport, accounting, and distribution difficulties characteristic of Sudanese administration left most of the provinces almost always under-supplied. Clearly, most ministries were reluctant to give up their functions and resources, and some continued to by-pass the Councils, failing to consult with them, for instance, about the scheduling of projects in their provinces.¹

An intensive investigation of the progress of decentralisation started in 1975 by a select committee of the national legislature—the People's Assembly—found that these and other problems were impeding the implementation of the Local Government Act. The committee found that the ambiguity in rôles and relationships between provincial and local councils hampered the work of both, and aggravated problems caused by inadequate manpower and financial resources. Many councils were unable to perform their functions effectively, even four years after the enactment of the local government law. The Provincial Executive Councils, it was charged, were so absorbed in the details of running existing programmes and of dealing with daily administrative problems, that they gave little attention to overall planning and budgeting, or to delegating responsibilities to local councils. The committee found that

¹ A detailed discussion of these problems in one province is provided in K. J. Davey, G. W. Glentworth, Mohamed Osman Khalifa, and Makdi Sheikh Idris (eds.), *Local Government and Development in the Sudan: the experience in Southern Darfur Province* (Khartoum, 1976), *passim*.

the relationships between many Provincial Councils and the local councils was not clearly understood by the citizens and village leaders who were supposed to participate in their activities, and that co-ordination was rare. Moreover, the committee discovered that without corporate status for local government, administrative officers were rendered powerless to perform their previous duties. Decision-making and administration were left almost entirely to the rather weak local councils; administrative functions had to be performed in many areas by what the People's Assembly committee called 'part-time persons who may not even be qualified to carry them out'.¹

In this atmosphere of ambiguity, administrative reform in the first few years after proclamation of the Local Government Act had little influence on changing the structure of informal leadership in villages and rural areas. An assessment of changes in local administration in areas where councils were established shortly after 1971 concluded that, in most, the traditional leaders merely took on new rôles within the councils. 'The picture that emerges is of an informal leadership group at the village level based on respected familiar loyalties', John Howell noted: 'This group is likely to fill any of the institutional roles that are required by visiting government or party officials'.² Moreover, traditional, religious, and family leaders continued to play important rôles in vital administrative matters:

In fields such as tax-assessment and tax-collecting for example it is evident that the traditional leaders still have an important role to play despite the formal abolition of native administration in the northern Sudan. Further, in the formation of the new People's Councils, it has often been the pragmatic conservatives who have re-emerged as the most substantial local political figures; and a Government committed to 'grass-roots democracy' clearly has to get *underneath* this local elite of pragmatic conservatives first.³

The People's Assembly committee also found widespread dissatisfaction with the provision of the 1971 Act that gave Provincial Commissioners power to suspend decisions of the Executive Councils. Many local leaders felt that Section 6(6) was contrary to the principles of the 'May Revolution' and its commitment to democratic rule. Although none of the Commissioners had actually ever used it, some agreed that the exercise of the veto power would place them in an uncomfortable political position, and the committee called for the amendment of that

¹ The People's Assembly, *Final Report*, p. 27.

² John Howell, 'Administration and Rural Development Planning: a Sudanese case', in *Agricultural Administration* (London), 4, 1977, pp. 99-120.

³ John Howell, 'Introduction: local government and politics', in Howell (ed.), *Local Government and Politics in the Sudan* (Khartoum, 1974), p. 8.

provision of the Act. It also suggested that the appointment of Provincial Executive Council chairmen by the Ministry of Local Government was an unacceptable compromise of decentralisation, even when the Minister only ratified the results of a council election.¹ Indeed, the Assembly committee took exception to any provision of the Local Government Act that seemed to contradict the intent of decentralisation policy, or the spirit of local participation fostered by the 'May Revolution'. A section of the Act that allowed Provincial Commissioners to direct Executive Councils to issue regulations or orders, and that required them to accede to such directions, was severely criticised. The committee insisted that this provision 'constitutes an unjustifiable interference in the powers of the People's Executive Councils which have a corporate personality, and that it bears a meaning contrary to the philosophy of local government'.²

In 1976, the Assembly committee concluded that the 1971 law did not really devolve power, as much as it deconcentrated it from some central ministries, and reconsolidated it in other ministries and in the offices of Provincial Commissioners. The People's Assembly was told that 'power thus becomes centered in the headquarters of the province and thus the administrative shade expands at the same time it was meant to be contracted by the establishment of such a tremendous number of People's Local Councils'.³

3. *Revisions in Government Structure*

To overcome some of these problems the Sudan Socialist Union decided upon a number of administrative reforms. In 1977, Nimeiry reorganised some central ministries and completely abolished others, transferring their functions to the Office of the President or to the provinces. In addition, he stopped the practice of sending out technical officers from the ministries as assistant commissioners, thereby giving the Provincial Commissioners greater executive and co-ordinative authority over both administrative and technical functions. The President also declared a major change in the way the national budget would be formulated. Beginning with the next fiscal year, provincial rather than central ministry expenditures would become the basis for national budgeting, and residual funds from the consolidated provincial budgets would be allocated for central operations and development.⁴

¹ The People's Assembly, *Final Report*, pp. 16-18.

² *Ibid.* p. 19.

³ *Ibid.* p. 24.

⁴ *Daily Bulletin* (Khartoum), 12 December 1977, p. 9.

In early 1978, Nimeiry convened the First Congress on People's Local Government to evaluate decentralisation. The representatives from a cross-section of administrative units throughout the country made a number of recommendations for improving the capacity of local councils to identify and administer development projects. Citing the need for provinces to promote and encourage the generation of income as a way of lessening their dependence on the central Government, the Congress urged provinces to establish specialised committees to conduct feasibility studies, to adopt flexible policies to encourage private investment in local ventures, to provide training to cadres who would follow up on the implementation of projects, and to create special banks to finance development activities. Moreover, it suggested that a permanent committee headed by the Provincial Commissioner be created to supervise local self-help projects, and to audit their grants from the Provincial Local Development Fund.¹ The representatives were clearly concerned about the worsening financial problems, and the growing financial dependence of provincial and local councils on the central Government. They called for an extensive programme of tax reform, with new powers and collection procedures, designed to increase local revenue. They also identified a number of other measures that would help to achieve the same aim: an information campaign about local taxation for village and town residents, greater co-ordination among provinces to reduce smuggling and tax evasion, and the creation of a research centre to assess local service expenditures and make suggestions to local councils about how to expand their revenues.

President Nimeiry followed-up his initial changes with others in 1978. Because of the reluctance of many national ministries to support the decentralisation policy, he greatly curtailed their powers. The Ministry of Local Government, to which the Provincial Commissioners had previously reported, was abolished, and the Commissioners were elevated to cabinet rank. The Ministry of Planning was ordered to establish offices in each of the provinces to assist the Executive Councils with short-range development planning, and the Ministry of Finance was likewise told to provide technical assistance for budget preparation and fiscal programming. The provincial planning teams would generate relevant socio-economic data needed to prepare provincial and district development plans, and would assist the Councils and the Commissioners in integrating local projects into provincial plans, and in co-ordinating provincial with national planning.²

¹ *Ibid.* 16 January 1979, pp. 14-15.

² *Ibid.* 2 February 1979, pp. 4-6.

The President's commitment to decentralisation was emphasised again in February 1979 when he abolished the following seven Ministries: Education, Interior, Religious Affairs, Social Affairs, Youth and Sports, Co-operation, and Commerce and Supply. Operational responsibilities for many functions previously performed by these Ministries had already been transferred to the provinces, and the residual national functions were consolidated and transferred to other central Government offices. Two new Ministries were established: Education and Orientation, and Co-operation, Commerce, and Supply. The President also ordered other Ministries—Transport, Finance, Energy, and Culture and Information—to begin preparing to decentralise some of their functions. Moreover, all the remaining Ministries were given special new assignments to assist the provinces to perform more effectively the responsibilities transferred from the central Government. With the abolition and reorganisation of the central ministries, Nimeiry ordered the transfer of more than 47,000 government employees to the provinces, including school teachers, nurses, and medical assistants.¹ The reorganisation and transfers placed the administration of police, prisons, and fire brigades under the authority of the Provincial Commissioners, and gave the Executive Councils control over youth care, sports and recreation, religious and cultural activities, public health (including the appointment of staff up to the rank of medical assistants), social welfare, primary education, administration of agricultural services, supervision of rural water development, and organisation of co-operatives.²

The transformation of the system from local administration to local government through the devolution of central functions to provincial and local councils is still underway. More systematic amendments of the Local Government Act of 1971, or its replacement with an entirely new law, are now under consideration.

4. *Towards Regional Government in the Sudan*

At the same time, other forms of decentralisation are planned that will move the Sudan towards a federal system, with semi-autonomous regional governments created to direct public activities and co-ordinate them between the central Government and the provinces. In March 1979, Nimeiry proposed to the Central Committee of the S.S.U. that

¹ Ibid. 17 June 1979, p. 18.

² Democratic Republic of the Sudan, 'Decentralization of Functions Connected with Abolition of Some Central Ministries', *Presidential Decree, No. 52* (Khartoum, 1979), translation, mimeographed.

Northern Sudan should be given three regional governments with semi-autonomous powers similar to those granted to Southern Sudan in 1972. As there, the regional institutions in the North would have responsibility for supervising administration, maintaining order and security, and planning for and implementing regional economic development. Unlike the South, however, where the President of the High Executive Council is elected and can only be removed by the Regional Assembly, the governors of the proposed new regions would be appointed by the President of the Republic.

Nimeiry argued that the implementation of these proposals would create a 'realistic administrative pattern that reflects national unity, attains efficiency, promotes production and ensures proper growth of national resources and a fair distribution of wealth'.¹ The arrangement would provide a governmental structure that would promote equity in regional development and guard against social imbalance. It would create a political system in which national resources would be more equitably distributed, and in which national development activities could be co-ordinated and implemented more effectively. The proposals were endorsed by the S.S.U. and a special commission was created to work out financial, administrative, and structural details.

Although regionalisation in the Sudan is only in its initial stages, it is clear that Nimeiry sees successful implementation as a political necessity for maintaining national unity, and as a practical means of achieving more responsive and efficient administration. He has told the nation that the 'regionalisation proposals constitute radical solutions for our supply, economic and political problems', that they are essential alternatives to temporary solutions, and that they 'open new horizons for national action and constitute a progressive step and an additional experience to the systems of administration, government and democracy'. He claims decentralisation to be a 'genuine response to the aspirations of the masses' that could 'help forestall tendencies of discord and conflict'.²

But in the Sudan, belief in decentralisation and widespread participation is still an article of faith. The tangible benefits have not yet appeared. The achievement of these goals will depend in part on the central Government's ability to control serious economic problems, to maintain political stability, and to obtain the co-operation and support of the national bureaucracy, local officials and élites, and also ethnic and religious groups.

¹ Quoted in Abdel Moniem Awad El Rayah, 'SSU Central Committee Meeting: an uncompromising speech', in *Sudanow* (Khartoum), 4, 4, April 1979, p. 9.

² *Daily Bulletin*, 17 June 1979, p. 14.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DECENTRALISATION: CONDITIONS
AND OBSTACLES

The difficulties that the Sudan has had implementing decentralisation policies should perhaps not be surprising given its colonial history, strong traditions of central control, high levels of poverty, and the severity of its current economic and social problems. It is clear that decentralisation involves far more than simply declaring a policy of 'bottom-up' decision-making, reorganising the administrative structures, and establishing local planning procedures. Experience elsewhere attests to the extreme complexity of the process, and suggests that a variety of mutually reinforcing conditions must exist or be created before decentralisation is feasible¹ — some are prerequisites, others must emerge in the process.

There is evidence, for instance, that a minimum level of economic development must already have occurred before local governments can effectively assume responsibilities for further progress in this field. Studies of the correlates of devolution in a sample of industrialised and developing nations concluded that it is most extensive in those older, more politically stable societies that have already achieved sustained economic development, and in which technologies are well distributed and an extensive communications network has been created.² Thus, the question of whether decentralisation is an effective instrument for promoting development — especially in the poorest countries — or an arrangement for sustaining and making development more equitable once it is underway, is still open to debate.

In any case, the Sudanese experience with devolution suggests that its successful implementation depends upon four categories of necessary conditions: (1) strong political commitment to decentralisation among both national and local leaders; (2) clearly defined decentralisation policies and procedures; (3) adequate financial resources and administrative capacity at the national and local levels to plan and manage development; and (4) physical and organisational infrastructure

¹ A concise summary of the Tanzanian experiments can be found in Richard N. Blue and James H. Weaver, 'A Critical Assessment of the Tanzanian Model of Development', in *Agricultural Development Council Reprints*, 30, July 1977, pp. 1–30. See also Paul Collins, 'Decentralization and Local Administration for Development in Tanzania', in *Africa Today* (Denver), 21, 3, Summer 1974, pp. 15–25; and James W. Fesler, 'Centralization and Decentralization', in David L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), pp. 372–74. The Asian experience is described in Norman Uphoff and Milton Esman, *Local Organization for Rural Development: analysis of Asian experience* (Ithaca, 1974), and in various studies by the Asian Centre for Development Administration, *Approaches to Rural Development in Asia: the South Asian experience* (Kuala Lumpur, 1975), *passim*.

² Frank P. Sherwood, 'Devolution as a Problem of Organization Strategy', in R. T. Daland (ed.), *Comparative Urban Research* (Beverly Hills, 1969), p. 75.

conducive to devolved decision-making and interaction among administrative units. Weaknesses or 'gaps' in these conditions make decentralisation more difficult, and explain many of the problems that the Government of the Sudan has faced in implementing its programmes of devolution and regionalisation.

1. *Political Commitment to Decentralisation*

Despite the strong pressure exerted by President Nimeiry for more than 10 years, support for decentralisation remains weak among some military leaders and politicians outside his faction of the Sudan Socialist Union. Central bureaucrats and local élites have either resisted the new regulations, or attempted to reassert control over the decentralised structures. Some feel that devolution will further divide the country and allow regional leaders to build semi-autonomous fiefdoms within the Sudan. Others argue that decentralisation weakens the central Government's control over development, and maintains the provincialism that has prevented the Sudan from achieving national unity. Thus, only a few of the reforms initiated by the Local Government Act of 1971 have been institutionalised, and the probabilities that these will survive Nimeiry's personal tenure in office are thought to be relatively low.

A related obstacle to implementing decentralised planning and administration has been the continuing resistance of officials in both the national ministries and provincial councils to 'decision-making from below'. Civil servants in the capital resented the transfer of their functions to the provinces, and attempted to maintain control over them, directly or indirectly, for as long as possible. The resistance is attributable not only to the reluctance of central ministries to lose those functions that provided their base of financial resources and political influence, but also to the deep distrust of local administrators among technicians and professionals within the central bureaucracy. A recurring objection by ministry officials to devolution has been that local administrators and rural people would not understand their work. They feared that in the field they would not receive the same support that they got in Khartoum from supervisors who shared their professional values. As one technical officer explained when the Ministry of Social Affairs was abolished: 'I don't know how I'm going to work in the provinces away from home. The province commissioners do not understand the work of social workers, so our efforts will be undermined.'¹

¹ See Abdel Moncim al Rayah and Alfred Logune Taban, 'Decentralization: power to the provinces', in *Sudanow*, March 1976, p. 14.

Only the abolition of some central ministries in the Sudan removed the most intransigent bureaucratic obstacles – at least temporarily – and served warning to other ministries that their co-operation was mandatory.

A similar resistance to widespread participation in decision-making is evident among officials in the provinces. The only effective force for making decentralisation work in the Sudan is within the office of the Provincial Commissioner. But the bureaucrats here tend to be former central ministry technicians, and neither they nor the Executive Councils have been eager to extend authority to local councils.

Administrative decentralisation is also weakened by the pervasive distrust in the rural areas of government officials, whose centrist attitudes lead them to scorn 'participation' in development activities. Many local officials attempt to work 'around' members of district and village councils rather than with them. 'Distrust of the ability and probity of local councillors is ingrained, and instructions on grass roots democracy are cynically administered', Howell contends.¹ 'Technical officers still control local planning and budgeting, and when they do consult the councils it is usually only to obtain ratification of decisions already made.

The ability of the central bureaucracy to penetrate local administrative units and reconsolidate power is evident. In one sense, as the People's Assembly has already been told by its select committee on the evaluation of local government, devolution in the Sudan has simply reconcentrated power at the provincial level by reducing the decision-making authority and resources of the central ministries and of local governments. Although the Provincial Executive Councils have the authority to devolve functions to lower-level councils, few of them outside of Khartoum have done so. An evaluation of decentralisation in Southern Darfur Province concluded that 'this has in effect meant the loss of identity by the lower councils which are entirely dependent upon the province councils for staff, equipment, and authority to spend even the smallest amounts of money.'²

Moreover, a major objective of decentralisation was to break up traditional political influence by establishing administrative structures and planning procedures that would weaken the power of local élites by bringing younger leaders into community decision-making, or by strengthening the rôle of centrally appointed officials. Decentralisation would thereby lead to greater national unity and political integration, and extend the Government's influence in development to the peripheral areas. But it is there that diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, and

¹ Howell, *loc. cit.* p. 109.

² Davey et al. (eds.), *op. cit.* p. 4.

nomadic groups exist together with little sense of common heritage or nationalism; obligations, responsibilities, and loyalties rarely extend far beyond family, village, or tribe. Decentralisation has neither completely broken the hold of traditional élites nor promoted decision-making that will achieve the kind of development desired by the Government. In many Sudanese villages, for example, traditional leaders have emerged as local councillors, and their demands are for social rather than productive investments. 'The most powerful councillors are either traders or party leaders from the small market town which are the effective face of government activity', Howell observed. 'Demands for "development" center upon the provision of schools and clinics in particular, with questions of increased agricultural productivity not figuring in the infrequent council deliberations.'¹

2. *Clearly Defined Decentralisation Policies and Procedures*

A second condition for effective decentralisation is a set of appropriate and concisely defined procedures and regulations. Functions must be allocated so that they suit the decision-making capabilities and resources of each level of government, and the arrangements should be flexible enough so that they can be reallocated when, and if, necessary. Poor countries such as the Sudan, in which much of the population is illiterate and uneducated, need concise and definitive decentralisation laws, regulations, and directives that clearly outline the relationships among different levels of government – as well as the duties of the respective officials – and that can be clearly explained to the people. Planning and management procedures must be kept simple.

But little analysis was done of the appropriate allocation of functions in the Sudan, and the decentralisation laws provided hardly any flexibility for their reallocation. Authority was devolved from the central ministries to the provinces *en masse*, and the differing capacities of Provincial Councils and Commissioners to perform the functions were never assessed. It was simply assumed that capacity for development planning and management existed, or that it would expand as functions were devolved. Nor did national leaders pay much attention to preserving the rôles of traditional leaders, at least until the new councils could develop the capacity to carry them out. Devolution was used to attempt to destroy their base of influence – a strategy that always produces opposition and conflict – when it could have been designed to co-opt traditional leaders and change their rôle gradually, while

¹ Howell, *loc.cit.* p. 109.

drawing on their experience in such matters as land-dispute settlements or tax assessment and collection. The traditional, and effective, rôles of notables and elders in solving local disputes, for instance, could have been recognised officially. Traditional leaders could have helped to supplement the work of local police and the courts in maintaining order. The evaluation of decentralisation policy in Southern Darfur Province concluded, for example, that the *ugada* or elders, 'who help maintain peace by informal consensus among smaller groups within the tribe...selected for their diplomacy and detailed historical knowledge of the causes and backgrounds of disputes', and the *manadib* or messengers, appointed by *nazirs* to collect information and taxes and bring instructions to scattered tribes and villages, should be given formal authority within local jurisdictions to continue performing their traditional functions, which they carry out more effectively than local government officials.¹

Problems arose as well from the lack of clarity about the responsibilities of local councils. The ambiguous rôle of local administrative and technical officers after the abolition of local governments created a serious loss of morale. Many former local government officers remained in their localities and participated as councillors, but they no longer had formal legal powers to perform administrative functions. Because the Provincial Executive Councils did not delegate their authority over local functions, many district and local councils obtained neither the necessary warrants nor sufficient resources to perform their assigned duties. Thus, many local councils remain 'paper organisations'. Moreover, the Provincial Commissioners were placed in the difficult position of being both the political and executive leaders of the province, and charged as well with supervising a wide variety of technical functions. The inadequacy of trained middle management, and the heavy demands placed on the time of the Commissioners by the Sudanese tradition of face-to-face decision-making, made the effective performance of all duties assigned to them nearly impossible.

3. *Adequate Resources and Administrative Capacity at National and Local Levels*

Successful decentralisation requires adequate financial and administrative resources at the local level to carry out the ministerial duties devolved from Khartoum, and strong managerial capacity within the central Government to support and assist localities with implementing

¹ Davey et al. (eds.), *op.cit.* p. 28.

those functions. As David Leonard correctly points out in his study of neighbouring Kenya, 'In a decentralized administrative structure the center needs to be every bit as strong as in a centralized one, but the orientation required is one of technical services rather than of hierarchical control.'¹ At the same time, local units must have, or be able to acquire, sufficient financial resources, trained personnel, and managerial capacity to operate effectively, and to deal with central bureaucracies on a reciprocal basis. But even if the central ministries in the Sudan were committed to more extensive decentralisation, they have little capacity to support and facilitate local planning and administration.

The ineffectiveness of central administration in the Sudan can be attributed in part to the legacy of colonial domination, and in part to deeply ingrained cultural traditions. Under Egyptian and British rule, the Sudanese civil servants were neither as well trained as they ought to have been, nor allowed to assume key positions of responsibility. After independence in 1954, the Government attempted to localise nearly all positions within a 15-month period. Poorly trained and inexperienced Sudanese were promoted to the top ranks of administration with inadequate preparation, and lower-level positions were filled with many who had little education or training. As one analyst of Sudan's civil service points out, 'the vision and intellectual horizon of, and the standards set by, those promoted to the top grades in 1954-55 have had a continuing influence'.² A quarter of a century later, the bureaucracy remains overstaffed with people not technically qualified for their level of responsibility, and is desperately short of skilled and professional manpower, a problem that was aggravated in the 1960s by the Government's policy of guaranteeing jobs to all college graduates who could not find other employment. And since virtually none of the civil servants can be dismissed or disciplined, the central bureaucracy remains large and ineffective.

Moreover, traditional attitudes and behaviour keep the bureaucracy inefficient. Government employees at all levels, for instance, must deal with each other in ways that stress 'smooth' interpersonal relations. Conflict and criticism must be repressed, and relationships that reinforce

¹ David K. Leonard, *Reaching the Peasant Farmer: organization theory and practice in Kenya* (Chicago and London, 1977), p. 213.

² Oluwadaré Aguda, 'The Sudan Civil Service, 1964-1971', in *Quarterly Journal of Administration* (Ibadan), 6, April 1972, pp. 333-47; see also M-Agab A. Al-Ferahi, 'Localization Policies and Programming in the Sudan, 1945-1970', in *Journal of Administration Overseas*, 12, April 1973, pp. 125-35; and M. El-Bashir, 'Bureaucracy and Development: general impressions from the Sudanese experience', in *African Administrative Studies* (Tangiers), 10, 1976, pp. 21-5.

the strong dependence of subordinates on superiors dominate public organisations. Superiors expect obedience and loyalty from their subordinates, and act paternalistically towards them. The way in which bureaucrats interact with each other and their clients is often more important than the results or consequences of their work.

The strong tradition of face-to-face communications heavily burdens middle- and high-level administrators, who spend an overwhelming amount of their time in personal meetings with other officials, superiors, subordinates, and clients, rather than dispatching work through indirect or written communications. In the Sudan, face-to-face interaction is necessary not only because of tradition – individual initiatives tend to be condemned because the Muslim concept of *shura* requires mutual consultation to solve problems – but also because the necessary systems of communications either do not exist or are extremely inefficient outside of Khartoum, all the more of a handicap when it is remembered that a large majority of the population is illiterate. Thus, decision-making and problem-solving are slow, time-consuming, and uncertain processes.¹

Serious shortages of trained personnel within central ministries are aggravated by frequent transfers, especially when those who have been promoted often take a coterie of subordinates with them to their new posts. Moreover, both religious practices and the demands of large extended families combine to justify the long periods of paid annual leave given to Sudanese employees. Government personnel are allowed at least 40 days of leave a year, and often more is taken at full or partial pay. Also, middle- and higher-level officials consider training leave every two or three years to be a perquisite of their jobs, and opportunities for a long-term stay overseas are particularly valued. Since key employees are thus likely to be absent for extended periods of time during the year, their tasks are passed from one to another, or not performed at all.

Moreover, the inability of administrators to dismiss – or even severely reprimand – incompetent public employees, helps to explain the lack of discipline and widespread corruption within the civil service that extends down to the lowest levels. A Regional Minister in Southern Sudan, who was previously a Provincial Commissioner, describes the case of a clerk who continually misfiles letters, fails to tell his superiors about serious problems, and performs his duties lackadaisically. 'He should be dismissed', the Minister contends. 'But he has three wives and

¹ See Zain, *op.cit.* pp. 39–47.

nine children and if I take disciplinary steps I will become the object of scorn, a *kawaja* (white man) they will call me.¹ Even if charges are lodged against incompetent public employees, the disciplinary committee that must be formed under civil service regulations is unlikely to recommend serious disciplinary action because social pressures will be brought on any member who advocates punishment. The Sudanese concept of *malesh* requires that wrongdoers be forgiven, and tends to inhibit any initiative at imposing punishment. Thus, throughout the bureaucracy many employees are generally apathetic about performing their duties or serving clients; there is little concern for meeting schedules; work is accomplished at a slow pace, and when tasks are not completed on time, or according to fixed standards, the general attitude of all involved is that 'it is God's will'.

Moreover, a crucial problem in the Sudan is caused by shortages of trained professionals and skilled administrators. These are severe even within the central Government, and the degree of devolution contemplated for the next few years will exacerbate the difficulties that provincial and local councils now have in staffing their positions. And the difficulties have been intensified over the past few years by the 'brain drain' of technically trained Sudanese to high-paying jobs in Saudi Arabia and other Arab oil-producing countries. This shortage of skilled technicians and managers in the Sudan has been a serious impediment to decentralisation. Thus, although extensive authority for planning and managing health services has been devolved to the provinces, the ability of provincial administrators to provide anything but basic curative services is extremely limited. Plans to emphasise preventive health care during the next five years will make further demands on already inadequate cadres of health workers.

Although there are serious shortages of administrative and technical staff almost everywhere outside Khartoum, they are most severe in the Southern Region, where 17 years of civil war depleted the ranks of younger middle-level civil servants. By 1976 nearly half of all the administrative, professional, and technical positions in the Government of the Southern Region were unfilled, and nearly one-third of the clerical and 15 per cent of lower-level unclassified positions were vacant. The widespread disruption of primary and secondary education during the civil war, as well as the destruction of school buildings, left the overwhelming majority of Southerners illiterate, making it nearly impossible to find adequate numbers of qualified candidates for technical

¹ Quoted in Jakob J. Akol, 'Old Attitudes Die Hard: five ministerial views', in *Sudanow*, 2, 12, December 1977, p. 15.

training and education. Thus, the Regional Government was unable to fill nearly 12,000 vacancies in budgeted positions in 1976, and many of those jobs remain unfilled. The shortages of skilled personnel makes it especially difficult to provide services in technical fields such as health. The six Provinces of the Southern Sudan, with a population of about 3 million, had only 54 medical doctors, 18 nursing sisters, and 285 health para-professionals in 1979. A year earlier, only two of the Provinces had assistant commissioners for health, and the shortage of experienced medical staff made the supervision of para-professionals extremely difficult.¹

The unwillingness of central ministry officials and skilled personnel to serve in the provinces is attributable, in part, to differences in living standards between the rural areas and the national capital. Living conditions for professionals tend to be lower in the provinces where housing is inadequate, educational opportunities for their children are limited, supplies and equipment are difficult to obtain, and there are few opportunities for professional advancement. The central Government, in most cases, is unwilling or unable to provide adequate amenities to attract technically trained personnel to the rural areas. An evaluation of decentralisation in Southern Darfur Province summarised the effects of these conditions concisely: 'if staff are not moved to the provinces and the corresponding resource allocations are not made to allow them to work and live there satisfactorily, then the success of the whole policy of decentralization will be jeopardized.'²

But the greatest ambiguity in decentralisation policy has been the insistence of national leaders on transferring planning and administrative functions to lower levels of government, without providing sufficient financial resources or adequate legal powers to collect and allocate revenues within the local jurisdictions. These financial limitations on local government are aggravated by — and in part attributable to — financial difficulties within the central Government.

Despite overall economic growth in the Sudan during the past five years, domestic savings have hardly been adequate to finance new investments without extensive foreign aid and domestic bank borrowing. From 1970 to 1977 the central Government's deficits rose from a little more than 3 to over 10 per cent of gross domestic product. The increasing deficits were temporarily controlled in 1978 only by imposing tight constraints on current expenditures, which had adverse effects not

¹ Democratic Republic of the Sudan, Southern Regional Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, *Southern Regional Six Year Plan of Economic and Social Development, 1977/78-1982/83* (Juba, 1977), pp. 27-8.

² Davey et al., eds., *op.cit.* p. 19.

only on providing new services, but also on completing and maintaining projects begun under previous development plans. By 1979, however, the Government again faced sharply rising deficits. Inflation fluctuated between 20 and 30 per cent a year in the late 1970s, balance-of-payments deficits were about \$500 million by 1979, with arrears on foreign-debt service approaching \$1,000 million.¹ These financial problems have forced the Government to revise the national plan for 1977-83, only a year after it was published, to reflect a more austere policy.² These problems were exacerbated by the inability of many central ministries to spend the funds allocated to them for operations and development. Between 1971 and 1978, for example, the Ministry of Health had been able to spend no more than 66 per cent of the annual funds appropriated to its development budget, except for one year when it slightly over-spent. Although some of the funds appropriated were never released by the central Government, a good deal of the short-fall in spending can be attributed to administrative inefficiency within the Ministry of Health, and to the inability of the Ministry of Public Works to construct the necessary facilities.³

The value of participation in development planning becomes questionable when local citizens have little or no control over financial resources with which to carry out their plans. The shortage of operating and development funds in the Sudan casts serious doubts on the feasibility of large-scale devolution. The People's Assembly committee that evaluated the results of the Local Government Act in 1976 was blunt in its conclusions: 'It became apparent that the insufficiency of funds was the basic cause of weaknesses...in the institutions of the People's Local Government and of turning them into empty skeletons.'⁴ The unwillingness of the central Government to devolve taxing powers, and the weak revenue-raising capacities of most provincial and local governments, perpetuate the problem. The World Bank estimates that in the fiscal year 1975-76 transfers from the central Government provided 72 per cent of all local revenues, and that only about 12 per cent of the remaining income was raised through local taxation. The low yields of local taxes are attributable not only to ineffective tax assessment and collection, but also to the fact that rates have remained

¹ U.S. Agency for International Development, *Country Development Strategy Statement, FY 1981 Sudan* (Washington, 1979), p. 18.

² International Monetary Fund, *Sudan: recent economic developments* (Washington, 1979), pp. 18-23.

³ The figures are cited in U.S. Agency for International Development, 'Project Identification Document: health sector support' (Khartoum, 1979), p. 22.

⁴ The People's Assembly, *Final Report*, p. 38.

unchanged for many years despite inflation and structural changes in the economy.¹

4. Physical and Organisational Conditions Conducive to Decentralised Decision-Making and Interaction

One of the strongest arguments offered for decentralised planning and administration in the Sudan is that the country is so large and heterogeneous that many of the peripheral areas are physically isolated from the national capital, thus making central planning and management ineffective. Yet these same conditions – large size, heterogeneity, distance among administrative centres – are also obstacles to effective decentralisation. They are not conducive to national integration and unity, to promoting the delivery of efficient services, or to allowing communications and interaction among local administrative units within regions. Inadequate physical infrastructure, transportation facilities, roads, and communications networks within the rural regions of the Sudan makes co-ordination among decentralised decision-making units nearly impossible, and interaction between the central Government and local administrations is extremely difficult. Moreover, local administrators have faced enormous difficulties in mobilising resources, supervising field personnel, distributing services, and disseminating information.

Only a few surfaced highways connect Khartoum to other Provinces in the eastern and central parts of the Sudan, and large parts of the north, west, and south remain inaccessible by road. Some river transport allows travel to the south, but equipment is old and inadequate. The national railway system that connects Port Sudan with Khartoum is decrepit; tracks are poorly maintained, and much of the rolling stock is obsolete or in disrepair. Sudan Airways provides only limited – and unreliable – flights to some of the larger towns in the interior. Vast areas of the Sudan are inaccessible even by feeder roads, seriously limiting the ability of local administrators to provide services, visit the population, or distribute supplies. Whatever co-ordination does take place between local councils and the Provincial Executive Councils depends on sporadic and infrequent personal communications. But many provinces lack cable, wireless, or telex equipment, and local officials often cannot communicate with either the national capital or with a number of towns and villages within their jurisdictions. The inadequacy of physical

¹ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Sudan: agricultural sector survey* (Washington, 1979), Vol. III, Annex 8.

infrastructure and transport, combined with serious financial problems and organisational inefficiency, limits severely the operations of local administrative units, and creates physical obstacles to widespread participation in local decision-making. American A.I.D. analysts have observed that the Government in the Southern Region 'can barely conduct its normal business for lack of fuel, vehicles and power generation. Spare parts too are virtually nonexistent'.¹

Nor is the settlement system in the Sudan conducive to decentralised decision-making and interaction among communities. Most of the Sudan's 16 million people are widely dispersed over an area the size of Western Europe, without access to regional or local markets, inputs for agricultural development, or other basic resources. The distribution of resources needed for development is highly skewed. The overwhelming percentage of physicians and health facilities, for example, are located in the most urbanised areas – Khartoum and the Gezira Province – where each public health care unit serves from 3,000 to 4,000 people. But elsewhere the ratio rises as high as 1 to 15,000.² Rural settlements tend to be unserved by most developmental functions, and they are largely inaccessible for marketing and trade. Moreover, the costs of providing services to small scattered settlements are extremely high, and the use of existing facilities is generally inefficient.

The physical isolation of small rural villages, the lack of widely dispersed market centres, and the inadequate numbers of middle-sized cities, as well as weaknesses in the linkages among them, constrain production and trade in much of the Sudan, and inhibit political and administrative interaction within and among the provinces. Thus, locating services and facilities in such a way as to articulate and integrate the nation's spatial system seems essential, not only for creating a 'spatial infrastructure' more conducive to production and exchange, but also for strengthening the political linkages among regions.³

Finally, the disappointing results of decentralisation in the Sudan can also be explained by the absence of, or weaknesses in, public and private institutions needed to complement and bolster the managerial capacity of local governments, and by the frailties in organisational linkages and interaction between central and local administrations. The functions usually performed by private enterprises in non-socialist countries are the responsibilities of parastatal organisations in the Sudan, and with

¹ U.S. A.I.D., *Country Development Strategy Statement*, p. 31.

² *Ibid.* p. 3.

³ The argument is made in greater detail in Dennis A. Rondinelli and Kenneth Ruddle, *Urbanization and Rural Development: a spatial policy for equitable growth* (New York, 1978).

few exceptions they are poorly managed. Most public corporations make additional claims on the national budget instead of contributing to public revenues. They have most, if not all, of the deficiencies in administrative capacity that characterise central ministries and, indeed, nearly all other governmental institutions in the Sudan.

With the exception of some of the heavily financed organisations in the Gezira scheme, for example, co-operatives in most provinces are inefficiently managed usually by non-professional local leaders who are frequently replaced at annual meetings. The resulting 'confusion and inconsistency of leadership leaves the cooperatives in a dysfunctional state, incapable of weighing alternatives or making sound decisions'.¹ Agricultural co-operatives in the Sudan are chronically short of operating capital and credit; most lack mechanisms for generating savings among members, and even those that can mobilise some of the meager surpluses produced by villagers have nowhere to invest those resources to obtain a reasonable return. The co-operatives and extension services in the rural areas, in turn, are poorly supported by the national ministries in Khartoum. According to an A.I.D. technical assistance team in 1978: 'Backup support from the Ministry [of Co-operation] is weak in such areas as training, materials, promotion, general supervision and planning because of communications, transport and funding constraints... Headquarters people rarely get to the field.' The ability of the central ministries to provide assistance to supporting institutions for decentralised planning and administration is low because of shortages of trained manpower. Thus, the staff of the Ministry of Co-operation has been 'spread so thin that its impact at the village level is negligible in terms of meaningful support and extension services'.²

CONCLUSIONS

All of the weaknesses that have obstructed the implementation of decentralisation in the Sudan form, perhaps, the strongest argument for pursuing such programmes more vigorously. Unless these problems can be addressed, and the obstacles overcome, there is little hope for rapid and equitable development through either centralised or decentralised administrative structures. The Sudan's experience shows quite clearly that many of the conditions identified earlier are prerequisites to decentralisation, and that the relationships between devolution and

¹ U.S. Agency for International Development, 'Blue Nile Rural Development Project Paper' (Khartoum, 1978), p. 83.

² *Ibid.* p. 86.

development are complex. The sequencing of activities must therefore be given careful attention in the design of policies and their implementation.

No government that attempts massive reorganisation of political and administrative institutions can expect to implement its policies without problems, obstacles, and delays, and the Sudan has surely faced more than its share since 1969. Yet, experience provides important insights into conditions that are necessary to turn plans into realities. Weaknesses in local organisational structures, and in the linkages between provincial and local councils and the central bureaucracies, are perpetuated in part by weaknesses in political commitment to decision-making and management 'from below', and by ambiguities in decentralisation laws and procedures. These in turn are reinforced by the adverse attitudes and behaviour of government officials – at both the central and local levels – towards widespread participation in decision-making. Attempts at decentralising important functions were undermined by inadequate financial resources, and by the lack of trained manpower willing to serve in the provinces. All of these weaknesses, again, were reinforced by poor transport, communications, and physical access in rural regions, by the country's unarticulated and unintegrated settlement system, and by the lack of supporting organisations at the local level.

Thus, it is to these issues, as well as to the procedures and structural problems, that decentralisation policies must be addressed, if they are to be successfully implemented and to have an impact on stimulating more socially equitable economic growth in developing countries such as the Sudan.¹

¹ Cf. Dennis A. Rondinelli, 'Government Decentralization in Comparative Perspective: theory and practice in developing countries', in *International Review of Administrative Sciences* (Brussels), 47, 2, March 1981, pp. 133–45; and Dennis A. Rondinelli and Marcus D. Ingle, 'Improving the Implementation of Development Programmes: beyond administrative reform', in G. Shabbir Cheema (ed.), *Institutional Dimensions of Regional Development* (Singapore, 1981).