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# DECENTRALIZATION IN AFRICA: WHY, WHEN, AND WHERE

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# ACRONYMS

ANC	African National Congress (South Africa)
CADA	<i>Comparative Analysis of Decentralization in Africa</i> (USAID, 2010)
DDPH	<i>Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook</i> (USAID, 2009)
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Revolutionary Front (Ethiopia)
FRELIMO	<i>Frente de Libertação de Moçambique</i> (Mozambique Liberation Front)
NDC	National Democratic Congress (Ghana)
NPP	New Patriotic Party (Ghana)
NRM	Natural Resource Management <i>also</i> National Resistance Movement (Uganda)
RENAMO	<i>Resistência Nacional Moçambicana</i> (Mozambican Liberation Front)
SNG	Sub-national Government
USAID	United States Agency for International Development



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is designed mainly for USG officers considering advocating for decentralization policies in Africa, though much of the analysis can apply to other regions. It identifies the conditions under which decentralization can promote three USAID goals, and considers these three goals in order, following a first section that outlines the basic framework of the guide. The first section shows how the prospects for decentralization are shaped by two categories of conditions. One is the background or contextual conditions in any given country. The other is the political economy, which emphasizes the incentives facing different actors in a country's political system. Following this first section, section 2 treats the USAID goal of stability. The goal of development (to include economic growth and human development) is treated in section 3, while the goal of deepening democracy and democratic governance is the subject of section 4. Throughout, the document relies for evidence upon the *Comparative Analysis of Decentralization in Africa* (CADA) reports. The document synthesizes available evidence from the CADA and considers where and under what conditions these goals can be promoted elsewhere. This synthesis points toward programming for policy reform (in a separate guide) and provides a point of reference for the conditions under which USAID personnel might effectively advocate for decentralized governance.

This paper is part of a set of three papers that treat the contexts, causes, and programming possibilities for decentralization in Africa. The papers are as follow:

- *Decentralization in Africa: Why, When, and Where;*
- *Decentralization in Africa: Programming for Policy Reform;*
- *Decentralization in Africa: Programming Guide.*

These papers draw upon the findings of USAID's *Comparative Analysis of Decentralization in Africa* (2010), and the conceptual framework of the *Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook* (2009).



# 1.0 DECENTRALIZATION IN AFRICA

In recent years, USAID has accumulated considerable knowledge and experience in the area of decentralization. Much of the knowledge and experience at USAID has come in Africa, the region that used to lag behind the rest of the world on decentralization, but that more recently has witnessed many of its countries undertake significant transfers of authority, power, and resources from central governments to elected subnational governments (SNGs) or appointed subnational administrative units. Alongside programmatic interventions in many countries, USAID in 2010 sponsored the *Comparative Assessment of Decentralization in Africa* (hereafter CADA), a study of 10 countries that examined in detail the extent and nature of decentralizing reform. This guide builds upon these studies to examine when and where – and under what conditions – decentralization seems to have taken off and when and where it has not. It uses the CADA as evidence to draw lessons about where interventions are likely to work.

USAID’s decisions about whether and how to intervene in the area of decentralization depend upon how this will affect three main goals: *stability*, *development* (to include improved service provision as well as promotion of economic growth), and *democracy*. This guide analyzes the conditions under which interventions may be propitious and appropriate. The aim is to identify conditions in which support for decentralization might contribute to one or more of these goals, and where intervening to support decentralization will have less impact, or possibly even do harm. It is designed to help USAID officers avoid circumstances where decentralization might lead to instability, underdevelopment, or a lower quality of democratic governance.

Recent work at USAID has developed strategies for making adequate assessments of policy and programming environments before proceeding with action (see the *Democratic Decentralization Programming Handbook* or DDPH). For the purposes of determining where policy interventions are appropriate, these resources have identified two general types of country analysis that should be carried out prior to advocating for decentralization policies. The first (section 1.1) consists of the various aspects of background conditions that shape a country environment, to include a country’s society, economy, and history. The second (section 1.2) could be seen as a subset of issues in the policy environment, but is perhaps better treated independently: it is the set of political motivations of major actors, or in other words the political economy of policymaking.

## 1.1 POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Policy recommendations regarding decentralization are not universally applicable in all national contexts, but rather are dependent upon many factors affecting politics and governance in a given country. The aspects of national context that condition policy recommendations are numerous, and range from geographic circumstances to levels of economic development to demographics to national history. This is before considering aspects specific to the political economy noted below. How decentralization relates to specific goals is addressed later in the guide (in sections

2, 3, and 4), but this section notes how several variables shape the decentralization context generally.

The conditions are grouped in several categories. It is important to note here that the presence or absence of certain conditions do not simply mean decentralization should be promoted or avoided. Rather, these conditions are identified as particularly important to take into account in shaping how and whether decentralization is desirable.

### 1.1.1 DEMOGRAPHY & SOCIETY

The first factors that shape the decentralization context are a country's demographic givens. In Africa, the distribution of the population is especially important in determining whether and how decentralization will work. Many countries have a relatively large capital city (or often a coastal region) coupled with a large and more sparsely populated hinterland, and this will mean that decentralization can be expected to have different consequences in different places within the country. Another key demographic factor is the ethnic distribution across the national territory and by region. Ethnicity overlaps strongly with geographic regions in most African countries, and decentralization can thus mean different things to different people, depending upon whether ethnic regions seek greater autonomy from the center or stronger ties to central power. Finally, a demographic and social variable of great import is the division between "indigenous" people of long standing and relative newcomers to an area, including foreign migrants; this has been noted most dramatically in the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire in which conflict emerged between some Ivoirians and others of Burkinabé descent, but the tension applies across many countries where internal or transnational migration has affected land distribution.

### 1.1.2 ECONOMY & GEOGRAPHY

A second set of issues relates to those under demography above, but is more explicitly economic. Of particular salience for Africa is the geographic distribution of economic activity, which is often uneven. The majority of Africans still live in rural areas and work in agriculture, but decades of urbanization has meant the rise of merchant classes and service industries, as well as some industrialization. The economic base of most countries is uneven. It is common for a country to have some regions with relatively greater wealth or resources. One way this happens is with the economic power of capital city or large city as contrasted with rural areas. Another is when extractive resources – such as petroleum or minerals – are located in certain regions of a country. These realities will often make decisions about centralization versus decentralization quite controversial, with relatively wealthy areas frequently wishing to retain the public revenues associated with local activity and residents of lower-income areas typically preferring more redistributive mechanisms. Awareness of the likely consequences of decentralization depends upon knowledge of the economic geography of a country.

### 1.1.3 POLITICAL HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY CONSEQUENCES

A third category of significance can be thought of in terms of how "three c's" have developed historically to affect the current state of affairs in a given country. These are *colonialism*, *centralism* (of the post-independence state), and violent *conflict*. The legacy of a centralized state or of violent conflict can make decentralization especially urgent to advance the aims of national stability, development, or democracy. In terms of colonial legacy, the particular colonizer matters but the legacy is not reducible to which country was the colonizer. Rather, the colonial history can be interpreted more broadly in terms of the inheritance at independence:

what was the extent of state-building and state formation under colonial rule, and what is the presence of state in rural areas that resulted? This has varied by country and has effects on decentralized governance to this day. Post-independence history also shapes how centralized the state has been. Many African countries strove after independence to create highly centralized systems of rule yet they largely failed at efforts to build the developmental and transformative capacities of states and other central institutions. Finally, some of the most significant contextual issues revolve around the extent of violent conflict, for which African countries have had quite different experiences. In countries where the state has failed to control the use of force within the national territory, the prospects for peace, or for the continuation or renewal of civil strife (including the current situation regarding the presence or absence of armed groups) is a key variable in shaping whether decentralization is viable. At the risk of oversimplification, decentralization seems to have been a motor for furthering peace when it is part of a negotiated settlement or a bargaining process, but is not advisable when violence is ongoing.

#### 1.1.4 POLITICAL CULTURE

A final issue of great import for the policy environment is a country's political culture. The phrase political culture can be defined for our purposes as the distinctive informal characteristics of a country's politics – such as norms, values, and tendencies – that shape how different actors behave and make decisions. This set of factors goes beyond the formal rules of politics and the arithmetic of the economy and demography. An example of a political culture factor is whether a country has high levels of social trust and substantial cooperation between ethnic groups versus low levels of trust and considerable suspicion between groups. This example of ethnic relations clearly links to the factors above, but is more than simply the ethnic demography and a history of ethnic conflict; it could also include whether ethnic and kinship groups shape access to patronage networks, for instance. Political culture can also relate to historical trends. For instance, some Africa countries have been democracies for over 20 years, meaning that a person of median age might know democracy as “the only game in town”, while the entire population of other countries may never have known functioning democracy. These realities affect political culture, not in the sense of something static and unchanging, but rather a dynamic pattern of norms and behaviors that make a country context more or less conducive to policy recommendations about the decentralization of power. The most general conclusions are that inclusive and democratic political cultures are conducive to decentralization improving governance, but that decentralization is also potentially useful when trust and democratic institutions are lacking; the differences in political cultures do not lend themselves to a simple yes/no decision on decentralization, but rather shift the focus of the reform.

#### 1.1.5 SUMMING UP: BACKGROUND CONDITIONS

When contemplating decentralization, the above elements of the country context are largely taken as given. USAID certainly cannot alter a country's history, nor its demography, and political cultures and the structures of national economies are subject only to gradual change over extended periods of time. Advocates of decentralization must therefore take account of how the national environment presents and prevents opportunities, and adapt approaches accordingly. The variations in country circumstances can and should engender different approaches among decentralization advocates. There are key aspects of the political economy that shape the incentives of major decision makers. Key among these is how power is distributed among the formal structures and institutions of government. For those interested in

decentralization, a most obvious question is the distribution of powers between the levels of government and between branches of government. Countries with politically powerful SNGs will be quite different policymaking environments from countries where the national executive and central government ministries dominate all government decisions. In highly centralized systems, the national executive and ministries will wield much of the political power. In systems more conducive to decentralization, the political power of SNGs can come from constitutional and legal protections, or can come from political support, especially if national legislatures represent subnational constituencies and have real powers vis-à-vis the executive. In addition to the national executive, the legislature, central government ministries, and SNGs, traditional or customary authorities also affect governance at the local level.

**TABLE 1.**  
**ANALYZING BACKGROUND CONDITIONS FOR AFRICAN DECENTRALIZATION**

<b>Conditions</b>	Salient Questions for African Decentralization: <i>What is the...? / What are the...?</i>
<b>Demography &amp; Society</b>	Concentration in capital or largest city Ethnic distribution across territory Presence of indigenous and newcomer groups
<b>Economy &amp; Geography</b>	Regional distribution of economic base Presence of extractive resources Relative economic power of capital city or large cities vs. rural areas
<b>History: Central Power</b>	Colonial history (Anglophone vs. francophone, e.g.) Extent of state-building, state formation, presence of state in rural areas Ethnic conflict; prospects for peace vs. continuation/renewal of strife
<b>Political Culture</b>	Extent of trust between groups in society History of democracy and democratization

Coming up with a menu of options and a detailed recipe for programmatic intervention in any particular country is only advisable after the analysis of the context and political economy. It is nonetheless useful to consider some of the large patterns of governance in Africa, and to consider how these might give rise to certain directions for policy advocacy. We return to this in section 1.3 after considering the importance of the political economy in a given country.

## 1.2 POLITICAL ECONOMY AND INCENTIVES TO DECENTRALIZE

The account of conditions that shape the prospects for decentralization is incomplete without an understanding of the contemporary political context and the motivations of political actors. This goes beyond the historical trajectories and cultural tendencies found in a country, and into the analysis of present decision makers. The political economy of decentralization is a crucial element of the policy context, and merits separate treatment. Indeed, USAID publications and practices emphasize the need to undertake a political economy analysis for decentralization policy in Africa (see CADA Final Report Chapter 2, DDPH). In Africa, the urgency of political economy analysis is heightened by the long history of interaction between African regimes and donors, and the sophistication with which some African regimes have garnered continued support despite poor governance. Repeated assertions about the need for “political will” should be revisited to be based on an understanding of political incentives (see CADA Final report). Some decision makers will support decentralized governance (and others will oppose it) not

because they have (or lack) courage, but because their interests are served by it. For instance, some parties may advocate decentralization when they control SNGs and are in opposition at the national level, only to revise or reverse their positions when their electoral fortunes shift. This behavior is perfectly comprehensible (and even defensible) in light of political incentives, but could be bewildering if one views it as actors suddenly gaining or lacking political will. A political economy perspective that places the emphasis on incentives corrects for this.

### 1.2.1 FROM POLITICAL WILL TO POLITICAL ECONOMY

Decentralization is a political paradox. It typically involves sovereign actors voluntarily “giving away” power, resources, or authority to others. Understanding that such voluntary “giveaways” are rare is crucial to making decentralization policy proposals that are plausible. In general, policy advocates need to be aware of where political power lies in the system, lest they propose interventions that are scuttled by political actors of consequence. It is essential to know which political forces favor decentralization, which oppose decentralization, and why.

While the logic is paradoxical, decentralization does happen. And it is possible to construe national leaders’ decisions to decentralize in several ways. One comes from a relatively narrow conception of political will. In this vision (as defined narrowly), good policy reform is the result of prominent decision makers that have a deep commitment to some cause greater than themselves. They may incur political costs or take political risks in the service of the national interest or out of a deep (personal or ideological) commitment to some noble goal, such as stability, democratic deepening, or human development. While this certainly exists with some individuals and at some points in time, it does not exhaust the reasons politicians may choose to undertake a reform like decentralization.

**TABLE 2.**

#### **THREE MODELS OF POLITICAL CHOICES IN AFRICAN DECENTRALIZATION**

<b>Model of Choice</b>	<b>Assumptions about traits</b>	<b>Politicians’ primary interest</b>	<b>Expected behaviors and actions</b>
<b>Political Will</b>	Noble Altruistic Courageous Risk-taking	Public service National interest	Exhibiting deep commitment to “noble” goals (stability, development, democracy)
<b>Self-interest</b>	Self-interested Calculating Venal Risk averse	Reelection Higher office Personal enrichment	Seek maximum benefit or minimum cost of actions to themselves
<b>Constrained optimization</b>	Some combination of above	Some combination of above	Seeking best solution in an institutional environment that shapes choices

Political decisions are sometimes made out of conviction, but are often made out of *self-interest*. Some leaders and politicians stand to benefit politically from decentralization. Individual actors in the political economy will often act or react in ways that reflect concern for their own political ambitions, as they seek to retain power within their own level of government, agency, political party, or faction. As a first pass, political actors may be expected to favor arrangements in which

they retain for themselves greater power, authority, influence, access to resources, and decision making autonomy. Thus, leaders in the national executive will frequently seek to retain authority within the executive at the central level, with different ministers and officials often seeking to maximize their own leverage and resources. For proponents of decentralization, SNG officials will frequently be interested in greater devolution for the same reason. For national legislators, attitudes about decentralization will depend in part upon who controls electoral opportunities, since legislators often seek to be re-nominated for their positions or to advance up the political ladder; countries where national party leaders control the nomination procedures will likely have legislators that defer to the interests of national-level actors, while a comparable country where nominations are controlled by local-level constituents would likely have more legislators willing to militate for devolution.

These rules are not hard and fast, and a third model of political choices helps contextualize this. It features elements of self-interest, but also suggests that political will (more broadly defined) can sometimes be manufactured in the interest of substantive reform. This approach can be called *constrained optimization* by politicians. In this vision, politicians are aware of the political benefits and costs (or risks) of different actions, and they make decisions with attention to the institutional environment in which they operate. In some circumstances, central governments may be active proponents of devolution, such as when a governing party sees its electoral future being strong at the subnational level and weak at the national level in the future. Nonetheless, partisan incentives suggest that top-down, centralized political parties will not often be strong advocates of decentralizing power. Similarly, there will be occasions where SNG officials advocate for centralization, perhaps because they are seeking to please powerful actors at the center or because they are underfunded to take on the tasks assigned to them. The rule of thumb is still that actors will seek arrangements that are to their political or fiscal advantage, but the institutional environment may dictate that their own rationales coincide with improvements in governance of the sort advocated by USAID.

An important claim in this guide is that “self-interest” and “constrained optimization” are not necessarily impediments to decentralization. On the contrary, these may operate separately or jointly to *promote* decentralization. In fact, understanding them is a more useful point of departure for USAID than political will. The remainder of this guide identifies circumstances in which decentralization can be effectively promoted. This includes understanding the interests and motivations of actors and the institutional environment in which they operate. The general lesson is that the most propitious contexts for supporting decentralization will be where USAID objectives align with the incentives of major political actors.

### 1.2.2 DECENTRALIZATION: MOTIVATIONS AND INCENTIVES OF ACTORS

Decentralization is likely to work in some circumstances and not others, and USAID officers will wish to know how to distinguish contexts that are propitious from those that are not. This means understanding the background conditions in a country that make decentralization more or less likely to work. Besides the general characteristics of a country’s policy environment (such as level of development, social divisions, political history, and extent of democracy), political incentives shape whether key actors will be motivated to support decentralization or not. Political incentives, combined with favorable background conditions, will ensure that USAID deploys its resources in situations where its advocacy for decentralization amounts to “pushing on an open door”, rather than (to extend the metaphor) pushing on a door that is bolted shut.

### **1.3 EVIDENCE FROM AFRICA: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF CONDITIONS FOR DECENTRALIZATION**

USAID’s CADA reports from 2010 provide considerable evidence about the extent and achievements of decentralization in 10 African countries, and began to synthesize some of the lessons. The following subsections offer an overview of the findings from those cases, with an eye toward identifying when decentralization has worked and when it has not. This overview of the findings from the CADA does not feature specific reference to individual cases (since the 10 countries will be highlighted in boxes in subsequent sections). Rather, it is a primer on overarching lessons.

#### **1.3.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: FAILURES OF THE CENTRALIZED STATE**

The argument in favor of decentralization processes in Africa is rooted in the historical failure of centralized states on the continent. Many African states exercised authority from the top-down up through the 1980s, partly based on theories that a strong central state was necessary in developing countries to give a “big push” toward self-sustaining growth. Instead of development, however, top-down rule led to well-documented problems: the state largely failed to promote development, becoming instead a “lame leviathan” (in the words of Thomas Callaghy), a set of weak institutions despite attempts to dominate society. This history may motivate decentralization, but it alone cannot ensure that SNGs will perform better than central states did. This guide thus argues that USAID support for decentralization and local governance can operate in many areas: central governments, SNGs, civil society, and the institutions and processes that link these actors together.

#### **1.3.2 ACHIEVEMENTS IN DECENTRALIZATION IN AFRICA**

The countries in the CADA study all introduced meaningful legal frameworks that decentralized power (at least on paper) in the two decades after 1990. These established a degree of legal authority for devolved officials in subnational elected governments, and/or deconcentrated officials in subnational administrative units. These laws generally feature decentralizing changes in political, fiscal, and administrative dimensions. On the whole they represent a major shift in Africa from the era of highly centralized authoritarian regimes before 1990.

On the political side, decentralization laws have instituted (and maintained) sub-national elections to some extent in all 10 country cases examined in the CADA, reflecting the increasingly common reality across the continent. This has happened at various levels (with different names by country), including local governments or municipalities, districts, and states, provinces, or regions. Elections at sub-national levels are often held at two or more levels in a given country. While subnational elections may not exist everywhere in Africa beyond the 10 CADA countries, the trend is spreading and deepening, and is not limited only to the strongest democracies: it has occurred in robust democracies (such as Botswana and Ghana) and in the much greater number of regimes that are in between democracy and authoritarian rule.

Decentralization has taken place in the fiscal dimension with major framework laws that have devolved public service responsibilities and some fiscal resources to the subnational officials. On the expenditure side, SNGs have major responsibilities in such areas as health and education in many countries. In terms of revenues, most countries receive transfers from the central government that correspond to the responsibilities (such as health and education expenditures) that have been decentralized. An important achievement is that these are typically based on

publicly-available formulas and not on central government discretion or whim. The presence of formulas provides some measure of a guarantee for SNGs that they can count on a certain amount of resources. In addition to revenue transfers, SNGs also are empowered to raise taxes locally, though the tax bases are quite limited (as noted below).

Finally, decentralization has changed administrative structures in many countries. Subnational officials now have responsibilities for planning and implementing public responsibilities. Even in the countries that remain most centralized among those in the CADA, a degree of administrative decentralization has taken place through deconcentration. The reforms have established a range of necessary administrative bodies, including offices of various central government ministries.

These areas of political, fiscal, and administrative decentralization have shown (in a general sense) that Africa is fertile ground for decentralizing reforms, at least on paper. It shows that real decentralization can occur across a range of countries, suggesting that potential environments for USAID interventions can be found in former francophone or Anglophone countries, in post-conflict societies and those that have not known civil strife, and in low-income and middle-income countries. The immediate qualifier is that the decentralization reforms on paper have not been as powerful in practice, as suggested next.

### 1.3.3 LIMITS TO DECENTRALIZATION IN AFRICA

While decentralization has advanced (on paper) in several dimensions in Africa, there are major caveats to enthusiasm about its achievements. The major observation here is that the actual autonomy of SNGs is quite limited *de facto*. Notwithstanding framework laws, SNGs are also quite circumscribed in the political, fiscal, and administrative dimensions. These very likely reflect the incentives facing central governments to retain power themselves.

In terms of political decentralization, subnational elections may be held, but they do not prevent political parties from operating in a very top-down fashion, and elections themselves cannot make party systems competitive. In fact, seven of the 10 CADA countries have had relatively clear dominant-party states (with Ghana, Mali, and possibly Nigeria being exceptions), which in turn feature tendencies toward a continuation of centralized rule. On the fiscal side, the resources devolved to SNGs have typically been inadequate to meet the service responsibilities sent to them. Since SNGs have only very limited own-source revenues and depend upon central government transfers, their fiscal autonomy is quite restrained. Since central governments limit how transfers can be spent, SNGs have ended up with very limited autonomy over their resources are spent. Central government mandates are, in short, extensive, and often unfunded or underfunded. Administrative decentralization is also quite circumscribed. The principal lever for central governments here is its continued influence over the civil service. Central governments continue to pay, manage, and administer the civil service in most countries. This constitutes a major restriction on SNG autonomy. For example, decentralizing education to SNGs may appear to be a consequential reform, but it means much less if salaries for teachers (a main category of expenditure) remain the responsibility of central government. Even civil servants that are nominally responsible to local elected officials or deconcentrated officials often remain central government employees, or have their wages or career paths determined by the center.

The various limits to SNG autonomy show that a propitious environment for passing decentralization laws is not necessarily the same as a propitious environment for making decentralization happen *de facto*. The achievements in terms of elections, legal transfers, and

deconcentration are tempered by dominant parties, tight spending mandates, and top-down civil service structures. This shows that political incentives for leading actors are crucial for decentralization to work. Without these, governing parties, central administrations, and public servants will be able to undercut the principles of autonomy and downward accountability, leaving decentralization in Africa less transformative than it appears on paper.

In sum, the CADA finds that decentralization is now entrenched in many African countries, but not necessarily consolidated. One can say from the CADA that decentralization can (and has) happened literally all over the map in Africa, as it has occurred in countries with quite different backgrounds, and in countries where central governments would seemingly have little incentive to devolve power, but in the other hand, the evidence shows that several features of African politics have circumscribed meaningful decentralization. Chief among these are the preponderance of dominant-party political systems, the weak revenue bases of low-income localities, and the prevalence of civil servants who prefer to remain central government employees. All of these suggest that accountability will continue to flow upward to the center (rather than downward to citizens) and that SNG autonomy is likely to remain rather limited.

# 2.0 DECENTRALIZATION AND STABILITY

*[T]hough the European may feel that the problem of who he or she is can be a private problem, the African asks always not “who am I?” but “who are we?” and “my problem is not mine alone but “ours.”*

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*

This section considers the first of three major USAID goals: stability. Of the three goals to which decentralization might contribute, stability can be seen as the first among equals, because it is a major goal in its own right, but is also very nearly a prerequisite for the other two goals of economic development and democracy. Getting the level of decentralization right is especially urgent in divided and potentially unstable societies. Decentralization is likeliest to be useful and successful where the incentives of central governments to ensure stability and governability are matched by the incentives of other actors (such as the opposition and minority groups) to share power responsibly. The conditions when this can happen include situations where central governments seek out power-sharing with opposition and where actors at all levels are willing to accept or promote diverse arrangements to fit local needs, often drawing upon local institutions to do so.

## 2.1 THE CHALLENGE: GOVERNING DIVIDED SOCIETIES

One fundamental challenge of African decentralization is the relative weakness of the central state in the presence of social divisions. It may seem an ironic twist that state weakness at the center would make decentralization difficult, but the idea of decentralization is predicated on the notion of taking some degree of power that resides at the national level and “decentering” it. State power must exist before it can be redistributed to lower-level governments. A degree of central authority can be seen as a prerequisite for decentralization, and Africa is the world region where central state power has historically been weakest, while divisions along ethnic and regional lines remain stark and socially resonant. Central states have often been authoritarian, and have thus tried to project their authority, but have had very little transformative power: they have been largely unable to promote economic and human development and have been weak in the push for modernization, when contrasted with countries in East Asia and Latin America, for instance. Where power is defined in terms of the capacity to get things done, Africa remains a continent where state institutions are weak.

This matters for policy advocacy because USAID officers will need to determine how decentralization can contribute to the necessary processes of nation-building and state-building, rather than detract from them. Stability is predicated on a nation-state meeting the basic criteria required of it: that it exercise a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in a given territory. This does not mean that states must always be the prime actors in social and economic decisions; the powers of states must be balanced against those of civil society institutions, private actors, and individual citizens, to include an emphasis on the rights of minority groups. Yet there is

considerable evidence (from countries like Somalia) to suggest that the goals of stability depends upon a modicum of state power. This raises questions about the conditions under which decentralization can contribute to nation- and state-building in divided societies.

## 2.2 WHAT BACKGROUND CONDITIONS? DECENTRALIZATION FOR NATION-BUILDING AND STATE-BUILDING

Under what conditions does decentralization contribute to stability, and when does it not do so? The short answer is that decentralization can promote stability when it provides power and resources to subnational actors, yet also embeds them in a broader national system of rules, norms, and laws. That is, decentralization is likely to promote stability when there is a balance of powers between the central government and subnational actors. This is something of a truism: decentralization must be neither too centrifugal, nor too centripetal, but balanced. This “Goldilocks” perspective demands further elaboration, but a key takeaway is that improving the quality of governance at decentralized levels does not always mean further decentralization.

Decentralization can contribute to stability in two main circumstances. First, it can support processes of state building where institutions are weak, a situation that applies in much of Africa. It can help by investing local governments with authority and opportunity to draw upon local resources. Second, it can help manage conflict in societies divided by ethnic or regional differences. It does so by turning a nationwide “winner-take-all” set of elections into a system with more power sharing. The circumstances where decentralization is especially opportune are where the stakes of national elections are quite high, and where entire population groups will consider themselves shut out of access to power and resources if they lose the national election; a key example was in Kenya in 2007-2008, when strife and violent conflict provided an impetus for recent decentralization reforms. Decentralization can help mitigate the perception of zero-sum politics. Decentralization is predicated in part on its ability to give population subgroups a stake in the political system and thereby accommodate minorities of various kinds (whether ethnic and regional or political/ideological). The challenges of nation-building and state-building are key targets for intervention.

### Case Study:

#### Decentralization from the Bottom-up in Post-Conflict Uganda

Uganda’s decentralization followed a unique trajectory, and it shows how decentralization can be tantamount to a process of state building. Decentralization was built from the bottom-up as the NRM government (then known as the National Resistance Army) swept across the country during its victory in the civil conflict of the 1980s. As it claimed power, the NRM introduced local Resistance Councils, which transferred considerable planning, decision making authority, and service provision responsibilities to the communities. This “decentralization” created a multi-level system of elected councils at several levels: villages, parishes, sub-counties, and districts throughout. The early multi-tiered NRM governance system formed the basis for the local governments, which were and renamed local councils

As the NRM settled into power over time, however, it sought to rein in the decentralization it had engendered. It attempted to recentralize power, arguing that local-government performance was inadequate. Some of the implications of this dramatic bottom-up decentralization and subsequent attempts at recentralization are directly relevant to the question of stability: decentralization

played a major role in the process of stabilizing and rebuilding a fractured country, but the central government's incentives to continue the process waned once stability, a functioning state, and its own regime were assured.

## 2.3 WHAT POLITICAL CONDITIONS? INCENTIVES FOR STABILITY

Africa has had many forms of instability of varying intensity. At one end of the spectrum are the regimes or states that emerged out of a civil war. Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Uganda are clear cases here. In three other countries, internal strife was a factor in regime calculations to decentralize, but amounted to less than all-out civil war. Examples from the 1990s were Mali, Nigeria and South Africa. (Nigeria and South Africa both also had civil wars in the more distant past that affected the early establishment of federalism.) Two other countries—Burkina Faso and Ghana—may have had histories of some coups and conflict, but these were not significant in shaping the decentralization agenda. Other cases are more limited: Tanzania has witnessed some issues with Zanzibar, but these have not destabilized the long-standing regime, and Botswana is a case where no significant legacy of conflict exists. It is clear that the instances of significant violent conflict did provide a strong impetus for decentralization, as noted below.

### 2.3.1 CENTRAL GOVERNMENT INCENTIVES

Perhaps the most noteworthy examples of decentralization in Africa have come when it was explicitly used as part of an effort to stabilize countries riven by conflict. In cases of civil war or serious instability (especially Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda), a legacy of conflict pushed the political calculus toward more decentralization as national elites attempted to hold their countries together or end long-standing bloody conflicts. This quest for stability can be seen as a form of constrained optimization by elites seeking to maintain a regime.

The political economy approach outlined in section 1, combined with evidence from the CADA studies, suggests that central governments generally will prefer central control in the context of a stable governing regime. When decentralization has been used for stabilization, national elites often decentralized because they had to: they needed to accommodate powerful opposition forces (often ethnic or regional in nature) in order to retain power. Central governments might prefer continued centralization to decentralizing, but they may have had to decentralize under duress.

Evidence from the CADA supports this, as many regimes have attempted to undercut decentralization once the nation-state has stabilized. Examples (with differing levels of “recentralization”) have included the ANC in South Africa, the EPRDF in Ethiopia, the NRM in Uganda, and FRELIMO in Mozambique. As the CADA notes, however, the desire to recentralize is not limited to post-stabilization countries. On the contrary, the BDP in Botswana has pushed for recentralization in the absence of conflict; this suggests a broader intuition regarding central government preferences. As the CADA Final Report notes, “[u]nder normal circumstances, the center will rarely prefer decentralization. Instead, decentralization will occur when national actors have some incentives to decentralize as a second best option. One such set of incentives is when national unity is at stake.”

#### Case Study: Post-Conflict Decentralization in Mozambique

Mozambique has a bifurcated system of decentralization, with elected municipalities

(*autarquias*) that have spending responsibilities and some devolved fiscal resources alongside other districts characterized by deconcentration. The decisions about the different forms of decentralization reflected the political incentives of the governing party FRELIMO, which dominates at the national level even as it performs poorly in many rural areas. FRELIMO decentralized some power in order to mitigate its conflict with its former enemy (and now opposition party) RENAMO, but has since exercised “centralizing tendencies” according to the Mozambique Desk Study. As suggested in the text, this illustrates a case where the idea of decentralizing to stabilize is subject to reversal.

USAID’s two CADA reports on Mozambique – the Desk Study and the In-Country Assessment – offer contrasting perspectives on the situation, however. The Desk Study suggests that many of the problems in Mozambique are attributable to an unwillingness to devolve sufficient power. According to the In-country Assessment, by contrast, municipalities “function poorly as cradles of democracy”, with low technical capacity and weak local accountability because citizens do not have individual representatives for their constituencies; by this assessment, full devolution would leave many small communities “bereft of the central government support they would have received had they remained as districts”. This perspective suggests that deconcentration can be more advantageous than devolution.

### 2.3.2 SUPPORT FROM OTHER ACTORS

Stability is a key objective mainly in countries where it is in question, and not where central governments have clear command over the political system. This is tantamount to saying that stability matters most in country environments where some substantial group apart from the central government is capable of bringing about instability. Thus, the propitious environments for promoting stability depend on incentives facing actors outside the central government.

#### *Ethnic and Regional Opposition*

In African countries, the important actors outside central governments that are responsible for stability have mostly been ethnic and/or regional opposition, as seen in several of the countries in the CADA (Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Uganda, at a minimum, along with Tanzania and South Africa to an extent, as well as Kenya, D.R. Congo, and many other countries beyond those considered here). The conditions under which stability can be supported thus depend upon more than just the incentives facing the central government. What are the incentives facing opposition forces? Where these opponents of the regime have reason to take up arms, instability follows. Those who wish to use decentralization as an instrument for stability thus need to understand how their proposals will be received by regime opponents as well as the regime itself. Generally, efforts to use decentralization for stability have focused on getting belligerents to the table, offering a negotiated settlement; this has resulted in bargaining over the extent of local or regional autonomy. In this sense, decentralization is at the core of efforts to stabilize many divided societies, as evidenced by several of the cases noted above.

#### Case Study: Decentralization and the Rise and Fall of Democracy in Mali

Mali has gone through major political upheavals in recent years, and these correlate to the ups and downs of the decentralization process. As of 1991, the semi-nomadic Tuareg people in the

north of the country led an insurgency that called for an autonomous state; the central government negotiated an accord in 1991 that offered regional autonomy and decentralization, including powers for local assemblies. As this accord came together, Mali underwent a dramatic democratization process headlined by a National Conference, at which numerous civil society groups demanded decentralization. In 2012, Mali suffered a coup that toppled the democratic regime that had been in place for two decades. The trigger for the coup was the unresolved conflict over the restive Tuareg population in the country's hinterland, a situation exacerbated by the flow of warriors back into Mali after the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya.

Decentralization and its shortcomings were thus integral to Mali's dramatic regime changes from authoritarianism to democracy and back again. Mali in 1991 showed that actors outside the central government for decentralization could meaningfully contribute to a process of negotiation, bargaining, and power-sharing that helps stability. Conversely, Mali in 2012 showed that dissatisfied regional groups (increasingly frustrated with the arrangements shaping subnational autonomy) later contributed to democratic breakdown. Decentralization as demanded by groups outside government has not been the only cause of political change in Mali, but it is exceedingly difficult to understand Mali's waxing and waning stability without it.

### ***Strong Local Institutions***

Not all political actors that shape the context for decentralization are necessarily ethnic or regional opponents of the central regime. Other actors can make decentralization work by creating new powers in a political system out of strong local institutions. The support of these local institutions can make or break efforts to promote stability. This is well-illustrated by the cases of Uganda and Mali, as noted above. The decentralization process in Uganda happened from the bottom-up as a new regime essentially built its power on the basis of local governments. The ability to do this was indispensable to the end of the civil war in the 1980s and the subsequent stabilization under the National Resistance Movement (NRM); this new regime was not a beacon of democracy, but its contribution to stability has been substantial, and is originally traceable to its early build-up of local power. Mali presents a contrast to this. Accords in the 1990s seemed to neutralize the threat of Tuareg rebellion, partly through an innovative decentralization process. Yet the later democratic collapse in 2012 can also be seen as a failing of decentralized institutions to accommodate the demands of important population groups. These suggest that the quality of local level institutions can contribute to the overall stability of country, for better or for worse: political inclusiveness in well-functioning institutions can be the foundation for stability, while grievances over exclusion and dysfunctional local governance can sow the seeds of unrest. Incorporating local actors is necessary for a working system of decentralization and for stability.

What does this imply for USAID officers preparing policy or programming interventions? In general, decentralization to enhance stability may well be amenable to central governments. The conditions when state-building and nation-building are weak are also conditions in which central government actors may have political incentives to negotiate with opposition groups. At the same time, using decentralization for stability purposes means confronting the challenge of other groups (often armed) that may be reluctant to come to a settlement. The conclusion is that decentralization should be a key topic of discussion, and on the table when it comes to efforts to stabilize countries divided by ethnicity and/or regionalism.

# 3.0 DECENTRALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

*It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.*

Justice Louis Brandeis, *New State Ice Co.. v. Liebmann*

When considering the conditions under which decentralization might contribute to development, the particular emphasis is on why governments and other actors would find it propitious to push for *decentralized* development, as opposed to simply development by other means. The best scenarios may be when governments can generate positive outcomes by encouraging competition between jurisdictions (though these cases may be rare in Africa) or the need to demonstrate responsiveness to varied local concerns (which are likely more common).

## 3.1 CHALLENGE: COMBINING QUALITIES OF GOVERNANCE

Decentralization enhances development when it generates several governance characteristics, as outlined in the DDPH and CADA: authority, autonomy, accountability, and capacity. Absent some combination of these characteristics, decentralization is unlikely to live up to its aims. With these characteristics – most notably a proper degree of accountability – decentralization can correct problems of poor governance, such as corruption and favoritism toward powerful elite groups. Furthermore, these characteristics can generate the traits of good governance, with responsiveness to the demands and needs of the populace; this again requires accountability, but also the other characteristics that give subnational actors the wherewithal to act.

For decentralization to contribute to development, it must address several challenges or impediments. One category of challenges is that it cannot simply be assumed that decentralization will translate into improved development outcomes; these outcomes must be cultivated through persistent use of feedback mechanisms that endure and become entrenched over time. A one-off process of decentralization is insufficient: ongoing decentralization in the processes of governance is needed. The other challenge is that decentralization could conceivably worsen public service provision, if SNGs have inadequate capacity to deal with the tasks allotted to them. Technical and administrative capacities are likely to be lower at the local level than at the national level, especially in the early stages after decentralization when SNGs are new and have a steep learning curve. The challenge is thus combining the several features of good decentralized governance, which can be found when subnational actors are embedded in a strong set of intergovernmental institutions.

## 3.2. WHAT BACKGROUND CONDITIONS? SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

A leading approach linking decentralization and development centers on building local government institutions along with “supporting institutions” at and between different levels of government. This section elaborates on identifying whether local governments and supporting institutions are present and can be relied upon to put decentralized governance into practice.

### 3.2.1 LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRENGTH AS A PREREQUISITE

The point of departure for decentralized development is one or more levels of functioning and capable SNG or subnational administrative units. This can come from any of the various forms of decentralization: devolution (in which powers and responsibilities are transferred to elected SNG); deconcentration (in which subnational units appointed by the center); delegation (in which certain responsibilities are transferred to elected governments or special purpose units); or some combination of the above.

USAID officers can focus on two sets of indicators in determining whether SNGs are in a position to accelerate development. The first indicator is whether SNGs have the requisite authority, whether in the form of clear legal backing for SNGs or a clear regulatory system that empowers deconcentrated administrators to make decisions based on local realities. Without these, decentralization is on very tenuous ground, as subnational action is subject to the whims of decisions made by central government. Legal backing is not sufficient for decentralization to thrive, but it is probably necessary, at least if USAID projects to work with decentralized government units. (This does not address the situation in which development partners seek to work exclusively with non-state actors in civil society on local issues.)

The second set of indicators to consider is the general capacity of SNG. To judge the viability of decentralization, USAID would want to know that SNG or subnational units have some level of technical and administrative capacity at the local level. By way of illustration, the Burkina Faso case study notes that many subnational officials are illiterate and have little knowledge of the decentralization process; needless to say, these are inauspicious conditions for decentralization to work, even if the many other problems with political incentives in that country could be overcome. A caveat here is that subnational capacity will very often be lower than that of central government (especially in the early years of decentralization), and it is necessary not to allow the low capacity at subnational levels to become a permanent justification for a lack of decentralized governance; to a large extent, SNGs “learn by doing”, and it is imperative that SNGs be given opportunities to build a virtuous circle in which more exercise of authority generates greater skills and capacity. Nonetheless, insofar as USAID projects an impact of decentralization on development, the benefits of having government actors that are responsive to local concerns must be set against the potential costs of lower caliber technical capacity.

### 3.2.2. INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS: CENTRAL GOVERNMENT LINKAGES TO OTHER ACTORS

Development at local levels requires more than just competent subnational governments. It also requires effective linkages between levels of government and between the various actors in the political system. That is, decentralization should also be understood to refer to *intergovernmental relations* between SNGs and central government actors. These include a range of possible interactions, including coordination between the various elected officials representing the central

government and subnational constituencies; national elected officials (such as MPs) and SNG officials (both elected and appointed) in their constituencies; central ministries and SNG officials in the same sectors; levels of SNG (vertically), such as between regions and districts; and SNGs (horizontally), such as between neighboring districts.

The presence of strong IGR institutions is an indicator that the prospects for decentralization are strong; at the same time, it should be acknowledged that this argument may be circular or tautological: strong IGR institutions are probably indicators that decentralization already exists and is functional. They may represent opportunities for policy and programming interventions, and are thus revisited in the programming guide, but they are also indicators of whether SNGs are in a system where central government works effectively with strong SNGs.

### Case Study: Human Resource Management Reform in Tanzania

Tanzania shows that decentralizing to improve development outcomes faces a challenge in managing the civil service and other human resources. In Tanzania, central government continues to manage staff, even though staff are officially employees of local governments. All decisions on staff budgets and numbers staff are ultimately done by an administration in the President's Office. Salary decisions come from the center and are paid generally from central government transfers. Subnational staff thus confront what the In-Country Assessment's authors call "dual allegiances": they are accountable to local governments, yet know that their career ambitions depend upon decisions made by the central government; they thus have incentives to satisfy central officials.

The arrangements for the civil service have implications for development. Field research found that locally recruited teachers were "far more likely to continue work within their post than teachers that were deployed by central government and sent to particular districts". In addition, central deployment of staff has generally failed to address the significant inequalities in staffing levels across districts, with remote or marginalized districts having trouble attracting or maintaining qualified staff. It is not clear that a purely decentralized system would rectify these challenges, nor that recentralization is the solution, but the challenge of decentralizing human resource management is a key part of the institutional setting in most African countries.

#### 3.2.3. LOCAL SOCIETY AND TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY

A brief word is in order here about the capacity of civil society organizations in some cases. A strong and highly developed civil society (at the local level, as opposed to existing only in, say, the national capital) is an indicator that decentralization will have social support to ensure a degree of accountability. Not all civil society is oriented toward accountability (as some is centered on securing rents), but insofar as USAID can identify independent and autonomous CSOs doing the work of accountability in a given context, this is an indicator that decentralization can be well-supported.

Similarly, traditional authority may be a strong actor in some countries, and its presence too is an important indicator of whether decentralization can contribute to development or not. Once again, the mere presence of traditional authority should not be seen as a dispositive of either a propitious or unfavorable environment. Some traditional authorities have proved to be rather

reactionary (with examples in southern Africa being clearest), while others have considerable legitimacy with the populace that far surpasses that of the central or local governments (as seen in Ghana and Mali, plus religious brotherhoods in Senegal). The CADA notes that traditional society has had ambiguous relationships to decentralization – sometimes resisting it as a threat to customary rule and other times reconciling itself to the political opportunities it represents – and the particular configuration of the relationship between traditional authority and decentralization is a subject that is likely to affect the efficacy of the latter when it comes to development issues in Africa, especially those relating to land rights and tenure.

### **3.3. WHAT POLITICAL CONDITIONS? INCENTIVES FOR DECENTRALIZED DEVELOPMENT**

In examining political incentives to promote development, we must specifically consider those oriented toward *decentralized development*. There are many ways to promote development that are not directly related to decentralization, and the emphasis here is on how this particular governance instrument serves developmental goals.

#### **3.3.1. CENTRAL GOVERNMENT INCENTIVES (FOR DECENTRALIZED DEVELOPMENT)**

The case that central governments would have incentives to decentralize for the sake of stability is relatively plausible, as is the case (in section 4) that central governments will sometimes have reasons to decentralize in order to buttress their political legitimacy. The case that central governments will have incentives to decentralize with an eye toward development is somewhat trickier because the question that emerges is why would development need to be *decentralized*? As most central governments are aware, it is possible to support or promote development through a variety of mechanisms, not all of which are related to decentralization. (These may range from exchange rate policy to privatization of state-owned enterprises to setting national standards for education policy.) To find political motivations to decentralize for the purpose of development, USG officers will need to find circumstances in which central governments *both* feel that development is crucial to their interests (perhaps because it grants them needed legitimacy) *and* that decentralization is necessary to promote that development. Given that incentives to decentralize for stability are clearer and that the link between decentralization and democracy is more direct, the link in the area of decentralized development may be less obvious: it is predicated on a multi-step process in which decentralization leads to development, which in turn advantages the current government.

The strongest arguments that central governments will decentralize for the sake of development probably come from the link between responsiveness, development, and legitimacy. (The particular mechanisms through which decentralization can lead to development also include competition between jurisdictions and political innovation and experimentation at subnational levels, but these are left to the programming guide.) This logic can follow two lines. First, governments in African countries may be persuaded that decentralization is indeed a crucial instrument in delivering the development that advantages them. That is, some governments may have an instrumental view of decentralization, even if they do not think it intrinsically valuable as a governance initiative. They may be persuaded (by themselves or others) that a degree of responsive local governance is needed for effective public service provision or economic growth, and that the resulting development is what they need to perpetuate their ability to govern. Second, governments may have incentives to be attentive to local demands largely as a matter of “show”, with demonstration of a commitment to local demands being crucial to retaining power.

In this case, improved development may result almost as an unintended consequence of a central government incentive to appear responsive. Either logic can serve to reconcile the goal of decentralized development with the political incentives of the central government.

### Case Study: Decentralized Development and Legitimacy in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's decentralization is most renowned internationally for its attempts to promote the goal of stability through its system of "ethnic federalism" that created states for the country's major ethnic groups in the early 1990s. Yet Ethiopia also provides some evidence of a central government that attempts to build legitimacy through decentralized development, most notably through a second wave of decentralization in and around 2002. The EPRDF coalition has governed Ethiopia for over twenty years, and it has mixed incentives regarding decentralization. Dominant parties in many countries are reluctant to decentralize (because it could divide power), but the EPRDF has successfully projected its political authority to subnational levels through decentralization. The EPRDF dominates at all levels of government, and the result is huge numbers of elected officials staff positions at the district (*woreda*) and local (*kebele*) levels. The EPRDF has argued that these ensure participatory democracy, but they are a political benefit for the governing coalition, which controls nearly all of the approximately 3.6 million local administrative seats around the country. These are effectively patronage opportunities for party activists, and they have also deepened the political linkages between the party and local populations.

That said, Ethiopia has performed quite well on development indicators in recent years, with robust economic growth and advances in human development, and the EPRDF can make the plausible claim that extensive decentralization has allowed it to channel local demands up the chain to the central government. This can be true even as the party benefits from substantial state control and "top-down governance in which decentralized units perform more as transmission belts for central prerogatives than for upward transmission of local demands". The EPRDF may thus seek to support decentralization in the interest of improved service provision and as a basis for governmental legitimacy, but not in the interest of bottom-up democracy.

#### 3.3.2. SUPPORT FROM OTHER ACTORS

As suggested above, decentralization functions best when it is embedded in a system of intergovernmental relations that apportions and balances power between local and central levels of government. This should be extended to include apportioning and balancing power between subnational levels. One pitfall is that different levels of SNG may have conflicting views about the specifics of decentralization, and may in fact undermine one another. This is particularly salient in countries that mix devolution to elected local governments with deconcentration to appointed subnational units. Most African countries have blended these two forms, and the different subnational actors may not necessarily support the same vision of decentralization. Even if central government decision makers in the capital wish to push for decentralization, for example, its appointed officials in the provinces or rural areas may not see this through.

The implications for policy and programming are that decentralization will be on strongest footing where the many subnational actors themselves share a vision of what powers and responsibilities are to be devolved, and what the proper role is for centrally-appointed officials to

exercise oversight. One way of framing this is that decentralization is likely to thrive where actors both inside and outside the central government exhibit a commitment to the idea of *subsidiarity*, or the notion that government action should be undertaken at the lowest level that is feasible and functional. With respect to intergovernmental relations, a willingness of SNGs to participate in intergovernmental coordination is a positive sign, so long as they have a degree of autonomy and opportunities for voice in institutions that could become dominated by the center. Absent effective communication between levels of SNG, it is possible to end up with a less desirable situation like that found by CADA researchers in Nigeria.

### Case Study: States and Accountability in Nigeria

Nigeria provides a cautionary tale about a view of decentralization that simply seeks to maximize the autonomy and power of SNGs. In Nigeria's political system, the states then exert considerable power over local government authorities. In fact, one of the problems seems to be the federal government's inability to "check" the states or require them to cooperate and collaborate on matters of interest to local governments. Nigeria's powerful states are implicated deeply in the lack of fiscal accountability in the country. State governments are powerful and are endowed with substantial resources, with the result being a tendency to lord over local governments and limit their autonomy. The states exercise power over localities through fiscal and administrative systems, and via the political party system since the dominant party prevails in many places. As the study authors note, the need in Nigeria is for "stronger local government IGR [that] might actually stimulate the fiduciary contract between governors and the governed".

A lesson here is that effective decentralization relies upon more than just strong SNGs. Nigeria has strong states, and these have proved to compromise governance rather than enhance it. The necessary counterpoint to strong SNG autonomy is strong mechanisms of accountability. By many accounts, Nigeria would be the strongest candidate country in Africa for supporting decentralization: it has significant ethnic and regional divisions that provide motivation for decentralized governance, plus some real technical capacity and history at the subnational level. Yet promoting further decentralization in Nigeria – at least to the state level – could be disastrous if it furthers state autonomy rather than enhancing accountability via stronger IGR mechanisms.

# 4.0 DECENTRALIZATION AND DEMOCRACY

*Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it. A nation may establish a free government, but without municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty.*

– Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

The above quote shows how a possible link between decentralized governance and the depth of democracy was construed by a prominent observer in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This section focuses on the conditions under which decentralization can support or promote the goal of deepening democracy in Africa. The challenge is viewed as coupling a degree of autonomy for subnational actors (necessary for decentralization to make decision making more local) with appropriate degrees of accountability (both upward to the center and downward to citizens). The conditions when this might arise are found when central governments have incentives to devolve power downward, and when subnational actors are held accountable by relatively strong forces in central government and local civil society.

## 4.1 THE CHALLENGE: COUPLING AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In a very general sense, the fundamental dilemma in using decentralization as a means to democratic deepening is to ensure that autonomy for SNGs to act independently is paired with enforcing accountability that makes SNGs responsive downward to the citizenry and upward (at least somewhat) to central government.

A common phenomenon in African decentralization has been relatively scant subnational autonomy combined with accountability that flows primarily “upward” to the center rather than “downward” to citizens. This implies a relatively weak form of devolution, if in fact devolution to elected SNGs is the form of decentralization undertaken. This limited autonomy can compromise stability and development, but is especially problematic for the goal of deepening democracy via decentralization. It can occur even when subnational actors have had responsibilities and powers transferred to them in law (or have legal “authority” in the parlance of the DDPH and CADA).

### Case Study:

#### The State and Local Autonomy in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso is perhaps the clearest case in the CADA studies of a centrally-controlled, undemocratic system in which the prospects for decentralization to improve governance are limited by the overarching political context (and the lack of incentive of the governing party) to support change. The problems facing decentralization in Burkina Faso are numerous. The local governments (*communes*) have limited authority, minimal power, and lack own-source fiscal resources; this is especially true in rural areas.

Many of the main challenges can be traced to the central state's reticence to devolve power. As the Burkina Faso study notes, the governing party has pursued a top-down form of decentralization that has been "gradual" at best. Of particular note is the multi-layered "tutelage" (*tutelle de l'état*) exercised by deconcentrated authorities that sharply delimit the autonomy of subnational actors in the communes. This central oversight is found at multiple levels, with governors in the regions, commissioners in the provinces, and prefects in departments. Communes have a degree of legal authority, but their actual performance of their duties depends upon centralized administrative services. The capacity of local level staff is low, with few professionally trained staff, outdated or missing equipment is, and limited understanding of the mechanics of decentralization. This compounds the reliance of communes on state entities.

A major lesson from the Burkina Faso experience is that a complete legal framework for decentralization is inadequate to indicate a propitious environment. It is entirely possible – and even common in Africa – to have a country that has "decentralized", but in which neither the country environment nor the incentives of leading actors favor meaningful reform.

Conversely, ample subnational autonomy without sufficient accountability is also a problem. In shorthand, this can be seen in Africa as creating a "Nigeria problem". Where SNGs have significant resources and few responsibilities, corruption, patronage, and bad governance practices can prevail. By creating new levels of government, decentralization can either shift governance difficulties from national levels to subnational levels, or can replicate national government problems at subnational levels. Autonomy without accountability is problematic for its direct impact on the quality of governance, but also because poor performance has provided grounds for recentralization in some countries (such as Uganda), whether justified or not.

## **4.2 WHAT BACKGROUND CONDITIONS? CENTRAL SUPPORT FOR SUBNATIONAL ACTORS**

Under what conditions can these challenges be overcome? The key is empowering SNGs, then embedding these in a web of effective institutions that both support and constrain them. One category of such organizations is the web of intergovernmental institutions (IGR), the organizations that link SNGs to national governments and to one another. Another category is the set of relationships between government institutions and civil society.

### **4.2.1 INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS**

As noted in section 3, one of the indicators of strong intergovernmental relations is the presence of linkages between the many actors in multi-level governance systems. These include the linkages between various levels of SNGs, central government ministries, legislators in parliament (including upper chambers of bicameral legislatures), the national executive, and even the judiciary and other actors. This was considered above and the logic is not repeated here. The main takeaway is that a strong web of linkages between the many actors in the system is likely an indicator of a system that is prepared to provide the kinds of accountability (and perhaps technical capacity) needed to allow decentralization to serve the goal of democracy. The caveat is again ensuring that these IGR institutions do not represent merely systems for central government domination of subnational actors. If a robust IGR system is intact and does protect a degree of SNG autonomy, this is a fine indicator that decentralization is on solid ground.

## 4.2.2 GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS AND CSOS

The other category of relations that shapes the environment for decentralization is between government institutions and civil society. Civil society organizations are well-suited to performing one of the key tasks that makes decentralization work: holding subnational governments accountable. Importantly, CSOs can do this on a sustained basis, whereas the citizenry at large (in the absence of civil society organization) operates largely through periodic elections. In addition to holding government accountable through public meetings and civic communication, CSOs can also assist in co-financing and co-producing projects, as noted in the Mali case study. Many CSOs have demonstrated more capacity to mobilize resources (whether financial or human resources) than SNGs.

The presence of vibrant CSOs is thus another positive indicator that decentralization may be opportune, though a caveat reflects that referenced immediately above in section 4.2.1: CSOs must maintain their autonomy in order to promote governmental accountability. CSOs are best able to provide a check on government when they operate independently and are not caught in the government's network of patronage.

## 4.3 WHAT POLITICAL CONDITIONS? INCENTIVES TO DEEPEN DEMOCRACY

Decentralization has contributed to democratic deepening in several countries. At the most obvious level, political decentralization has meant multiple levels of elections in most countries; in many countries, dominant parties have won at all levels, but decentralization can introduce greater competitiveness and opportunities for minority parties to gain a foothold in the political system. (It is most apparent how decentralization can be a step to deepening democracy in cases of devolution, where local officials are elected by local citizens, but it is also possible that deconcentrated officials under the purview of the central state can be more attentive to local demands than distant bureaucrats, and this too can improve local governance.) In fact, this dovetails with the argument – made most notably by Staffan Lindberg – that elections in Africa are themselves eventually democratizing as they become normalized over time. At the same time, multiplying the levels of autonomous government multiplies the instances at which civil society institutions can make demands. Finally, decentralization has also helped consolidate democracy via its impact on national stability. Where decentralization has served to resolve conflicts by making power-sharing possible, it has helped to entrench democratic practice. The strongest example is South Africa, though Nigeria may also be an illustrative case, and Kenya may be going forward (though the verdict is still out on these last two country examples).

### 4.3.1 CENTRAL GOVERNMENT INCENTIVES

Central government may favor decentralization as a means to buttress its own legitimacy in the eyes of the populace. In some cases, this operates by achieving economic development or by stabilizing a fragile country, but in other cases it comes from conveying a sense that governance is nominally more inclusive. Attempt by central governments to establish their own legitimacy via governance reforms are not “democratizing” in a strict sense, but they link to the idea that decentralization can allow for greater incorporation of varied ideas.

Examples of this logic are found in several countries with quite different democratic credentials. It can be seen in the willingness of Botswana's governing party to continue the process of decentralization, however slow and gradual that process may be. Decentralization for the sake of political legitimacy occurred in Ghana in the 1980s before full democratization. The logic can

also be seen in Tanzania's flawed democracy under the CCM party, or the efforts by South Africa's dominant ANC to reassure the opposition that it will retain elements of decentralized governance that it tends to oppose. Even the decentralization reforms in Mali and Mozambique in the 1990s (however modest) can be understood through the lens of central government actors aiming to put new regimes on solid political footing by offering a degree of decentralized authority to political opposition. Again, decentralization in many of these cases relates to the stability imperative (see section 2), but can also be understood as crafting governability through extension of some voice to otherwise marginalized groups or regions.

When it comes to deciphering the conditions that support decentralization, the implications are that central actors may support a modicum of decentralization even when it runs counter to the government's narrowly-defined interests. All of the examples above – Botswana, 1980s Ghana, Tanzania, South Africa, Mali, and Mozambique – witnessed a degree of decentralization by central governments that did not have a true “interest” in the process. Rather, the governments engaged in constrained optimization, responding to the challenging political context with a dose of decentralization. The governments' political incentives entered into these cases in the form of strict limitations on the extent of decentralization, but these cases nonetheless show that a desire to establish governing legitimacy has been an effective impetus behind some degree of reform.

#### Case Study: Top-down Politics in South Africa

South Africa illustrates several reasons why central governments might resist decentralization. The reasons illustrated in the CADA case study are compelling because they combine several different categories of reasons to oppose decentralization; these include political incentives and background conditions of the country (both of which are noted in section 1 of this paper), plus a technocratic logic.

With respect to the technocracy, the authors note that central government actors have “a genuine feeling that development management is a national project and requires centralized guidance”, and this is coupled with the idea that “[t]here are limited professional skills in the country” that “can be used most effectively at the national level”. Many development planners are oriented toward centralism; regardless of the merits of this approach, it seems clear that it comes at least partly from a genuine ideological conviction.

Political incentives and background characteristics matter as well. In terms of incentives, the governing ANC has little reason to support decentralization, given that it dominates at the national level and has a more tenuous grip on subnational politics; moreover, its party leaders like to exercise top-down control within the party, which depends upon centralism. Similarly, allies in the trade union movement (and among many technocrats) seek to defend their prerogatives by keeping power at the center. In terms of the country's political background the study authors note the “historical memory that federalism, decentralization, and local government were tools of apartheid”. Decentralization is thus associated with political parties and interest groups dominated by whites. In the end, the result has been that power is nominally devolved in South Africa to elected provinces and municipalities, yet the effect has looked more like “deconcentration” or “delegation”, given the extent and nature of central control. The country is nominally federal, but the factors identified in this guide have kept it quite centralized.

There is another sense in which actors linked to central government can have incentives to decentralize for the purpose of “democracy”. This is that many elected officials in national political parties will have links to their constituencies. Political parties are not single-minded unitary actors: they are filled with many different actors at different levels, with competing and even contradictory ambitions. National party leaders – such as presidents and top ministers – have the clearest incentives to centralize power, but members of parliaments and legislators will often have reason to be much more favorable to decentralization.

This holds especially in cases where these officials are elected in geographic constituencies and are themselves accountable to local electorates, rather than to national party leaders, for their place in the legislature. MPs with geographic bases – not to mention Senators in the upper chambers of many countries – will wish to satisfy the demands of their local residents. This can obviously mean decentralizing fiscal resources (as in legislators “bringing home the bacon”), but also possibly the devolution of control over public services.

#### 4.3.2 OTHER ACTORS: CIVIL SOCIETY AND OPPOSITION

Another set of conditions that would suggest opportunities for decentralization programming is the presence of powerful institutions in civil society. The indicators of civil society strength can be found in typical measures of associational activity, such as frequency and inclusiveness of meetings. Less obviously, evidence of civil society strength can be found in the community projects that may have been undertaken through community action. For example, civil society organizations may be responsible for various forms of local resource mobilization that result in community projects or services. These can include physical infrastructure (churches and mosques, local irrigation systems, and sometimes public health or education facilities) or governance and management systems (such as management of common resources like pastures, forests, or fish stocks). Where CSOs have demonstrated the capacity to manage or garner resources, decentralization has an important set of social supports.

That said, not all civil society is created equal, so observers should not infer too much from the mere presence of CSOs. In many circumstances, governing parties and elite actors can create organizations serving their electoral and/or financial interests. The distinction here could be seen as CSOs that are genuinely “grassroots” versus those that are more “Astroturf”, having been created by powerful actors as a tactic to secure access to resources, yet having the appearance of grassroots organizations. The desirable form of CSO activity is that which maintains an arm’s length independence from state power and remains autonomous; it is important to avoid organizations that have been either coopted by government or are “of, by, and for the elites”.

Co-financing is an indicator that USAID can use to measure civil society’s ability to contribute to local governance. It indicates that local institutions exhibit a degree of capacity and fiscal autonomy, and the presence of an active civil society likely indicates the presence of accountability mechanisms at the local level as well. Together, these suggest the potential for constructive interaction between civil society and SNGs.

#### Case Study:

#### Democracy and the Balance of Central-Subnational Power in Botswana

Botswana is the longest-standing democracy of the 10 CADA countries, and it shows that

democracy cannot be assumed to lead to decentralization. The country exhibits the limited subnational autonomy after decentralization that is seen in other less-democratic countries. The core units of SNG – known as the local councils – have limited local power over personnel, and rely heavily on central government transfers for both capital investment and recurrent expenditures. The governing BDP (Botswana Democratic Party) has also leveraged opportunities to place a number of its members as councilors in appointed positions.

There is, however, a sense that the national electoral environment in Botswana is becoming more competitive, with a reasonable chance that the BDP will lose power in 2014. According to the in-country assessment, there are indications that increasing competitiveness at the local councils may affect the competitiveness of national politics, and vice versa: public debate is becoming more vigorous and this means improved prospects for enhanced accountability through elections. As the in-country study notes, one intriguing issue is whether alternation in the national government would lead the current opposition to rethink its commitment to decentralization. At present, opposition parties favor decentralization as a means to counter the BDP's dominance, but the opposition's "political will" may be subject to change according to the logic of political incentives. From the perspective of this guide, a potential change of government in Botswana in 2014 would seem to be an ideal moment to push for decentralization, but a new government's motivation to support decentralized governance is subject to scrutiny.

Another set of actors that can contribute to decentralization processes is opposition parties. Unlike governing parties, opposition will often have incentives to advocate for decentralized resources and responsibilities, since they often wield more power at the subnational level than at the national level (being out of power nationally by definition). They are likely to support vigorous public debate about the merits of decentralization, especially if their experience in opposition has been sustained and looks indefinite. To be clear, opposition parties should not be assumed to carry their preferences for decentralization into government, should they be elected. Today's pro-decentralization opposition parties can easily become tomorrow's pro-centralization governments. Still, the presence of viable subnational opposition can present an entry point for USAID to operate at subnational levels: opposition parties may invite support for decentralization in ways that facilitate programming, and it may be difficult for governing parties to resist this (either because they wish not to be left out of subnational programming, or because stifling debate will be detrimental to the party's image). In different ways, both Botswana (above) and Ghana (below) illustrate the importance of understanding the power and limitations of opposition advocacy for decentralization. The suggestion here is that opposition will likely offer strong (albeit politically contingent) support for decentralization under many circumstances, and the presence of viable opposition is itself a promising indicator of an opportunity for intervention.

### Case Study: Partisan Politics and Executive Power in Ghana

Decentralization in Ghana began as a political strategy by an authoritarian regime seeking to establish its legitimacy in the late 1980s, but it subsequently took on a more explicitly partisan flavor. The party system is almost evenly divided between the National Democratic Council (NDC) and the National Patriotic Party (NPP). The forerunner of the NDC was the progenitor of decentralization, while the NPP first favored increasing decentralization, partly due to its

“greater success in local elections and its strong support in key regions of the country (especially the Ashanti region, often considered the country’s heartland)”. As the NDC and the NPP alternated in power in the 2000s, a pattern emerged: the opposition party often advocated for greater decentralization, in large part because they maintained a strong sub-national presence when in opposition at the national level.

Decentralization has thus received rhetorical support from both of Ghana’s major parties, when each is in opposition. Yet neither the NDC nor the NPP seized upon decentralization when in power. The flip side of opposition support for decentralization is governing parties’ unwillingness to forego central government prerogatives. A key example is the power of the president to appoint District Chief Executives and 30 percent of members of the District Assemblies, which each party uses to the fullest when governing. From a political economy perspective, this is unsurprising, though it may be confounding when viewed through the lens of “political will”. Even in democratic Ghana, political commitment to decentralization is highly contingent; as the saying goes, where one stands depends upon where one sits.



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