

## **Decentralization for Participatory Development in Uganda: Limitations and Prospects**

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SEVERAL GOVERNMENTS in Sub-Saharan Africa have been embarking on economic and institutional reforms since the 1980s. A growing attention is paid to decentralization as a promising institutional reform to advance political democratization and to promote socio-economic development. Among such countries, Uganda is one of the few which has been recording consistent improvement of macro economic growth and democratic governance since the current National Resistance Movement (NRM) government took power in 1986 under the leadership of Yoweri Museveni.

This article examines the process of decentralization in Uganda in order to identify policy achievements so far, as well as unfulfilled tasks for the near future. The political aim of the NRM government to pursue decentralization is to widen its support by increasing people's participation in decision-making process through the local government system. By so doing, it is intended that social and economic development would become more effective and would contribute to the reduction of persistent poverty in the country. Decentralization efforts of the government, with donor support, have especially been accelerated since 1993. With the Local Government Act 1997, Uganda now has a fairly clear local government structure, which has created opportunities for different stakeholders to consult and negotiate mutually agreeable outcomes. Yet there is a serious challenge in the near future to turn these opportunities into sustainable improvement of local livelihood. Only then would the exercise of changing a long-lasting centralized administrative structure to a decentralized one is really successful.

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## EVOLUTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

### 1. *Historical background of decentralization in Uganda*

When the NRM was still “in the bush” fighting against the previous regime in the middle of the 1980s, they established the Resistance Council (RC) system in areas where they brought under their control. The NRM used the RC system primarily for mobilizing support of the people to fight the guerrilla war. The RC was a five-tier hierarchical structure of Councils. The grass roots RC 1 was at the village level; RC 2 for parish; RC 3 for sub-county; RC 4 for county; and RC 5 for district. The people at grassroots elected their representatives as Councillors at RC 1. There were nine Councillors at RC 1 in charge of various aspects of local matters including information, mobilization, education, finance, security, and concerns of youth and women. These RC 1 Councillors in turn elected the same number of Councillors for RC 2. This process was repeated up to the level of RC 5. When the NRM took power in 1986, the new government introduced this RC system nationwide.<sup>1</sup>

The NRM regime also started to investigate what sort of local government system would be desirable in Uganda, whose recent history was associated with political dictatorship, economic misery and social collapse. The NRM government established the Commission on this matter. The Commission considered that the objectives of decentralization would include: (a) to put public services closer to the people; (b) to reduce tedious administrative/ bureaucratic procedures; (c) to make services suitable to local needs and conditions; (d) to improve accountability by close local

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<sup>1</sup> Brett, *Providing for the Rural Poor: Institutional Decay and Transformation in Uganda* (Sussex, 1992) especially Chapter 3.

scrutiny; and (e) to contribute to the process of capacity building of local institutions.<sup>2</sup> The possible approaches to decentralization would range between the two extremes of (a) deconcentration by which administrative duties were shifted from central government to local governments without necessary transfer of autonomy to the latter, and (b) devolution which would be usually accompanied by the increased autonomy of local governments. After considering various options, the Commission in 1987 recommended that the RC should not be a state nor a NRM organ but “democratic organs of the people” in order to establish “effective, viable and representative Local Authorities.”<sup>3</sup> This was in practice an attempt to adopt a middle way of the two extremes of superficial deconcentration and full devolution.

In 1993, a first group of thirteen districts were decentralized. This was also the year that the Local Government (Resistance Councils ) Statute, 1993 was passed. This Statute firmly provided the legal basis for the earlier practices of the RC system, and rationalized the confused line of authority caused by the five-tiered hierarchy. It also clarified that the public servants are answerable to the respective RC.

In the meantime, another significant political and social exercise was embarked to develop a new Constitution for the country. After a series of debates, the new Constitution, adopted in 1995, advocates, among others, principles of democracy, national unity, human rights, role of the people in development, gender equality, and environmental protection. Its Chapter 11 describes the principles and structures of the Local Government. Following this new Constitution, especially its Article 206, the Local Government Act 1997 was enacted. This fairly

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<sup>2</sup> For general accounts of decentralization, see for instance, World Bank, *Rethinking Decentralization in Developing Countries* (Washington, D.C., 1998); Alec Ian Gershberg, ‘Decentralisation, Recentralisation and Performance Accountability: Building and Operational Useful Framework for Analysis,’ *Development Policy Review* (London, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> The Republic of Uganda, *Commission of the Inquiry into the Local Government System* (Kampala,

comprehensive Act now provides the legal framework of the current local government system by laying out various responsibilities and functions of local government in relation to the central government.

The recent government development plans take decentralization into full account. For instance, *Background to the Budget 1998-99*, one of the essential government documents to testify development priorities, states that urgent discussions are needed to secure appropriate budgeting for all districts in order for them to provide satisfactory services to the people.<sup>4</sup> Another example is *Poverty Reduction Action Plan*, according to which decentralization is one of the critical institutional frameworks to achieve its intended target to reduce Uganda's poverty<sup>5</sup> by half by 2017 by more cost-effective allocation of essential services, particularly health, education, agricultural production, feeder roads, and safe drinking water.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout these years, the Decentralization Secretariat, created in 1992, has been vigorously advancing the decentralization by providing resources and technical support to various parties. This is a semi-autonomous organization of the Ministry of Local Government. Its training programmes target variety of stakeholders: civil servants, Councillors and the concerned citizens. The Secretariat also prepares and issues various manuals and guide books to enable the Councillors (politicians) and administrators to manage various duties. The Secretariat, with the support of donors, especially United Nations Development Programme and Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), has been generally performing satisfactorily despite shortages of financial resources and manpower. The role the Secretariat is now shifting from the earlier

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<sup>4</sup> The Republic of Uganda, *Background to the Budget 1998/99*, (Kampala, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> UNDP, *Uganda Human Development Report 1997*, (Kampala, 1997), especially Chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> The Republic of Uganda, *Poverty Eradication Action Plan Volume I Final Draft*, (Kampala, 1998).

emphasis on sensitization to the consolidation of the implementation results of decentralization.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Changes from the RC to the LC system

With the Local Government Act 1997, the Resistance Council (RC) was renamed the Local Council (LC). This signified the end to the legacies of the guerrilla war, and was a reflection of the government orientation that the rehabilitation from the long lasted civil strife was over and the country would need to embark on critical political and developmental issues with a forward looking manner. The name of the legislature, National Resistance Council, was also renamed as the Parliament.<sup>8</sup>

The LC system introduced fairly significant changes, which clarified the earlier confused line of accountability and streamlined the procedures. The Council now is the supreme political organ in its jurisdiction. At the district LC 5 level for instance, Chairperson, who is the political head of the Council, forms the executive wing together with the core members of the Councillors in important functions. The core Councillors are called Secretaries of sector committees: finance and administration, production and extension services, education and sports, health and environment, and works and technical services. The Council also forms a legislative forum where all elected Councillors serve as representatives of the people. The technical staff under the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), who is the head of the civil service, implements policy decisions of

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<sup>7</sup> Soren Villadsen. 'Decentralization of Governance,' in Soren Villadsen and Francis Lubanga ed.

*Democratic Decentralisation in Uganda: A New Approach to Local Governance.* (Kampala, 1996)

<sup>8</sup> For the historical background, see Anthony Regan, 'A Comparative Framework for Analysing Uganda's Decentralisation Policy' in P. Langseth, J. Katorobo, E. Brett, and J. Munene ed. *Uganda: Landmarks in Rebuilding a Nation* (Kampala, 1995); Anthony Regan, 'Decentralisation Policy: Reshaping State and Society' in Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle, *Developing Uganda* (Oxford, 1998); Soren Villadsen and Francis Lubanga, *ibid.*

the Council.

In addition, there were significant changes to improve the previous RC system. First, while the RC was a five-tier system, the LC has basically three levels. Although there are still LC 2 and LC 4 units (which are equivalent to RC 2 and 4 respectively), they are not essential in delivering public services. Since RC 3 is the focal point for such services, it enjoys the corporate status, and is now the target of various institutional building efforts.

Second, in the RC system, RC 1 leaders were elected by universal suffrage of adults by lining behind the candidates. This form of direct election did not apply to the upper level elections. Therefore as the Councils moved from grassroots to upper levels along the hierarchy, the degree of reflecting public views was reduced. In the current LC system, the range for direct election has significantly enlarged. Additionally, secret ballot is a more common method of voting with the exception of selecting women representatives by lining behind the candidates. Most important is that the election of LC 5 Chairperson, equivalent to the governor in many other countries, is now a secret ballot of universal adult suffrage.

Third, women's representation has significantly improved. While minimum requirement of female representation in the RC system was only one out of nine Councillors, now it is at least one third of the entire representatives.

Fourth, during the RC system, discharging responsibilities as Councillors were totally dependent on voluntarism without any official remuneration. Now core members of the LC are paid full time at LC 3 and 5 levels.<sup>9</sup> This has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the improvement of work incentives of the Councillors.

Fifth, reflecting experiences of earlier districts to manage delegated funds by the central

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<sup>9</sup> This include, Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, five Secretaries in charge of key activities in the executive wing, and Speaker and Vice Speaker of the legislative wing of the Council.

government, the central government now articulates the means to provide financial support to local governments without which autonomous activities cannot be carried out.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF CURRENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

### 1. *Political decentralization*

With decentralization, ordinary people have opportunities to participate in decision-making process for the first time since colonial rule was imposed. This is a very significant change because before decentralization people felt little relationship with the administrative offices except being asked to pay taxes and other duties. Now the people have the opportunity to exercise their rights.

Reflecting this appreciation and enthusiasm by the people, the level of participation in electing their representatives appears to be generally high. Although, the level of turnout varies from one type of election to another, it seems that the turnout tends to be high on elections of chairperson of LC 3 and LC 5, while the tendency is low for elections of women candidates perhaps especially at lower administrative units. Nonetheless, elections are important enough for the people to realize the significance of decentralization quickly.

After the Local Government Act 1997 became effective, a series of local elections were held throughout the country in 1997 and 98. The election results indicate the high turn over, and many representatives elected during the recent election process are new. Voters did not prefer the incumbent to stay on leadership positions when they felt their representatives were incompetent, and/or corrupt. Among the forty-five posts of chairpersons of LC 5, only three incumbent

candidates were reelected.<sup>10</sup>

In the current system, local political leaders have a fair amount of autonomy. They are elected by their constituency, and they are held accountable in managing their jurisdiction. Yet on the other hand, a new post of NRM Representative, introduced by the government in 1998, may create some obstacles for full autonomy. This new post is considered to reinforce the polity of the NRM as a movement to encompass various political positions as complete as possible.<sup>11</sup> The NRM justifies this because political parties in the past tended to create divisions of the people along ethnic and religious lines, and thereby contributed to the prolonged civil war in Uganda. Yet for those who oppose this type of political arrangement, this new post is yet another reinforcement of NRM's position at the cost of the opponents. It is too early to judge whether the creation of this new post would affect the autonomy of political leaders, especially those who are against the NRM.

## *2. Personnel management*

Currently, responsibilities for managing personnel fully reside with the district administration. For this purpose the District Service Commission (DSC) was formed with the mandate to hire and fire personnel. In theory, the DSC can recruit staff considered necessary to manage their daily duties more effectively. The reality is, however, different. Many of the newly recruited staff by the local governments in the last couple of years are those who had to fill vacancies created by the enactment of the Local Government Act 1997. When the law was

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<sup>10</sup> There are thirty eight new chair persons and four are unidentifiable. Information by the Electoral Commission in Kampala.

<sup>11</sup> In Uganda, the current government forbids the activities of the political parties, although the existence of political parties can be admitted.

passed, the government reorganized the local government structure, and created certain new types of posts including Assistant CAO. Therefore the funds were used to fill these posts first. In reality, because most of the districts are suffering from severe shortage of funds, they cannot easily have additional manpower, even though decentralization has increased the amount of public services provided by local governments. For instance, most of the districts wish to recruit more medical and teaching staff working at dispensaries and schools, yet this sort of new recruitment is rare.

Most of the personnel appear not to be fully pleased with the current situation. Almost all of them did not choose to be where they are now. Civil servants were, in fact, one of the most vocal opponents to decentralization because they considered that decentralization would block the prospect of their promotion within the central government. Along with decentralization, civil service reform has been pursued by the government with donor support.<sup>12</sup> This reform monetized all the fringe benefits that civil servants used to be entitled. While civil servants previously enjoyed free transport and accommodation, this is no longer the case. Instead, they can receive augmented salary payment. This message is not always clearly understood by civil servants particularly in remote areas, and some of them still show resentment to decentralization.

On the other hand, some improvements can also be seen. The release of payment is now more prompt than before since decentralization was introduced.<sup>13</sup> This is because district administration can manage their funds without referring the details to the central government. The prompt payment undoubtedly improves the moral of the personnel. Therefore, decentralization does not always create negative consequences for local civil servants.

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<sup>12</sup> See for instance, Peter Langseth, 'Civil Service Reform in Uganda: Lessons Learned,' *Public Administration and Development*, (London, 1995).

### *3. Financial resources and autonomy*

This is probably most crucial to make any decentralization effective. Without delegation of powers to generate and spend significant funds, autonomous activities rarely take place. The resource base of local governments is, however, very limited. On national average, only 13.2% of the revenue can be locally generated.<sup>14</sup> Local governments thus depend heavily on central government transfers. Figure 1 shows that the total amount of funds being transferred from central to local governments has steadily been increasing from FY 1993/94 to 1997/98. Yet in the first two years, the number of the districts under decentralization was limited, and it is only after FY 1995/96 that all districts receive funds from the central government. Nonetheless, the Figure shows the steady increase of central government transfers to the district administrations.

There are number of reasons for the shortage of funds available to local authorities. First, the attitude of the central government toward local governments on financial autonomy still appears to be ambiguous. It was the recurrent expenditures, which have been decentralized. It is only in FY 1999/2000 in which a limited portion of development expenditures will be decentralized.

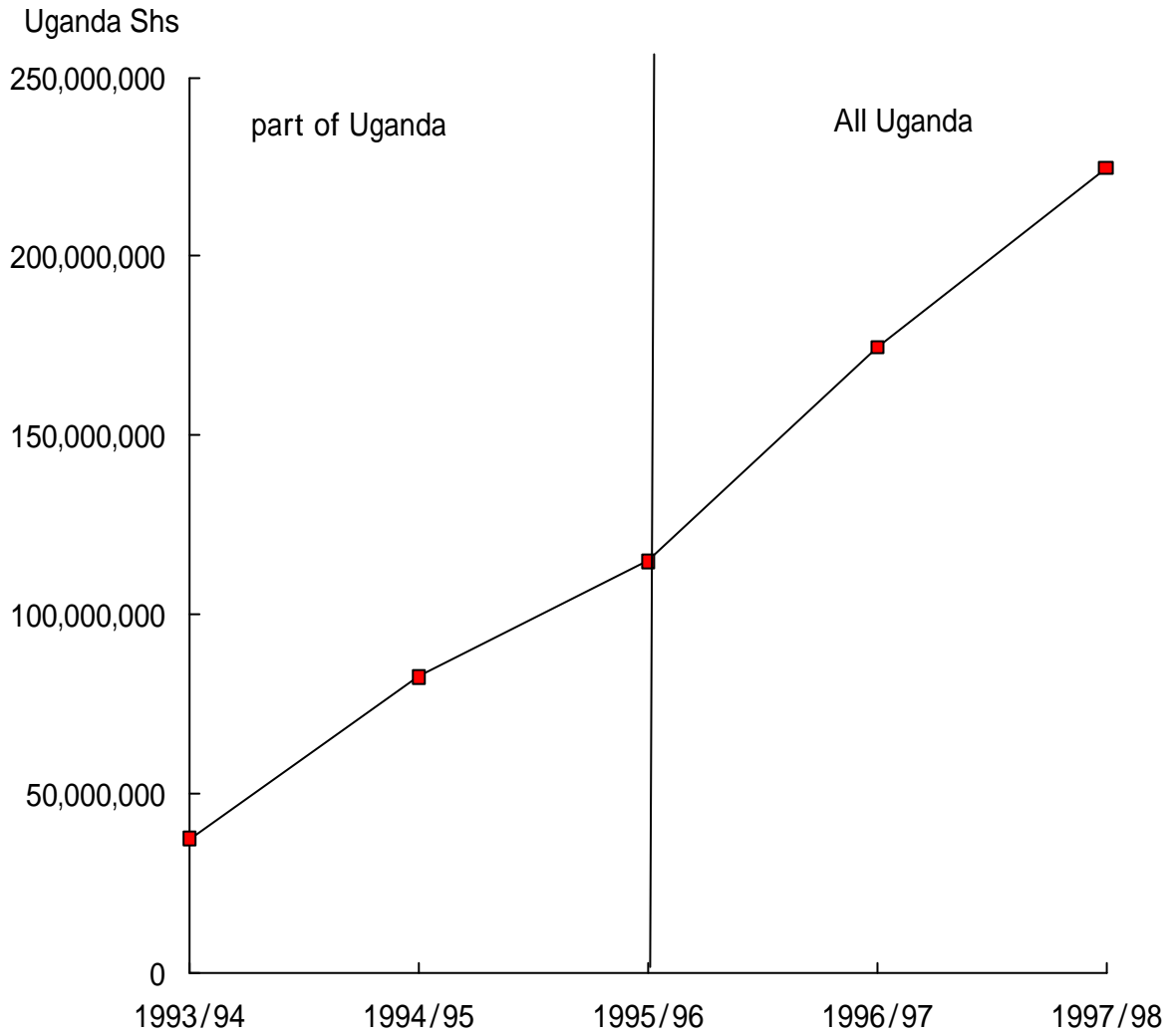
For this purpose, financial support by the central government to local authorities include conditional, unconditional and equalization grants. The conditional grant is delegated funds by the central government to local governments for the use of certain specific purposes.

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<sup>13</sup> Personal interviews of officials at the district and sub-country offices in Tororo District.

<sup>14</sup> Information by the Local Government Finance Commission.

Total amount of financial tranfer from central to local governments



Source: Decentralization Secretariat, Kampala

The main activities include education, health, feeder roads, agricultural production, and the salary of local personnel. The unconditional grant is also called the block grant, and this is for unspecified purposes. The equalization grant is given for the disadvantaged local governments whose living standard is below the national average. The actual use of these types of funds provides interesting insights. One such example can be found in the *Background to the Budget 1998-99*, which states that the central government prefers conditional to unconditional grants to local governments since the former method allows the central government Ministries to exercise appropriate support to and control over local governments.<sup>15</sup> This discourse indicates that the central government is weary of the full delegation of financial autonomy to local governments.

Another example is that the equalization grant has not yet been used. The main reason is that although some districts enjoy better financial status than others, all districts suffer from shortage of funds and all consider that they should be the legitimate recipients of this fund. This is a political issue with no obvious answer. To resolve this issue, the Local Government Finance Commission (LGFC) was established in 1995. Its mandate is to advise the President on the distribution of revenues between the central and local governments. The particular importance of this Commission is to recommend to the President of the application of equalization grant. Yet the weak institutional capacity of the Commission, coupled with political difficulty of the issue, delays the implementation of the equalization grant. It is only in FY 1999/2000 that a small number of districts are scheduled to receive limited amount of equalization fund.

The second reason why local governments face severe shortage of funds is that the income tax is still collected by the central government. The authority that the local governments are entitled to levy taxes and duties is really limited. The amount of actual tax collection is therefore very small. Third, locally generated revenues are often affected by weather. Uganda

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<sup>15</sup> The Republic of Uganda, 1998, op cit., page 123.

is no exception in recent years to suffer from unusual climactic upheavals. Especially 1997 was a bad year due to floods. Fourth, locally generated funds are also severely handicapped by recent local elections. Politicians, who were competing to win the elections, often promised “tax cuts” to their constituency, and this resulted in a significant reduction of the resource base of local governments. All of these factors contribute to the heavy financial dependence of local governments on the central government for most of their activities.

## DECENTRALIZATION AND MORE EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

With the recent Act, a reasonably clearly local government structure is now put in place. Many rural people have heard that the government has been pursuing decentralization. What sort of consequences does this have on development planning and management in Uganda? Since decentralization in Uganda is intended to make development more effective, we examine whether it would increase the level of participation, including women and thereby contributing to foster civil society.

### *1. Participatory development*

One of the important outcomes of participatory development based on the LC system is local development planning. All districts are now expected to compile respective District Development Plan (DDP) reflecting the needs of the grassroots people. However, the level of popular participation in planning varies considerably from one district to another. Rakai and Mukono, for instance, are relatively advanced. With the assistance of DANIDA, Rakai was the first district to produce the DDP in 1994, a year following the real beginning of decentralization in

1993. Mukono produced a similar DDP in 1997 without much donor support. In Tororo, the district is now undertaking this exercise, but the Plan has not yet formulated.

Rakai is located in southwest of Uganda bordering with Tanzania. This is the area where Tanzanian soldiers invaded into Uganda in 1978, which led to the ousting of Idi Amin from power in the following year. This is also the area that HIV/AIDS epidemic has been very high since the 1980s because it is located on the international highway linking Uganda with Tanzania. A recent survey indicated that 76 % of the households live below the poverty line, which is the average monthly household income of Ush 5000 (about \$ 4.2).<sup>16</sup> Because of these harsh conditions in the district, DANIDA decided to assist Rakai from the very beginning of decentralization. Approximately \$ 9 million was provided between 1992 and 1995.<sup>17</sup> What was original in this project was not the amount of assistance, but the way it was provided. Previously all donor assistance needed to be based on an agreement between foreign donor(s) and the central government of the Republic of Uganda. DANIDA, while maintaining this agreement, also negotiated a parallel agreement with the district authority in Rakai. This allows DANIDA to channel funds directly to Rakai with the notice to Kampala government.

In Rakai a really significant change in the way in which accountability is sought was also taking place. The earlier centralized system was led and managed by civil servants of the district administration, who were answerable to the central government. There were virtually no opportunities for local politicians nor public to express their views on development planning. Therefore, decentralization needed an enormous transformation whereby different stakeholders would play new roles respectively. This has also changed to whom each player should be answerable. The local public servants are now accountable to the Local Councillors, who are in

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<sup>16</sup> Rakai District Council, 'Rakai District Development Plan', (Kyotera, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Information by the Embassy of Denmark in Kampala.

turn held accountable to the people in the district.

In order to make this change effective, training programmes for political leaders were carried out to empower them to be policy makers. When Uganda was suffering from a prolonged civil war, they were deprived of making any decisions. They were also afraid of making decision because being decisive tended to invite accusations by other stakeholders. Therefore, decentralization needed a complete change of their perception of their role. The local politicians were, in effect, suddenly called to exercise their leadership without any preparation. Therefore, training was essential to overcome this.

The process of local planning covered the stages of problem identification, goals and objectives formulation, strategy development, and articulation of policy statements. In this process, the political leaders had to lead local development planning, being assisted by the district administration. In order to identify local needs, LC 5 Councillors held a number of talks with various local leaders including NGO representatives and the Councillors of the lower hierarchical levels. Then, the sector committees of the District Local Council (LC 5) were asked to develop respective sector plan. Throughout this process, the politicians led the exercise, and the heads of department of the district administration facilitated and advised the process. The District Planning Unit subsequently compiled the sector plans to form the DDP Volume I. This Volume was laying out the policy directions. It described social, economic, demographic and physical characteristics of the district, political and administrative set-up, production and extension sector, education, health and social welfare, and transport and communication.

At the next stage, the politicians, opinion leaders, NGOs and civil servants were asked to initiate project proposals including budgets and implementation modality. Within the LC hierarchy, each LC 1 listed ten projects, and each LC 2 listed ten projects. This was repeated up to the LC 3 level, where many proposals were prioritized. The District Planning Unit checked this list

against the possibility of funding, and prioritized the projects. The result of this became the Volume II of the DDP, which was the list of projects for implementing the policies of the Volume I. The kinds of projects included capacity building of the public administration, especially at the district office, improvement of agricultural production, education, community services, health, water, sanitation, roads, housing and communication. This style became the de facto standard for the DDP in Uganda, and has been emulated by other districts.

It was pointed out that approximately 70 % of DDP activities had been achieved from FY 1994/95 to FY 1998/99.<sup>18</sup> DANIDA agreed to fund various activities identified in the DDP and the central government also carried out certain activities (especially in education) in line with the DDP. Some of the activities were accomplished by district and sub-counties on their own without external assistance. In this sense, Rakai planning exercise was very successful.<sup>19</sup>

Because of this success, both the central government and donors, especially the World Bank, are now seriously planning to decentralize development expenditures. The Rakai experience shows that with donor support capacities of local governments to manage large amount of funds can be enhanced. This can remove the obstacle why the central government has been hesitant to decentralize development expenditures.

Tororo is a counter example to Rakai. It is located in the eastern part of Uganda bordering with Kenya. Although this is a strategic area of transporting goods from/ to Kenya, the local economy is far from buoyant. But the main problem in Tororo is the quality of political leadership.

The Decentralization Secretariat points out that the performance of this district in FY

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<sup>18</sup> Information by the District Planning Unit.

<sup>19</sup> Henrik A. Neilsen, 'Decentralisation Experience: From Noakhali to Rakai' and also Vicent Semakula, 'Rakai District in Development: Consequences of Decentralisation,' in Soren Villadsen and Francis Lubanga ed. op.cit.

1997/98 was least satisfactory in Uganda, and the degree of their compliance with the established procedures and guidelines was considerably lower than other local governments. The main reason is the incompetent leadership of the District. The former LC 5 Chairman was accused of embezzlement, and voted out of the office in the recent election. The previous CAO was also accused of financial mismanagement, and the legal action is now being taken.<sup>20</sup> The current new leadership inherited a very difficult situation: the accumulated debt is approximately Ush 1.2 billion (about US \$ 1 million) which the District government owes private contractors as procurement costs and civil servants as their salary.

This makes the implementation of wide range local consultation extremely difficult. Tororo was, in fact, one of the first thirteen districts to be decentralized, but the actual local planning started in 1995. The consultation process for the preparation of the DDP was begun, but future continuation of the process is very unclear because of the serious financial situation of Tororo District. Although the Planning Unit in Tororo District is willing to follow the path of Rakai and other more advanced districts, their means are sharply curtailed. As a consequence, unlike Rakai, a good working relationship among different stakeholders, especially Local Councillors, civil servants, NGOs and the public has not yet established. Each operates more or less independently as it was in the centralized system. What is hopeful, however, is that, with the new political and administrative leadership in place, the district Council now squarely faces the serious challenge and has started to take some measures to restructuring the administration.

What can then be said following the contrasting experiences of Rakai and Tororo?

Although the example of Rakai is promising, the overall level of grassroots participation in development process still appears to be relatively insignificant, and there appears to be two main reasons. First, various government and non-government personnel indicate that the way in which

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<sup>20</sup> UNDP, op cit., page 44.

plans are made is still very much “top down.” They argue that this is because of the traditional mentality of civil servants toward the population; because civil servants believe they are more knowledgeable than the people, they should inform the people what to do to. In this sense, if we use the expression of Robert Chambers, “handing over the stick” has not yet taken place.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly even some public service staff in Rakai agree with this observation.

Second, the past experiences of the people dealing with the government has largely been that government would not readily respond to their needs and aspirations. When Uganda was in the prolonged civil strife and economic collapse, it was the people’s self help efforts and not the government who helped to maintain their livelihoods. What the government normally asked the people is something unwelcome by local population: taxes and duties. This phenomena of “strong society and weak state”<sup>22</sup> has fostered deep skepticism among the public that government policies are not credible. Although many consider that the NRM is the most willing government to listen to the people, the people still either doubt or cannot fully realize how the current decentralization really changes their relationship with the government. One study indicates that after the last election more than 70% of the people do not interact with the LC 5 Councillors over the community issues.<sup>23</sup> This hints that the road ahead to make local participation meaningful is really challenging.

## 2. Gender sensitive development

Many developing countries suffer from gender inequalities, and Uganda is no exception.

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts: Putting the First Last*, (London, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> J.S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, (Princeton, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey B. Tukahebwa. ‘The Role of District Councils in the Decentralisation Programme in Uganda,’ in *The Quest for Good Governance: Decentralisation and Civil Society in Uganda*, (Kampala, 1997).

The illiteracy of women is 55.1% compared with 36.5% of men. Women contribute more than 80% of food production. Although 97% of the women have access to land, only 7% actually own land. Women-headed-households are more likely to be poor than other households.<sup>24</sup> Recently HIV/AIDS epidemic tends to reinforce gender inequality in health conditions of women as well as their socio-economic status.<sup>25</sup>

In order to reduce such gender imbalances, the NRM government has been taking measures. It established in 1987 the National Council of Women, a parastatal umbrella organization for women's NGOs (since 1993 it is National Associations of Women's Organizations of Uganda), and created the Ministry of Women in Development in 1988. The NRM government has also been promoting women's participation in decision-making process at various levels. At the national level, the current Vice President of the country is a women, and the number of cabinet ministers and the state ministers has been steadily increasing since 1986. The new Constitution expresses explicitly the concern for gender equality.

The relation between women and the NRM regime is, however, ambiguous. On the one hand, women are generally supportive of the NRM government. It is because thanks to the less authoritative nature of the current regime and to the stable social and economic conditions in the country that the NRM brought since it took power, many associational activities of women are made possible. On the other hand, they are sometimes very critical of the NRM government as long as it appears to curtail the autonomy of women and/or to reinforce gender inequalities. When women attempt to go beyond what the regime is currently prepared to accept, that would create a fierce tension.

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<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Gender and Community Development, 'Country Report in Preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women 1995' (Kampala, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> See for instance, Sandra Wallman, *Kampala Women Getting By: Wellbeing in the time of AIDS*, (London, 1996).

At the local level, the issue of gender in development also presents a very mixed picture. The election process presents a problem. It is pointed out that in “general, female candidates running in the 1996 parliamentary elections faced greater public ridicule than men.”<sup>26</sup> One women candidate, who is well educated and articulate and stood in the election, reports that most of the votes she received is from men and not from women. She speculates that women still considered that men would be better leaders than women themselves. As a result, she could not win the election.<sup>27</sup>

The proportional representation of women at the Councils has increased significantly. While in the RC system only one out of nine Councillors has to be women, now one third of the Councillors are required to be women. Although this is a significant improvement, the numerical increase of female representation in decision-making process does not automatically guarantee that the decisions are more gender sensitive. When RC included at least one women secretary, it was often reported that women's voices were not seriously heard by male colleagues.<sup>28</sup> Now the number of women Councillors is increased so that more men are exposed to women's views.

Although women are still less represented than men in local decision-making process, it seems more likely that gender sensitivity has been improving in the last few years. At the district level, all forty five Chairpersons of LC 5 (governors) are men, while forty out of forty five Vice Chairperson of LC 5 are women. This appears to make women's concerns less marginal than

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<sup>26</sup> Aili Mari Tripp, 'Expanding 'Civil Society': Women and Political Space in Contemporary Uganda,' in Nelson Kasfir ed. *Civil Society and Democracy in Africa: Critical Perspectives* (London, 1998) page 88.

<sup>27</sup> personal interview in September, 1998. Tripp shows the opposite indication that women think they are better or at least as equally good leaders as men. See Aili Mari Tripp, 'Local Women's Associations and Politics in Contemporary Uganda,' in Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle, op cit., page 124.

<sup>28</sup> Aili Mari Tripp, 'Local Women's Associations and Politics in Contemporary Uganda,' in Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle, op cit. 1998. Tabitha Mulyampiti, 'Political Empowerment of Women in Uganda: Impact of Resistance Councils and Committees' MA Thesis for the Department of Women

before. Uganda is probably in an important transition to more gender sensitive society where both men and women can participate in decision making and receive benefits of development equally. For that purpose, the increase of women's representation in Local Councils is one important step forward.

The degree of activities supporting women and/or attempting to close gender gaps varies from one area to another. In Rakai, mainly because DANIDA is keen on gender issues, there have been conscious efforts to assist women in the area. As a part of the overall efforts to support women in the district, for example, micro credit provisions are provided by two intermediary organizations located in a provincial town of Kyotera in Rakai District. One of them is Victoria Building Society providing micro credit since 1990. It started to provide loans to women in 1996. DANIDA released its first seed money, Ush 30 million, in 1998. DANIDA, following the success of the micro-credit schemes in Bangladesh and other Asian countries, recommended a methodology to "make rural women bankable." According to this methodology, women Councillors mobilized rural women at the grassroots level and to form a group of at least five women. The training was provided on management of funds and project activities. Both individuals and groups can now apply for the loan, whose amount is Ush 100,000 - 300,000 for individuals and Ush 0.5 to 1 million for groups. Women can receive lower interest rate (17% per year) than the normal rate (22%). Many women applying for this loan for income generating activities ranging from agricultural production to handicrafts making. Repayment ratio is 97% so far. One women, who borrowed Ush 200,000 in her first loan for a pig farming, expresses that her financial situation has improved and now is planing to take the second loan.<sup>29</sup>

In Tororo, most of the donor support in relation to decentralization has been to enhance

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Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Makerere University.

<sup>29</sup> personal interview in September, 1998.

administrative capabilities of the district office. Grassroots outreach activities such as micro credit for women are not as active as in Rakai. Decentralization has brought less significant changes for rural women here than in Rakai. However, NGOs activities can be found in the area, and one good example is Tororo Community Integrated Development Association (TOCIDA). Established in 1992, it has been engaged in a number of activities: performing drama as a teaching media, conducting adult literacy classes of men and women, producing energy efficient cooking stove, and organic agriculture. These activities can be seen in various parts of the district, and most of the funding comes from donors. Although this NGO does not have a very clear gender focus, many of its actives contribute to ease serious obstacles that rural women face.

### 3. *Fostering civil society*

It is often argued that the conditions in Africa to nurture civil society are not promising. The reasons include that the post-independent polity in Africa has been fundamentally a zero-sum game. Those who control the state could get access to wealth at the cost of the public. This does not encourage the attitude of openness or compromise.<sup>30</sup> If this argument holds true, what can be the hopeful basis on which civil society can be nurtured as often advocated by development agencies?

NGOs are often expected to be the carriage for mature civil society, because they are considered to be good at reaching the poor at the grassroots and empowering them.<sup>31</sup> But it is not entirely clear whether decentralization exercise has been improving the environment in which

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<sup>30</sup> See for example, Claude Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa*, (Washington, D.C., 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Goran Hyden and Michael Bratton, *Governance and Politics in Africa* (Colorado, 1992); Andrew Clayton ed., *NGOs, Civil Society and the State: Building Democracy in Transitional Societies*, (Oxford, 1996).

NGOs operate in Uganda. NGOs in Rakai generally express their support for decentralization. The main reason is that decentralization makes coordination with the government offices much easier. While, in the centralized structure, coordination was carried out by Kampala, now it can be done in the nearby district capital. NGOs were involved in the formulation process of Rakai District Development Plan. Thus, their activities are well coordinated with the district offices especially in education, health, and HIV/AIDS prevention and care.

In Tororo, this sort of working relationship between local governments and NGOs has not yet emerged. TOCIDA expresses that decentralization has not yet taken any concrete shape to affect their operations. Unlike the counterparts in Rakai, TOCIDA appears to have little coordination with local government offices.<sup>32</sup>

When redefinition of roles and responsibilities of NGOs and the local governments proceeds as in Rakai, decentralization is, on the one hand, expected to improve the situation in which NGOs operate. The local government is facing severe shortage of funds and manpower, and NGOs are in a position to complementing the government in public services. NGOs therefore face a new challenge of how best they can utilize new opportunities made by decentralization.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, if the role of NGOs is to nurture civil society where they potentially counter balance the state, then it may be over-ambitious for NGOs to play that role at least at the moment. As long as NGOs play the role of “gap-filling” as defined by the government, that would not cause too much political confrontation.<sup>34</sup> Yet, if they are expected to go beyond that, then it would invite some serious friction and the state may oppress ambitious NGOs.

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<sup>32</sup> personal interview 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Clayton, “NGOs and Decentralised Government in Africa,” INTRAC Occasional Papers Series No. 18 (London, 1998)

<sup>34</sup> Dicklitch considers that many NGOs are actually gap fillers of public services and not contributing empowerment of the poor as anticipated. Susan Dicklitch, *The Elusive Promise of NGOs in Africa:*

If NGOs are not a good candidate for mature civil society, can the LC system itself play that role? The LC has a mixed character; it is at the same time organs of the state, of the NRM, and of the people. This has probably both positive and negative connotations for civil society. On the one hand, as a consultation and coordination mechanism of different stakeholders, it plays its role reasonably cost-effectively. The LC has created a social space where several stakeholders can express their views and make compromises. This was not the practice before decentralization was implemented. Local politicians appear to be the most essential player in this consultation process to facilitate different views and interests. The experiences in Rakai indicate that the role of local political leaders is essential to function as an intermediary between the people and the administration. Their role is perhaps indispensable in Uganda where political parties are prohibited under the NRM government. Therefore abilities and integrity of local political leaders are crucial to operate this system, because this sort of effective coordination mechanism needs to be insulated from profit seeking activities by narrow minded interest groups, who often target political leaders in order to influence decision making. Many Councillors, especially at LC 5 level who are elected in the last election, in fact have good educational and respectable career records. This fostered confidence among the public, especially in the minds of civil servants who previously thought the Councillors are much less educated than public servants. As long as several incompetent and allegedly corrupt leaders are not reelected, it means that accountability to the people functions reasonably well if not completely. This presents a hopeful picture that through LC system, civil society may grow in Uganda.

On the other hand, the LC is not a good candidate if it is expected to be an independent organization as counter balance against the state. The LC is an organ of the state as much as of the people. The LC system is used by the NRM government to widen its support, as criticized by

the opponents. This means that the boundaries of autonomous activities of Councils are largely defined by the NRM government. Although the NRM regime is much less authoritarian and coercive than the previous regimes in Uganda, it is unlikely that LC system would cultivate social groups which are overly critical of the NRM views.

Another cautious remarks need to be made on the way in which politics work in Uganda. Even if people are given opportunities for electing their representatives, this does not necessarily alter the fundamental rules of the game between the rulers and the ruled. Patron-client relationship still characterizes its politics because it functions as a way to redistribute the wealth, which increasingly becomes more and more scares in the country. In the notions of most Ugandans, it is not illegitimate for leaders to redistribute some of their wealth. Likewise, followers can to some extent legitimately claim their share of what their leaders may possess.<sup>35</sup>

This is the background in which corruption is practiced. Ironically, as powers are decentralized, corruption also tends to spread. A recent study reports that more than half of the Ugandans think that the problem of corruption has worsened in the last couple of years dealing with police, judiciary, and administrative services. The NRM government is fully aware of this danger. Because the LC system is the linchpin of the NRM polity, widespread corruption would weaken the fundamental basis of the regime. Thus the government has been endeavoring to put the accountability system in place. That the role of Office of the Inspector General was clearly stated in the new Constitution is one such example. The fact that the national survey on corruption was carried out is an important step to tackle this issue straightforwardly. One interesting indication is that proportionately more service providers at local level are keen than service receives to suggest that the cases of corruption should be reported. This is a sharp contrast to the views of service providers at the central government who think that if someone

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<sup>35</sup> Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (London, 1999)

reports the cases of corruption, that person is just a trouble maker.<sup>36</sup> This seems to support that close public scrutiny made possible by decentralization is likely to improve accountability and transparency of local governments.

## CONCLUSIONS

Decentralization in Uganda has passed a threshold over which there is no return or retreat. Progress so far has been impressive following the consistent philosophy attempting to widen political participation and to improve development effectiveness. Decentralization is a bold challenge where all concerned stakeholders are expected to play different new roles.

It undoubtedly takes a long time for stakeholders to redefine their role in “bottom up” planning process. In Rakai, due to the assistance by DANIDA, different types of participants have spent a long time to figure out what each player does at what stage. This in fact became a model for other district officials. Although Rakai still needs to improve its performance, it is considered as a successful model, which is in fact studied by not only other local governments in Uganda but other African countries.

The remaining agenda for the future is also very demanding. The planning process, for instance, should be more participatory and conducive for empowerment of the poor and the socially disadvantaged. It also needs more gender sensitivity. By so doing the LC system as a mechanism of consultation and coordination of different interests and activities can increase its cost-effectiveness. This may form the basis on which civil society can be nurtured.

Civil society often assumes a multi-dimensional society, where networking of various social groups is essential to articulate, present and negotiate their views with others. The

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<sup>36</sup> CITE International, ‘Uganda National Integrity Survey 1998 Final Report’ (Kampala, 1998).

experiences of Uganda may provide certain promises because the social space created by the NRM government allows such networking, including women. Although it is still at the infant stage, Uganda Local Authorities Associations is endeavoring to build a strong coalition of local governments against the central government which used to monopolize political and economic power. The polity of the NRM itself is, in one view, associational one to encompass wide different political positions. On the other hand, the NRM will continue to hold strong grips against activities which can threaten the foundation of the current polity. Therefore, civil society cannot flourish in the future as one may otherwise wish to see.

The decentralization experience in Uganda is posing a very fundamental question over the relationship between the state and society. If the post independent history of Uganda is equaled with “strong society and weak state,” what the current decentralization intends to accomplish may be “strong society and strong state.” In this process, the local government as a sort of an intermediary between the central government and the people in rural areas has a crucial role to play. The capable local governments can change the entire relationship between the state and society from previous zero sum game to more meaningful positive sum game. The effective local governance is an asset for both people who desire to improve their livelihood and for the central government which is overburdened to provide public services. One indication of such positive sum game is that when the people are convinced that certain efforts would improve essential services, they are willing to share burdens and responsibilities even under difficult circumstances. And this can be facilitated by donors in order to make decentralization as a more effective social transformation. Experience of Uganda is far from complete, but has produced a useful path for all stakeholders to reflect deeply.