An Analysis for Improved Decentralised Planning At Local Level: A Case Study from Namibia and Other African Countries

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the improved decentralized planning at regional and local government level in Namibia and other African countries. Although regional and local government has been in existence in Namibia since the colonial times, it never existed in the communal areas of the territory. As a consequence of this, tribal authorities governed these parts of the territory. This underscored the importance of local government that time and also inhibited people from taking part in the decision-making process on matters pertaining to their lives. This reduced citizens to mere recipients of predetermined decisions of the colonial authorities. In some parts of the Police Zone, where regional and local government was practiced, local governments were mere extensions of the state in that all decisions were taken in colonial capitals and handed down to local governments for implementation. This effectively meant that regional and local government was subjected to central control, and also that, extensive centrally determined rules governed activities such as development planning and policy-making at sub-national levels. This research paper examines the central, regional and local government system in Namibia and other African countries its relevance and impact in poverty reduction, economic growth and sustainable development. After a review of the central, regional and local government system in Namibia as an example of political, fiscal and economic decentralization, it further examines the nature and evolution of these sectors of governance in Namibia as well as the roles and responsibilities of each of them in the Namibian context and other African countries. In examining the deficiencies of these governance systems in Namibia; one of the major issues seems to be a problem of accountability of local governments along with serious capacity issues.

Key words: Decentralisation, Capacity, Participation, Planning, Poverty, Politics, Regional councils, Local government, Corruption, Accountability

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many countries around the world have been attempting to create or strengthen sub-national governments for several reasons and with varying degrees of intention and success. Africa is no exception to either the decentralisation trend or the reality of its complexity and diversity. It is often claimed by some African states that decentralisation is effective for the reduction of poverty due to its inherent opportunities for higher popular participation and increased efficiency in public service delivery Mokau (2000:31) argue that there are several shortcomings attached to this concept, such as insufficient human and financial resources, low levels of accountability, corruption, patronage and central resistance to decentralization; these constrain the proper implementation of the reform, putting improvements in participation and efficiency at risk and ultimately jeopardising the intended impact on poverty.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The transfer of central government functions to sub national government level would in turn improve grass root participation by re-assigning decision making responsibilities to lower government units. Delegated directorate of education and maintenance section identifies their needs at the regional level and forward their plan to their respective ministries.

Despite these improvements poor integration of seconded staff has been observed in regional councils and it has impacted the effective and efficient delivery of services of delegated functions and this in turn undermine the objectives of decentralisation. Coupled with this is lack of coordination of delegated functions in terms of planning and managing of central government seconded staff personnel files. Planning of delegated functions is done separately from the regional council’s activities. Decentralisation reform in Namibia is never means to just shifting
responsibilities to regional councils but rather aims at transferring power and improve service delivery to communities. However the potential benefit of decentralisation may not be achieved to the fullest if central government seconded staff are not well integrated into Regional councils. If this continues, the preparatory phase of delegation will not achieve it purpose of preparing seconded staff for devolution phase. Seconded staff will not be integrated into the regional council in terms of reporting, planning and coordination of activities because they are still working as if they are deconcentrated. Although there are several issues and challenges experiences with the implementation of decentralisation, this research paper analyses the decentralized planning of central government and the seconded staff members at local government level.

1.3 Background to the research paper

Approximately 30 percent of total budget today is transferred to local governments as intergovernmental grants and about 27 percent of total public expenditure is are spent at the local level (Johnson 2001:33). These proportions are very high in regional and even interregional comparisons but they must be seen in the light of expenditure assignments. Since most service delivery functions have been decentralised, local-level financial requirements are high. Yet, fiscal decentralisation is pursued without a systematic costing of decentralized services in the initial stage of the process, and devolving new functions has been done without adequate compensation for the costs of these services. Even though transfers have increased incrementally, this has happened without proper consideration of the costs of local functions, and local governments have always complained about the inadequacy of their finances (Stewart and Brown 2011: 81). The principal problem with regard to local finances is that collection of local taxes and fees is extremely low, about one third to one half of a percent (?) below the potential. Reasons for this are multiple, and include the politicisation of local taxes, wide reluctance among the population to pay taxes due to arbitrary, regressive and sometimes forceful collection practices, lack of awareness of taxpayers, and a lack of administrative capacity at local level.

According to Sharma (2005) decentralisation has become a worldwide trend over the past decades. Sharma further assumed that in some African countries decentralisation has gathered the momentum from the early 1980 while in several African states expanding substantial resources on political and administrative decentralisation. Burns et al, (1994) stresses that in the Western developed countries; decentralisation is promoted as a means to streamline government administration under over tightening fiscal constraints and response to public dissatisfaction with inefficient and unresponsive government bureaucracy. A leading political scientist once characterised politics as “who gets what, when, and how”. Though it requires some refinement this is a good general definition, because it points well beyond government or the state to focus on other holders of power in the society and the ways that they achieve their goals and affect lives of others. In order to live together on a continuing basis, and to achieve various goals in life, people seek and employ power in ways that affect the lives of others. In other words, they engage in politics. They erect governments to maintain order, further mutual goals, and promote general well-being. (Anderson 2011:13) Around and within that framework, people continue to seek their individual and group goals. People can no more live without politics in the sense that they can forego food, love, or other basic human needs and desires. Politics is the activity by which people define themselves and their world and publicly seek their goals. By means of politics, people can create, maintain, or adapt to the context that allows them to pursue their goals and/ or defend what they have already gained (Hewood 2007:19).

Participation is broader than merely voting, running for, or holding public office. Furthermore, it is very difficult to choose not to participate. The very act of withdrawal or denial is a form of participation. It leaves the decision in the hands of others and grants them that power. Thus politics is a vast interactive process of power applications, which nearly always has consequences for others. From the ideology learned as a child to the present process of defining a “problem” and perhaps acting on it we are participants in the process or at least in its effects. The focus on what bears “directly” on the use of government will not always be clear-cut, but we can keep our definition manageable, without losing its scope, by using a political economy analysis (Bless and Higson-Smith, 1997).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Hoop (2005) analyzing the administration of regional government in Namibia cannot be divorced from the country’s painful history of colonialism and apartheid. In Namibia decentralisation started immediately after independent when the South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO) led Government realised that there is a need for people to participate in
decision that affect their life both at central, regional and local level. In this regard SWAPO Manifesto, (1989:18) states that “under a SWAPO led government, independent Namibia will have democratically elected local authorities, in both rural and urban areas, in order to give power to the people at grassroots level, to make decisions on matters affecting their lives. Before independence Namibia was administered by means of ethnic administration which usually administered people along their ethnic lines and that was considered as the second tier authority. This setup was changed immediately after independence with the implementation of the decentralisation policy. Namibia is divided into fourteen administrative regions and Windhoek as the capital city of Namibia.

According to the World Bank (2005) decentralisation in some African countries was brought due to the spread of multi part political systems and demands for more control or participation in political process, while in most east Asian countries decentralisation is brought due to political factors such as the collapse of authoritarian regime in Philippines and Indonesia and the structural changes such as continuous economic growth and urbanisation.

According to the decentralisation enabling Act (Act 33 of 2000) the Minister of Regional Local Government, Housing and Rural Development may decentralise to any Regional Councils and Local Authorities Councils any functions determined by him or her. The Minister should do this in consultation with the Minister responsible for the Line Ministry concerned. This is preceded by a Cabinet resolution and the government gazette notice.

During the delegation phase the Line Ministries are still budgeting for the functions and transfer the funds to the Regional Councils on monthly bases. The salary of delegated staff is paid and budgeted for by the line ministry. Delegated staff report under the structure of the Regional Council to the line ministry and they remain the staff of the line ministry and resort under the public service act of 1995.

Their main files remain with the line ministry and the ministries sent copy of the personnel file to the Regional Council were the staffs are based. Assets and other resources used for the execution of the functions are handed over to the regional councils and remain the assets of the line ministry. All the correspondence to and from the line ministries are addressed to the Chief Regional Officer and forwarded to the respective directorates of either education directorate or directorate of planning were maintenance function fall. The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry remains the accounting officer at this phase and the Regional Councils perform the functions as an agent on behalf of the Line Ministry. (Manuals, Procedures and Guidelines for the delegation phase of decentralisation, 2004).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research design

The research design focuses on fostering a relationship of trust and empathy between the research and the research participants. The data were collected by means of interviews, observation and document analysis as well as questionnaires. These were planned and conducted in a way that would encourage research participants feel that they can speak freely. De Vos & Schulze (2002:176) argue that in a qualitative approach, procedures are not formalised. The researcher opted for a qualitative approach to answer the research question which will be a meaningful contribution for policy makers. This research paper adopted qualitative research design as the research method to be used in analysing the improvement of decentralised planning at local government level in Namibia and other African countries. The semi-structured interview facilitates a strong rapport and empathy between those involved, allows greater flexibility of coverage, and enables the interview to enter new areas of discussion. According to Smith (1995), it also tends to produce richer data.

3.2 Research population

Melville & Goddard (1996:29) state that a population is any group that is the subject of research interest or want to study. It further says that it is not practical or possible to study an entire population thus; the researcher can determine the average of a group to consider for the research paper of this nature and to make general findings based on the sample. Therefore, the research population for the study consist of the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development, Regional councils and local authorities in Namibia.

2.3 Sampling Procedures

The research paper used purposive sampling in selecting respondents at central government and regional councils. The target sample size was sixty (60) respondents were interviewed at central, regional and local levels.
3.4. Research Instruments

The researcher used multiple instruments and techniques within the qualitative approach of data collection. The following research instruments were employed: a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis such as the Decentralisation enabling Act of 2000 was explored. The study used the in-depth individual interviews to collect data to get a deeper understanding of individual’s perception and experience.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Both primary and secondary data were employed to collect information from the respondents. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents and the selected respondents before personal interviews were conducted. Personal interview were used as the data-collection method and a face-to-face setting took place between the interviewer and the interviewee. The researcher used semi-structured interviews and the responses were recorded on a tape-recorder and then transcribed.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data was presented through tables and charts and it was interpreted in a narrative form. Face to face interviews was tape recorded and then transcribed. The researcher classified similar responses and put them into themes and categories. This helped the researcher to examine the interview transcript and documentary notes before identifying the pattern and organising the data into categories.

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