LOCAL INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES: RECENT EXPERIENCE IN AFRICA

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SUMMARY

Democratic decentralisation is a stated goal of many African countries, but there are considerable institutional and political challenges involved in making it a reality. Even where official government decentralisation programmes are underway, many central agencies may be reluctant or unwilling to share significant powers with local governments. Overcoming local elite capture and generating genuine local participation can also be extremely difficult. This article reviews basic institutional and political mechanisms intended to facilitate effective decentralisation and intergovernmental fiscal relations, including legal, constitutional, fiscal and managerial reforms. It also explores the challenges of developing institutional mechanisms for hierarchical control and internal accountability which are potentially subject to considerable abuse. Particular attention is given to the development of external accountability through local elections, appropriately defined local government structures and operations, appropriately sized local government jurisdictions and various direct voice mechanisms that have been used to various degrees in Africa. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Compared to other regions and continents, African countries are the least formally decentralised. This is the case whether we look at relative expenditure or employee size of local governments vis-a-vis the rest of the public sector (Tables 1 and 2). Whereas the formal state is centralised, society remains highly decentralised—dispersed in rural communities and villages. The idea that African peasant societies are uncaptured by the state is a recurring theme in the social science literature on African governance (Hyden, 1983; Migdal, 1988; Dia, 1996). The resulting poor integration of state and society structures for development and governance is regarded as a key defining feature of Africa’s underdevelopment (World Bank, 1989; Mabogunje, 1995a; Mandami, 1996).

Africa’s limited decentralisation can be explained in objective terms: nascent state formation is taking place concurrently with democratic decentralisation (DD) efforts. This poses problems in societies deeply divided along ethnic, religious and other cultural lines and further complicates economic coordination in societies marked by limited human resources (Riggs, 1964; Prud’homme, 1995). Decentralising power and resources to semi-autonomous local governing units is irksome to many political and administrative leaders accustomed to monopolistic exercise of power. DD gives advantage to political ‘enemies’ (opposition parties) who might undermine the tenuous rule of patrimonial leaders. Many African post-independence leaders have looked to the crude governance models of the early colonial period rather than to arrangements of pre-colonial empires or the later colonial periods, when local governments (LGs) became the training ground for national democracy (Hicks, 1961; Mawhood and Davey, 1980; Mawhood, 1983; Olowu, 1988; Olowu and Smoke, 1992; Davidson, 1993; Mandami, 1996).

For a variety of reasons, many African countries since the mid-1970s have initiated fresh decentralisation programmes. These differ from previous efforts in two important senses. First, the process is linked to the programme of state democratisation. In fact, some countries (Nigeria, Uganda, Mali) construed the building of the capacity for local democracy and working upward to the centre as a more viable strategy than the simultaneous democratisation

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of all of state institutions (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997; Olowu and Wunsch, 2003). It is significant that the two countries in the region with strong municipal governments (opposition parties control major cities) are also the two standing democracies in the region—Mauritius and Botswana (Brautigam, 1999; Hyden, 1999).

Second, there is growing appreciation of the need to develop local governance and not just local governments. This implies not only vertical transfer of responsibilities and resources from central to local governments, but also the simultaneous engagement by the former of the latter and local non-state institutions (private sector, civil society and international organisations) in service delivery and development activities. This has, for example, included returning health centres and schools taken over from private and civic institutions (churches, mosques and philanthropic organisations) and privatisation of local services (Ostrom et al., 1993; Wekwete, 1997; Larbi, 1998; Robinson and White, 1998).

By the end of the 1990s, it was possible to classify African countries primarily as those with progressive DD policies and those that have stuck with old forms of deconcentration. A third category covers the few that have gone further to experiment with federal or quasi-federal arrangements (see Table 3).\(^1\) This article is primarily concerned with the more progressive experiments, highlighting how they have tackled the dilemmas that confront DD in countries characterised by state weakness, grinding poverty and poorly institutionalised state structures.

In particular, the article focuses on two key questions. The first is whether decentralisation has produced appropriate intergovernmental relations mechanisms for supporting strong and effective local governance. One of the most important lessons of successful decentralisation programmes is that DD involves the re-definition of central

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\(^1\)Strictly speaking, there are no federal systems in Africa, given the excessive powers of central compared to regional governments. However only Nigeria, Ethiopia and Tanzania have formal federal governmental systems.
and local government tasks and resources. This cannot be achieved without effective intergovernmental relations.

Given the nature of decentralisation, how have some countries handled pressures to take back powers earlier granted to local communities, as has happened in other developing countries (Eaton, 2001; Wunsch, 2001)? What types of institutional mechanisms have been created to support the redefined relationships between local governments and the various state organs (ministries), other local governments and independent non-state institutions?

The second question is whether decentralisation has led to the creation of effective self-governance structures at the community level. This is important because one of the strongest arguments against DD is the fear of aggravating local despotism, thus further undermining local development and poverty reduction efforts (see below). This article highlights a number of mechanisms in use as well as others that could help promote effective local governance. Special emphasis is given to rural areas because of the peculiar challenges they face—higher levels of poverty and fewer local resource possibilities. To provide a context for the discussion, we begin by reviewing the motivations and dilemmas confronting DD and local self-governance in Africa.

FACTORs MOTIVATING DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION IN AFRICA

A number of factors help explain the renewed interest in DD in many African countries from the mid-1970s. First, the failure of centralised public sector management is evidenced by economic, fiscal and political crises. The resulting decline in state resources increased pressure for economic, institutional (public sector) and political reforms (Wunsch and Olowu, 1990) as part of the search for new paradigms of governance by state officials. Nigeria, Cote D’Ivoire and Tanzania, among others, follow this pattern.

Second, non-state domestic pressures for change have also been important. Many civil society organisations have become more politically active and more sophisticated in their opposition to state policies as the economic crisis bit harder. Mali, Uganda and Ethiopia are cases in point (Davidson, 1993; Bratton and van de Walle, 1997).

Third, there has been pressure from external donors. Aid has declined as a proportion of donor GDP, but it remains a substantial portion of development expenditures for many African countries. The average for seven Francophone West African states from 1980 to 1993 was 45%, with figures above 60% for Mali, Niger and Upper Volta (Doe, 1997). By the 1990s, donors were pressing for ‘good governance’ which they linked to growth and poverty reduction. And since DD, along with electoral, legal, human rights, public sector and macro-economic reforms, is a key aspect of good governance, it became a condition of aid. A major OECD (1997, p. 13) study concluded that civil service reform without (democratic) decentralisation would be of limited value.

Fourth, Africa has experienced growing urbanisation. More than half of the continent’s population lives in urban areas and this is projected to grow 54% by 2020 (UN, 1991). Urbanisation is symptomatic of changes to modes of production and social developments, with a major shift from subsistence farming to agro-industrial and service industries, and increasing urban job pressures from rural-urban migration as education improves and people in rural conflict areas seek safety (Wekwette, 1997). The creation of central parastatals to improve urban infrastructure was both a cause and consequence of urbanisation, but the advent of economic crisis and structural adjustment has made many of them unsustainable. Their responsibilities have increasingly been transferred to semi-autonomous local governments or privatised (Olowu, 2001). Unfortunately, the institutional mechanisms for effective urban management remain poorly developed (Mabogunje, 1995b).
Fifth, DD has been used to promote conflict resolution as ruling groups seek to contain or craft compromises with regional or local elites in many parts of Africa. It played a role, for instance, in resolving long conflicts in Ethiopia, South Africa and Mozambique, and it looks promising in alleviating raging conflicts in the Sudan, Morocco, Angola, Senegal and the two Congos.

Finally, globalisation has been a factor driving DD. Free movement of capital between and within countries means that cities can compete for foreign investment, a task once monopolised by central governments. Moreover, globalisation is compelling many governments to focus attention on strategic issues of national economic and political management while leaving routine management of cities and communities to LGs, private, religious and philanthropic institutions which have demonstrated their effectiveness in these areas (Hyden, 1983; McCarney, 1996; Robinson and White, 1998; Olowu, 1999a; WHO, 2002).

DILEMMAS OF DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION IN AFRICA

Although the pressures to pursue democratic decentralisation have been great, the process has also confronted formidable challenges. Political dilemmas, of course, have been particularly important. While African governments are convinced of the merits of DD, there is a reluctance to share monopoly power inherited from the colonial period. DD is viewed as a zero-sum power game in which local actors gain at the expense of the centre, rather than a positive-sum power game in which all players gain over time. This is related to another misconception—that devolution means the abdication of all service responsibilities by the centre, while in reality the centre must assume responsibilities for policy formulation, regulation, monitoring/evaluation and certain delivery aspects of some services.

A second key political dilemma is the problem of local elite capture. Elites are required to sustain DD because of their power, knowledge and networks, but it is important to prevent them from using devolved powers to oppress the public, especially marginalised groups such as women and minorities. How to construct legislative bodies that are effective in articulating the interests of their constituencies, making relevant laws and holding the executive accountable for the use of public resources is a major challenge these bodies must resolve in all developing countries (Balogun, 2000; Oyugi, 2000; Mitra, 2001; Shotton, 2001).

There are also other types of dilemmas for African decentralisation, such as economic and institutional. This article highlights political dilemmas because they have attracted particular attention and key political constraints must be mitigated before major economic and institutional dilemmas are effectively tackled (Ostrom et al., 1993; Nzokenu, 1994; Smoke, 1994, 2001; Litvack et al., 1998).

INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS MECHANISMS FOR EFFECTIVE LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Tackling the reluctance to share power in many African countries requires development of mechanisms for appropriately transferring responsibilities, financial and human resources from the central to local governments. A variety of instruments are available for this.

Legal instruments

Previous decentralisation programmes either failed to specify local responsibilities or transferred responsibilities by administrative decrees or statutes that central governments can change easily and unilaterally. Specifically, such statutes often empowered the local government or interior minister to change the law at will. Under new arrangements, local government autonomy is better protected. First, the statute setting up councils should clearly articulate at least some local responsibilities. In many countries (e.g. Uganda, Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa), additional resort is made to constitutional mandates which are more difficult to amend. This represents an important paradigm shift as local governments in western legal conceptions inherited by these countries are not constitutional but creations of the state.
The reason for this shift is that many African central governments had so frustrated the aspirations of local communities that it became necessary to protect the local government system constitutionally. The authors of the Nigerian Reform Guidelines (1976), for example, argued that state governments, which had constitutional responsibility for local governments, reduced responsibilities of local governments, taking them over or transferring them to parastatals controlled by the centre. Under the 1976 local government reform, the Nigerian federal government’s common statute for all states provided for two sets of local government responsibilities, those that are exclusive to them and those they could provide concurrently with the central government. Among the former are community-based conveniences and roads, motor-parks markets and a range of regulatory and administrative powers. Services they could perform concurrently with state governments included—economic planning, provision and maintenance of basic education and health services and development of agriculture and natural resources (other than minerals) (Gboyega, 1983; Adamolekun, 1999).

Similarly Uganda laid out clearly the responsibilities and resources of each of the five tiers of local government, separating them from those of the central government. A recent evaluation notes that the Ugandan Constitution of 1995 and the Local Government Act of 1997 ‘constitute some of the most detailed and comprehensive legislative framework in the sub-Saharan Africa region’ (Steffensen and Trollegaard, 2000). The Local Government Act assigns certain responsibilities to local governments including: health, water, feeder roads, human resources, district planning, budgets, land surveying, probation and welfare, cultural affairs, local trade, community affairs, information, public works, order, recreation and collection and expenditure of local revenues.

The Ethiopian case is a little different but also similar in many ways. Its Federal Constitution of 1995 stipulates that ‘every nationality and people have the right to a full measure of self-government, which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits…’ Regions vary widely in population and capacity (Oromiya has 17 million people whereas Gambela has only 110,000), but they are all assigned wide (residual) powers, including the right to secede from the federation. Their responsibilities include economic and social development, land and natural resources, state police forces and public order. Below regions are zones, woredas (districts) and kebeles (communes), all of which, particularly woredas, are assigned responsibilities. The latter formulate budgets and are responsible for front-line functions such as health, education, soil conservation, observation of legal rights and law and order. The kebele functions for all intents and purposes as a field administration of the woreda. The states may further define local responsibilities. The Amhara regional constitution, for instance, empowers woreda to implement regional laws and regulations, to make local social and economic development plans, to decide on internal affairs and to develop its locality. It also has a judicial unit from which appeals can be made to other regional courts (Olowu, 2001; Ethiopia, 1994).

**Financial mechanisms**

Another article in this volume focuses on local government finances but we mention this important dimension of decentralisation for the sake of completeness in outlining institutional structures. Three instruments are utilised to transfer resources from national to local governments. First, taxing powers are given to local governments. Previously, local governments in many countries only helped the central government to collect its taxes, a percentage of which they might retain. This was predominant practice in Francophone Africa until the recent democratisation and was not uncommon until recent reforms in some Anglophone countries. Second, revenue sharing systems assist local governments to cover expenditures with national significance or to bridge expenditure gaps. Some transfer systems are mandatory and others operate at the discretion of the central government. Finally, separate provisions are sometimes made for specific grants and/or other arrangements for financing local development expenditures. Some countries give special development project grants, others create municipal loan funds and a number even allow restricted local government access to the capital market. Transfers are, except in a few cases, the predominant source of local government finance in Africa.

**Human resource management (HRM) mechanisms**

Organising HRM for LGs raises two crucial issues: (a) how to ensure that all LGs in a country are able to recruit qualified officials and (b) how to ensure that these officials are properly motivated. The integrated model involves
the deployment of central government employees in all local governments, particularly at senior levels. This has been used in much of Africa, especially the Francophone countries. While this approach ensures that all or most LGs have a modicum of competent professionals, they may not be motivated to serve local government as they look to the centre for direction (Olowu, 1988).

In contrast, the second, separated model allows each local government to hire and fire its own staff, thus making them loyal to the council. A potential pitfall of this approach is that less prosperous local governments are likely to be locked into hiring officials with much lower skills than they require. Only the biggest cities in some countries of southern and eastern Africa use this second model.

A third model, the unified model which gives more responsibility to intermediate levels, is becoming prominent. It can be managed from the district (Uganda) or state level (Nigeria and Ethiopia). Ethiopian regional governments, for example, manage their own personnel and today have ten times more personnel than the central government. Personnel at the local government level (woredas, kebeles) are however paid by and responsible to the regional state and the system is also plagued by ethnicity constraints in the recruitment of regional and local personnel (Beyene, 1999). Other practical problems may also arise, such as lack of autonomy and skilled personnel at the lower levels in Nigeria and lack of reliable funding for them in Uganda. Other nations that use unified approaches include Cote D’Ivoire, Mali, South Africa, Tanzania and Mozambique (Wekwette, 1997; Crook and Manor, 1998; Olowu and Wunsch, 2003).

HIERARCHICAL CONTROL AND INTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY

As noted earlier, local elites are required for the success of local government systems. They bring resources, knowledge, influence and networks that make these systems fully operational and effective. At the same time, they must not be allowed to exclude the masses of the people or serious problems of equity, responsiveness and corruption at the local level are raised. The key is to create an institutional framework that provides opportunities for the elite while constraining them from exploiting the system of local governance for their private interests. This can be done by developing multiple accountability systems at the local level—to citizens, state and non-state communities.

The literature shows that accountability is structured differently in different contexts depending on historical, cultural and other factors. It is generally known that accountability strategies are most effective when they are cumulative and combined (Olowu, 1999b; Blair 2000). The question is what types of institutional mechanism help to effectively neutralise local elite capture.

Most African countries have tried to resolve the problem of accountability of local governments by asserting central government hierarchical control of local governments. They usually designate a specialised Ministry or department in the Presidency or Cabinet secretariat. In Anglophone Africa, there are usually Ministries of Local Government, while Francophone countries tend to have a Ministry of Interior. Control mechanisms include inspectorates, approval processes for local government decisions, deployment of central level personnel to local governments and use of powers of suspension and dissolution of local government councils. Francophone countries also tend to insist that national officials manage all local financial matters.

These arrangements are typically complemented with internal accountability mechanisms—codes of conduct, financial and establishment codes, budgetary and personnel control, internal audit mechanisms and disciplinary, supervisory and training arrangements. Professional bodies further supplement these codes with professional codes that they supervise and enforce. All of these are aimed at reducing corruption which has been problematic at both the national and local levels (Hope and Chiculo, 2000).

The common failure of such accountability arrangements is one of the most important grounds for reform. Central governments often misuse their wide powers of control over local governments including using them to settle political scores or victimise councils controlled by opposition parties. More importantly, matters being dealt with by local governments often require details and expertise that central governments do not have. This partly explains the long delays in approving local government budgets (Nigerian, Kenya, Uganda, Senegal and Ghana)—and is not dissimilar to experiences in other developing countries (Ayee, 1997; Haque, 1997; Olowu, 1997). Legislative controls play an important role but they can be abused and are not sufficient to ensure good governance when they are not subject to appropriate central or citizen accountability mechanisms (Boachi-Danquah, 2001).
BUILDING EFFECTIVE EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Given the limits of internal accountability mechanisms, the thrust of DD reforms has been to develop external accountability using the principles of exit and voice. The two principles are premised on the fact that the delivery of services is contingent on the activities of three main stakeholders—the service beneficiaries (customers and citizens), political leaders and bureaucratic supervisors and service providers. The effectiveness of accountability mechanisms depends on the influence exerted by concerned stakeholders.

When public service consumers have an opportunity to patronise alternative service producers, this competitive pressure serves as a threat to public service producers. Essential to the application of the exit principle is the possibility of separating producers from providers. Examples of exit mechanisms include production of public services, such as basic education or health services, by for-profit and not-for-profit non-governmental organisations as well as public sector producers or when local governments give vouchers to citizens to purchase services from any producer. The advantages of exit mechanisms are that they are impersonal, neat and effective. The problem is that the exit principle cannot be applied to key local services with low differentiation and high product involvement such as police protection and environmental sanitation.

Voice mechanisms are particularly ideal for public services for which exit is not possible, but they require personal input from customers/citizens and can be messy. The application of voice mechanisms is dependent on knowledge (relevant production function information), low income and information barriers, and the ability to make those who exercise power listen and change their behaviour. Where these conditions are not present it is difficult to apply voice mechanisms effectively. Thus, it is necessary to involve a variety of institutional mechanisms to provide ordinary citizens with relevant information and power that ensures local government responsiveness.

Space precludes an exhaustive discussion of exit and voice in Africa but some examples can be offered. The use of exit mechanisms is limited by the restricted, if growing, responsibilities of local governments (Table 2), many of which are not easily subject to competition. In spite of this, some countries have instituted local privatisation and deregulation. Local governments in Cote D’Ivoire, Mali, South Africa and Ghana, for example, outsource selected services with some positive effects especially in larger urban areas. Voice mechanisms are more common, with a few types used in Africa.

Local elections

Compared to national elections, local elections have not been the subject of much serious study. Some countries (e.g. Ghana) have not allowed multi-party elections at the local level even though they permit political competition at national levels. Their argument is that local government matters are bread and butter issues on which there can be no division along partisan lines. Local elections are also keenly contested in Uganda although not in a partisan way. On the other hand, partisan elections are used in Nigerian, Kenyan and South African local governments and in Ivorian communes.

Elections are important to improve citizen participation, local government accountability and provision of information to electors. Unfortunately, money, violence and corruption often dominate both local and national elections. More importantly, they occur only in 4- or 5-yearly cycles, making them a blunt accountability instrument. Some countries have thus sought to supplement local elections with other mechanisms such as recall (Nigeria and Ethiopia) and referendum (not yet used in Africa). Most countries that have local government elections use constituency-based systems, although some analysts believe that proportional representation (PR) is desirable to ensure the representation of non-territorially based groups, associations and interests (Barkan, 1995).

In some countries, a proportion of local council membership is appointed by the central government (e.g. one-third in Ghana). Such appointees are often perceived as central government representatives. Members of parliament are ex-officio council members in some countries as well. Women are given one-third representation in local councils in Uganda. The rationale for appointed representation is to promote political or social minorities and ensure availability of special skills in the local governments.

Structure and operation of local assemblies/councils

The structure and operation of political and administrative systems in local governments also impact on the effectiveness of accountability arrangements. The most important forms are the weak mayor and the strong mayor
systems. In the former, councillors elect the mayor/chair who may serve a largely ceremonial role. In the latter, the whole community elects the mayor/chair who serves in an executive capacity. The switch in 1996 from weak to strong mayors in Zimbabwean cities, which was assisted by the Municipal Development Programme for east and southern Africa, has helped to make local officials more accountable to political executives (Olowu and Smoke, 2001).

Elected councillors are expected to represent the interests of their local communities and to provide oversight over the executive. But in many instances in Africa, local executives exercise much more power than the legislature. The budgeting and auditing processes are designed to empower councils to carry out oversight functions. In many countries however, councillors have neither skills nor support facilities to enable them to effectively scrutinise local budgets or audit reports. Another problem is ineffective sanctions against errant local government executives. The result is that local government executives can become all-powerful—and use their powers to buy key legislative support. In this regard the practice of central government providing budgetary frameworks and the creation of separate audit bodies can be helpful if they are adequately resourced, as in Uganda and Nigeria (Gboyega, 1998; Olowona et al., 2000).

In order to enhance the capacity of local level executives, some countries invest in training local councillors on how to perform their jobs, especially oversight functions. Some countries also pay full-time salaries to councillors (Nigeria, Senegal) rather than sitting allowances (Uganda). Experience, for example in Cote D’Ivoire, suggests that conventional structures of local democratic governance need to be supplemented by efforts of local leaders to actively engage organised interests in their constituencies. The local media, civil society and political parties can help local democracy in this way (Blair, 2000).

Size of local governments

Large LGs are expected to facilitate the provision of basic community—and in some cases—regional services. Local government reforms have often included consolidation of local government units to improve capacity and viability. Many countries, however, are beginning to understand that large size may stimulate inter-ethnic conflict and widen the distance between citizens and local governments. Furthermore, countries are learning that it is unnecessary to have large size in order to take advantage of scale, this can be done though contracting and joint production of services (Ostrom et al., 1993). It is also possible to create several tiers of local authorities which may improve local political connections but requires additional fiscal and human resources. A recent South African consolidation is intended to improve class and racial integration, but it will also make government farther away from the people, as the Nigerians realised when they undertook reforms in 1976. In such cases, efforts can be made to create sub-local government entities but they may not be able to effectively link communities and local governments. Uganda’s solution was to create five local government tiers. This may maximise participation, but it could waste scarce resources and be cumbersome in terms of how to share responsibilities and resources among local levels (Olowona et al., 2000).

Direct voice mechanisms

Most of the voice mechanisms outlined above can only perform imperfectly, largely because they are based primarily on indirect participation of citizens via their elected representatives. A number of more direct voice accountability systems are being developed in some African countries and elsewhere. They include the following:

- **Participatory budgeting** is being used, for example, in Entebbe and Jinja municipalities in Uganda to better link citizens to the resource allocation process.
- **Service delivery surveys** are being used to better understand consumer needs in Senegal, Uganda and Ghana, among others.
- **User groups and contracts**, such as social funds committees in Malawi (Schroeder, 2000) and citizen service charts at regional and local levels in Namibia, are being used to ensure more sustainable service delivery.
- **Increased transparency in revenue sharing allocation and use** allows members of the public to better understand the volume and uses of resources the local governments receive from the centre. For example, allocations to
local governments are published in Uganda. Tracer studies also reveal the extent to which funds transferred to local government actually go to service production (World Bank, 2000).

- **Increased levels of local revenue autonomy** provide clearer links between local revenues and expenditures for local citizens in some cases, although this is sometimes resisted by both central and local governments (Paul, 1991; Guyer, 1992; Fjeldstad, 2001; Livingstone and Charlton, 2001).

- **Ombudsman/Complaints Bodies**, as used in Benin, Nigeria, Uganda and South Africa, for example, are extending citizens’ defenders to local government levels.

- **Local judicial or conflict resolution agencies**, including customary courts in many African countries, have proven to be one of the most effective forms of voice. Field surveys show that such bodies are amongst the most popular institutions that poor people trust for the inexpensive resolution of local conflict. Research in some selected Asian and African countries (e.g. Nepal, India, Senegal and Mali) on decentralisation of forestry management underscores the potential of devolved adjudication powers (Agarwala and Ribot, 1999; Ottemoeller, 2000; Narayan, 2002).

- **Traditional rulers and land boards** also provide a means of community voice. Traditional rulers are a major general voice mechanism in Francophone Africa, while they tend to be given ceremonial, cultural and land matters in Anglophone countries. A few countries, such as Botswana, have advisory boards on land matters (Ntsebeza, 1999).

- **Community governments** have evolved in some cases from community based organisations (CBOs) with immense social capital. New and improved structures of local governance can build from the bottom up and integrate both indigenous and modern structures (Olowu et al., 1991; Davidson, 1993; Dia, 1996; Olowu, 1999c; Narayan, 2002). CBOs are often self-financing—through membership contributions, *harambee* drives and powerful community unions whose reach extends beyond their communities and their nations (Barkan et al., 1991; Olowu and Erero, 1996). CBOs have been behind the success of township associations and the survival of communities when the state breaks down, as in Zaire or Somalia (Barkan et al., 1991; McGaffey, 1992; Shivakumar, 1999). Unfortunately, the potential of community governments is rarely tapped by the large-sized single structures of local government units in African countries.

Table 4 summarises the two sets of factors that encourage greater voice initiatives and effective responsiveness in public service provision.

### CONCLUSION

In spite of a post-colonial history of recentralisation, many African countries under a variety of pressures have recently transferred responsibilities, fiscal and human resources to local communities. The greatest challenge to

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<th>Conditions for effective citizen voice initiatives</th>
<th>Conditions for effective responsiveness of local government</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Broad membership base and alliance with middle class and elite groups</td>
<td>• Internal champions/reform entrepreneurs</td>
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<td>• Technical knowledge</td>
<td>• External pressure</td>
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<td>• Knowledge of official policy discourses and of effective alternatives</td>
<td>• Vertical slice strategies—commitment of top leadership to reform</td>
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<td>• Publicity—ability to effectively utilise the media</td>
<td>• Incentive systems rewarding participatory processes and client focus</td>
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<td>• Lots of time and starting small</td>
<td>• Involvement of street-level bureaucrats in policy making and planning of service delivery</td>
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<td>• Social capital—where trust and mutual support has been built</td>
<td>• Involvement of external actors in local monitoring systems</td>
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<td>• Horizontal coalitions with other bodies</td>
<td>• Linking agency income to performance—user fees, bonuses etc.</td>
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<td>• Formal standing in policy making arenas and in oversight agencies</td>
<td>• Investment in attitudinal change</td>
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<td>• Statutory rights to know and rights to redress</td>
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*Source: Adapted from Institute of Development Studies, 2001.*
the success of these efforts in bringing about the desired results of democratic decentralisation is how to build effective intergovernmental relations and local accountability mechanisms. Some relative successes have been recorded, but there are also instances of retreats into centralised solutions. In certain cases, such as Ghana and some dissolved Zimbabwean local governments, central officials are designated as chief executives of local governments. In other cases such as Nigeria, local government chief executives become political dinosaurs in terms of their relationship with the local legislative assemblies.

It is important to develop appropriate legal and/or constitutional mechanisms to define a suitable service delivery and resource mobilisation role for local governments. Equally important are adequate mechanisms for local government management and internal accountability. Provisions for external accountability, principally exit and voice mechanisms, are particularly critical. A major challenge is how to appropriately balance ‘upward’ and ‘downward’ accountability mechanisms. The former are necessary because of the weakness of local governments and the lack of effective control by their constituents in many countries. The latter are necessary because they are the basis of decentralised democratic governance.

Many institutions of local accountability in Africa do not yet meet two conditions required for effective voice mechanisms: citizens lack information and power to compel local politicians to account. Moreover, both central and local government systems have weak incentives to make service providers responsive to citizens’ voices. In the absence of effective voice institutions, many local governments in Africa remain weak and corrupt, and citizens have often resorted to violence or social resistance. Steps to develop voice mechanisms can be taken by higher levels, but there must be a political desire to do so. Pressure can also come from the bottom up through the efforts of community-based organisations. Some progress has certainly been made in Africa but many challenges remain in mobilising central political commitment to decentralisation and formalising informal governance mechanisms that emerge from local communities.

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