

LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE GAMBIA

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Abstract

Local government and decentralisation in The Gambia has been part of a major public sector reform instituted by the Government of The Gambia in partnership with its relevant stakeholders to promote participatory development and the effective eradication of poverty. Local government and decentralisation have been the cornerstone of major government policies such as The Program for Accelerated Growth and Employment (PAGE), a national blueprint which aimed to promote growth and economic development. Despite some successes, there remain some major challenges which continue to impede the effective implementation of local government and decentralisation policies. In this article, we will highlight the local government structures in the Gambia, their roles and the extent of their autonomy. We will highlight some major achievements by these structures and some of the challenges they are faced with in their pursuit to ensure effective decentralisation in The Gambia.

Keywords: Local government; Decentralisation; Autonomy; Development; Local Government Authorities

YEREL YÖNETİM: GAMBİYE ÜZERİNE BİR DURUM ÇALIŞMASI

Özet

Gambiya'daki yerel yönetim ve ademi merkezîyetçilik, Gambiya Hükümeti tarafından ilgili paydaşlarının ortaklığı ile başlatılmış, katılımcı kalkınmayı ve yoksulluğun etkin bir biçimde ortadan kaldırılmasını teşvik eden büyük kamu sektörü reformunun önemli bir parçası olmuştur. Yerel yönetim ve ademi merkezîyetçilik; büyümeyi, istihdamı ve ekonomik kalkınmayı teşvik edici ulusal bir yol haritası olan Hızlandırılmış Büyüme ve İstihdam Programı (PAGE) gibi ana hükümet politikalarının temel taşlarını teşkil etmektedir. Elde edilmiş bazı başarılarla rağmen, yerel hükümet ve ademi merkezîyet politikalarının etkili bir şekilde uygulanmasını engelleyen bazı zorluklar varlığını sürdürmeye devam etmektedir.

Bu makalede, Gambiya'daki yerel yönetim yapıları, rolleri ve özerklik dereceleri vurgulanacaktır. Ayrıca, bu yapılar vasıtasıyla elde edilen başarılarla ve Gambiya'da etkili bir ademi merkezîyetçiliğin sağlanması için mücadele edilen bazı zorluklara da değinilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yerel yönetim; Ademi merkezîyet; Özerklik; Kalkınma; Yerel yönetim

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, there have been numerous debates on the roles and contributions of local governments in the development process. The roles and contributions of local governments have evolved tremendously due mainly to the massive adoption and implementation of decentralisation policies in many regions of the world, especially in developing countries. The decentralisation of development policies and programmes to local institutions has been emphasized in developing countries due to the increasing recognition that expensive administrative responsibilities cannot be carried out by the central government alone, that socioeconomic progress requires active people's participation, that resource mobilization necessitates local initiatives, and that devolution of power is a precondition for a democratic mode of governance (M. Shamsul Haque, 1997:1). Munawar Alam and Rishi Athreya (2008) further highlighted that:

“African countries have undergone waves of decentralisation reforms since their independence. The past two decades have seen a real trend towards shifting powers to sub-national governments. The factors motivating decentralisation include securing democratic governance and hence legitimacy at the sub-national level, managing intra-state conflicts and expediting development. The implementation of the decentralisation policies beginning in the late 1980s has been inhibited by inadequate resources and ineffective collaboration. The weakness of decentralisation reforms in Africa is often caused by lack of attention to the process of implementation and management of the reforms” (M. Alam & R. Athreya, 2008: 27).

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Historically, governments were to a large extent responsible for the provision of basic social services. They were partly assisted in this responsibility by non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and charity organisations. However, with the emergence of global and domestic economic problems, M. Shamsul Haque (1997) stated that with the diminishing role of the state in programs such as poverty eradication, employment generation, public health, and basic education, the role of local institutions in addressing the needs of local communities has increased (ibid).

Given the significant role it plays in improving lives and livelihoods of local people, strengthening participatory democracy, it is essential to understand what local government truly means. The term local government, unlike many other terms is not a contested term. Definitions given by various scholars seem to point out the same thing: participatory development. Cramer W., & Persaud P., (2004) defined local governments as "an initiative by which the central government has clearly demonstrated the political will to transfer more authority and responsibilities to local government bodies to administer the affairs of their communities" (Cramer W., & Persaud P.,2004:7). They further observed that: "this political commitment, however, is more than just wishful thinking on the part of central government functionaries. It must indicate tangible evidence such as the development of the requisite constitution and legal framework that would create an enabling environment for such a system to function (ibid). Furthermore, this must also be accompanied by free and fair elections, gender equality in term of representation and involvement of minority groups in the local governance processes. After examining the critical role that government can play to ensure the success of local governments, local governments too have a critical role to play to ensure that the needs of local people are efficiently and effectively met. Cramer W., & Persaud P., (2004) observed that:

For local government decentralisation to provide the desired results, local governments must possess the requisite technical, human and financial capabilities to sustain a high quality of public service delivery at a satisfactory level to citizens. This is important because the success of local democracy would be measured by the ability of local governments to improve the quality of citizens lives and the efficient performance of functions, even with limited financial resources. For this, well trained and qualified staff would be required rather than party loyalist who for the most have no idea what local government is and how it functions and frankly do not care. Related to this is the local financial position. Local government must receive appropriate intergovernmental transfers to support the work in which central government has an interest, but at the same time must be able to generate revenue from local sources to carry out its local responsibilities (Cramer W., & Persaud P., 2004:7).

Furthermore, the UNDP defined local government or decentralisation as:

"The restructuring or reorganization of authority so that there is a system of co-responsibility between institutions of governance at the central, regional and local levels according to the principle of subsidiarity, thus increasing the overall quality and effectiveness of the system of governance, while increasing the authority and capacities of sub-national levels. Decentralization could also be expected to contribute to key elements of good governance, such as increasing people's opportunities for participation in economic, social and political decisions; assisting in developing people's capacities; and enhancing government responsiveness, transparency and accountability" (UNDP, 1997:4).

1.1. Objective of the study

The aim of this paper is highlight the historical background of local government and decentralisation in The Gambia, the structures of local governments in The Gambia and their functions and the challenges of local government and decentralization in The Gambia.

1.2. Methodology

This paper has been written based on secondary data. Most of the data presented in this article is qualitative in nature and the qualitative descriptive method was used to analyse all data presented.

2. LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES IN THE GAMBIA: AN OVERVIEW

The Gambia is the smallest country on the African mainland. It is surrounded by Senegal, except for a 60 km Atlantic Ocean front (Hughes, Arnold& David Perfect ,2008). Although small in size, The Gambia harbors a wealth of terrestrial, coastal, marine and wetland habitats and species of local,

national, regional and global significance, making Gambia an attractive tourist destination and a hub for trade in the region. The country has a population of 1.8 million with a significant portion living abroad (GBOS, 2013). The current population has been growing at a fairly high rate of 2.8 % per year over the last decade (World Bank, 2013). The main languages of the country are English, Mandinka, Wolof, Jola and Fula, and 90 % of Gambians are Muslim (GBOS, 2014). Since its independence, little has been done to improve the living conditions of the Gambian population. The Gambia is only ranked at 172nd place for human development, and 70 % of its population lives below the poverty threshold (UNDP, 2014)

Looking into the history of decentralisation in The Gambia, Munawar Alam and Rishi Athreya (2008) noted that:

“Decentralisation in The Gambia was initiated in the late 1980s in consultation with international agencies such as the UNDP, EDF, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the World Bank. However, the momentum of the reform process has waxed and waned due to domestic issues. In 1986 the Gambia Government worked together with UNECA on organising a high-level workshop. In the early 1990s the UNDP commissioned a study to make recommendations on decentralisation in the country. The UNDP report was submitted to the government in 1993. In 1994 the Ministry of Local Government, together with other concerned ministries, submitted a joint paper that was approved by the Cabinet in April 1994” (M. Alam & R. Athreya, 2008:28)

Furthermore, the National Policy for decentralisation and local government observes that:

For administrative purposes, the country is divided into five administrative regions headed by Regional Governors, appointed by the President. The other two regions; Banjul and Kanifing are municipalities which are headed by Mayors who are elected to office. The five regions are further divided into 36 Districts headed by Chiefs. Chieftaincy posts, governed by customary law had hitherto been traditional appointments, which were hereditary. The 1997 Constitution however brought about changes in this situation to allow for the appointment of Chiefs by the President. At the village level, eligibility for being Alkali (village head) was predicated on among other things on yard ownership, thus women were nominally excluded from elections as they generally do not qualify as yard owners under customary laws. However, this is changing as women Alkalis are emerging (MLRG, 2014:11).

Since the attainment of Independence in 1965 from Great Britain, successive governments have in one way or the way initiated and promoted issues of local government and decentralisation in their respective national policy agendas. This was basically as a result of ensuring democratic governance at all levels and the popular demand from people which to a large extent arose because of the experiences from colonial governments in which power was highly centralised and exclusive.

Decentralisation in The Gambia was therefore conceived within the framework of the country’s local government and decentralisation reform program. As an alternative country-wide development strategy, it was derived from a broad consultative process that involved all local, national and international stakeholders designed to strengthening local government in order to facilitate more effective citizen participation in governance and accountability in the delivery of public services as the basis for decentralization(MLRG, 2014:6).

Having gain significant momentum at post independent period in The Gambia, the current national policy for decentralisation and local government (2015-2024) observed that the government of the first republic had some issues with their quest to promote local government and decentralisation due to domestic issues. However, the coming of the government of the second republic, they injected vigour and dynamism.

Before going further into the structures of local government in The Gambia, it is significant to note that local government in The Gambia is adequately supported by institutional and legal frameworks. Munawar Alam (2009) in his work entitled ‘Decentralisation in The Gambia’ observed that local government in The Gambia is based on the 1997 constitution, sections 193-194 and 214(3); the Local Government Act (2002); the Local Government Amendment Acts (2004, 2006 and 2007); and the Local Government Finance and Audit Act (2004). These legal frameworks instituted by the Government of The Gambia has helped paved the way for the creation of various structures of local governments such as Municipal councils headed by Mayors, Regional Governors offices headed Regional Governors,

Local government councils headed by councillors and Village heads headed by Village 'Alkalos'. The roles of these local government structures are clearly spelt out in either the constitution of the the Local Government Act. Having instituted these structures, the constitution further prescribed the provision of central government grants to councils and gave councils the authority to provide basic services in education, health, agriculture, road maintainance, sanitation and animal husbandry, with a concomitant transfer of resources from central to local governments (Munawwar Alam, 2009:8).

Given the fact that these local government structures are guided by a comprehensive national policy, it also significant to highlight the policy actions that guide the governments policy objectives towards the promotion of local government and decentralisation. This will help us to adequately understand why some structures execute their functions in a certain way.

These policy actions are in line with current trends and realities and they include: political decentralization; administrative decentralization; fiscal decentralization; decentralized development planning and budgeting; local economic development; popular participation and accountability; the involvement of private sector non-state actors in local governance and promoting the rights-based approach to development (MLRG, 2014:7).

After given a brief background on the Gambia and the emergence of local government, the subsequent parts of this article will examine the structures of local government. It will highlight their mandates, revenue earning methods, election and level of autonomy. The challenges they face will be highlighted, too. Some possible recommendations will be highlighted at the end.

3. MUNICIPAL COUNCILS & AREA COUNCILS

The Municipal councils otherwise known as Municipality were established in The Gambia by the Independent Electoral Comission in accordance to Article 192 of the constitution of the Republic of The Gambia. The Mayors are elected through elections of which residents of the area elect their Mayors. In the Gambia, the Mayor as in the case of Banjul and Kanifing Municipality are responsible for the day to day running of the Municipality. Futhermore, under the local government areas are different wards which are rerepresented by Councillors who are elected by people living in the concerned areas. These elected Councillors work under the Municipalities through specialized committees such as health, agriculture, environment, education, youth, women and children and sports and culture. The municipal councils in The Gambia established a Technical Advisory Committee that will seek to advice the council on issues related to the improvement of the general welfare of people living in the area. Furthermore, there are Ward Development Committees and under them are Sub Ward Development Committees in which councillors represent their people. The municipalities based on the report from the Sub Ward Development Committees intervene in local communities under their purview to respond to the development needs of people living in the area.

With respect to the revenue earning methods of Municipalities in The Gambia, they normally raise money from daily market fees collected from vendors, business trade licences and fees, land rates, car park fees and subvention from central government. These funds are later invested into communities through the construction of public taps, community centers, roads and community markets.

Now concerning Area councils, they are headed by a Chairman who is mandated with the task of running the day to the day activities of the Area Council. In the Gambia, there are 5 area councils namely, Basse Area Council, Mansakonko Area Council, Kerewan Area Council, Jangjangbureh Area Council and Kuntaur Area Council. These area councils were responsible for the collection of rates and duties which were later paid to the central government.

4. REGIONAL GOVERNORS OFFICES

Now moving into the specificities on the role of regional Governors, the local government act of 2002 provides that the Governor shall represent the President and the government accordingly and can exercise executive powers in the area (Local government Act, 2002:36). Furthermore, the act provides that the Governor can advice the Minister of Local Government on issues that affect the area and as well policies and programmes. The local government act of 2002 also provides that Governors shall be responsible for the inspection and monitoring of activities of local government authorities and can carry out functions assigned by the President or National Assembly (ibid).

Concerning the financial autonomy of Regional Governors Offices, the local government act of 2002 provides that every council has an autonomy over its financial matters.

5. TRADITIONAL RULERS (ALKALOS & CHIEFS)

In the Gambia, the Alkalos (Village Head) and Chiefs (District Traditional Head) commonly known as Seyfolu represents the traditional authorities in the governance process. The role of the Seyfolu has been purely traditional and have been existing since British rule as representatives of the British government in the protectorate. The local government act of 2002 provides that the President shall appoint a District Seyfolu in consultation with the Minister of Local Governments. The District Seyfolu is also responsible for the promotion of peace and good order in their districts. Given the fact that their roles are traditional roles, they are also responsible for the promotion and protection of customs and the wellbeing of their people. Furthermore, the Seyfolu play a significant role in resolving conflicts arisen from land disputes, marriages and among communities

Now in trying to examine the role of Alkalos, it is essential to note that their roles have been purely traditional and are the custodians of tradition and culture in the various villages they head.

In line with the local government and decentralisation changes in The Gambia, there has been some changes in the Alkaloship as a structure of the local government and decentralisation process. The local government act of 2002 further expanded the roles of the Alkalos. The local government act of 2002 provides that: the Alkalo shall promote good order, peace and stability in his or her village, promote general economic development of his or her village, safeguard the customs and traditions of his or her village and shall perform other task assigned by the Council or District authority (Local government act, 2002: 40).

Having highlighted the local government structures in The Gambia, the legal framework that guides their operations and the roles they play, the next section of this article will present the challenges that local governments face in the process of executing their roles and some policy actions.

6. CHALLENGES AND POLICY ACTIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND DECENTRALISATION IN THE GAMBIA

To begin with, it is significant to acknowledge that local government and decentralisation can only be successful if it is accompanied by fiscal decentralisation. However, in The Gambia, this has been a major impediment in the decentralisation process. Local governments in The Gambia are required to raise revenue from taxation which is to be accompanied by subvention from central government. Furthermore, the reassigning of revenue collection by the government to semi-autonomous agencies such as The Gambia Tourism Board, The Gambia Revenue Authority and the Gambia Roads Authority has resulted to local governments not been able to provide basic social services to its population.

Furthermore, the issue of fiscal decentralisation affects rural local authorities more as compared to those in urban areas. This is evident from a study conducted by the Ministry of Local Government during the development of the National Policy for Decentralisation. They argued that:

Fiscal Decentralisation has also posed significant challenges for some of the poorer local authorities, especially those in the rural areas, and hence, capacity to undertake their functions and responsibilities. Due to the relatively very weak economic base in rural areas, most rural councils do not have credible taxable services and activities, such that even in the context of real devolution, they would still not be able to raise a lot of revenue from local sources.

In this respect, the decentralisation process in The Gambia has the potential of creating and exacerbating inequalities that would promote the development of already rich Local Government Authorities, where important fiscal and economic resources are generated unless government lives by its commitment for the transfer of 'equalisation grants' to poorer Local Government Authorities (MLRG, 2014: 25).

The problem of fiscal decentralisation is further strengthened by the absence of structures and mechanisms that ensure that government is committed to its role and also, ensuring that when funds is transferred from central government, the money is adequately utilized. In order to cope with this

problem, both central government and local government must collaborate to establish strategies and mechanisms that will seek to guide fiscal decentralization with the aim of ensuring proper coordination between central government and local government in terms of revenue and expenditure and also, provide a framework that can facilitate easy borrowing by local governments. Furthermore, both central government and local government must seek to implement agreements concerning fiscal decentralisation. When this is done, local governments will be able to execute their plans and provide essential services to local populations. Local government councils should also develop fund raising and resource mobilisation plans with the aim of raising funds for their plans. Local governments can partner with NGO's and other relevant stakeholders in this process.

Moving further, another problem that continues to affect the effective implementation of local government and decentralisation is the problem of popular participation and accountability. The low level of participation is due mainly to the low returns that local populations get from local governments in terms of development thus, resulting to their low interest. In order to promote popular participation and accountability in local governance, local governments must constantly inform all its relevant stakeholders about its policies and plans. This will keep stakeholders informed and may increase participation. There is also the need to increase civic awareness among local populations so that they can understand the importance of local governments and the roles they can play to alleviate poverty and underdevelopment. On the side of accountability, techniques must be developed by local authorities to ensure that they are accountable to local communities.

Concerning rights based approach to development, women and children constitute the most underserved group as far as services provided by local governments are concerned. This is to a large extent is as a result of their non representation at the decision making level of local governments. Therefore, there is the need to promote women participation in the governance process through education and affirmative action. There is also the need to develop programs by local government authorities with the aim of protecting the rights of children and ensuring that their needs are adequately catered for at council level.

The participation of the private sector and as well as non-state actors is very significant in the success of local governments and decentralisation. However, there has been the lack of proper harmonization of activities between local governments and the non state actors in The Gambia. Therefore, there is the need to develop an effective framework that will seek to define their relationship and ensuring that local governments benefit from non state actors. Moreover, there is the need for local governments to harmonize their activities with NGO's and non state actors.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For local government and decentralisation to be successful, there must be adequate government will to ensure its success. Government must seek to ensure that all systems, mechanisms and procedures needed for the effective realisation of decentralisation are in place. Furthermore, the participation of people is crucial. Therefore, local government authorities must seek to ensure that local people are effectively engaged in their entire decentralisation process. This will help to promote a sense of ownership and enhance sustainability. With regards to fiscal decentralisation, central government must be committed in its mandate to ensure that there is timely transfer of subvention to various local government councils. Moreover, local government authorities must seek to diversify their revenue. This can be done through proper fund raising and resource mobilization in partnership with NGO's and non state actors. In term of representation, women and children must constitute the top priority of local governments since they are the most underserved group. Local governments must strengthen their partnerships with NGO's and the private sector for the effective implementation of local government and decentralisation policies.

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