

Decentralisation in Africa:

A Pathway out of Poverty
and Conflict?

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I Introduction: Decentralisation as a Pathway out of Poverty and Conflict?

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Decentralisation entails the transfer of power, responsibilities and finance from central government to sub-national levels of government at provincial and/or local levels. Its current popularity, especially in the developing world, is unparalleled, with 80 per cent of all developing and transition countries undertaking some form of decentralisation over the past two decades (ICHRP 2005: 11). In Africa south of the Sahara, the focus of this book, there are few countries that have not implemented decentralisation reforms.

This is remarkable, as Africa has a long history of formally centralised rule which dates back to colonial times, and in some instances much beyond. Independence constitutions did provide, at least in the former British colonies, for a fully established system of local government with elected councils. These had responsibilities for the delivery of services such as education, health, roads, water supply and agricultural extension, as well as a level of resources. Although attempts at state centralisation in independent Africa might not have been as successful as intended, the imperative of nation-building, the realities of single-party or military rule and the necessities of centralised planning led to the marginalisation or outright suppression of these elected local and district councils and their competencies throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. In their support for modernisation and Keynesianism at that time, the donor community equally pressed for the establishment of strong central state institutions. Local government did continue to exist in many places, but with little power and resources, and thus local authorities lost both their role in the political and development process and also their legitimacy with local populations. Few authoritarian regimes were willing to cede any control over resources to other state institutions, with the notable exception of Nigeria's military regime which initiated a substantial decentralisation programme in 1976.

Against this background, at first sight, there appears nowadays to be a remarkable consensus on the desirability of decentralisation, with support coming from international development agencies (the 'donors') and civil society organisations

alike, as well as – at least officially – from central governments who are charged with its implementation. Potential advantages of decentralisation are seen in both democratic and developmental terms. Government is brought closer to the people, in theory allowing greater influence on local public affairs, with local government perceived as more responsive to local needs, inclusive of the majority poor. Yet it is not at all clear that the anticipated benefits are being realised. Many studies to date, some of which are discussed below, have highlighted that decentralisation is complex, multi-faceted and faces many challenges, and has variable outcomes. The aim of this book is to contribute to this literature, with a particular emphasis on the outcomes of decentralisation in Africa on the two themes of poverty reduction and the management of violent conflict.

This initial chapter introduces the book. It proceeds in five sections. First, key terms are defined. Second, the motives, claims and issues concerning decentralisation are outlined. Third and fourth, the recent literature and debates on decentralisation and poverty reduction and on decentralisation and conflict management are discussed in turn. Finally, the structure of, and contributions to, this book are outlined.

I. Definitions of Key Concepts

1.1. Decentralisation

Although decentralisation is very prevalent, its form and extent varies greatly across countries. Difficulties in understanding and comparing decentralisation policies have been intensified by a multitude of definitions used by practitioners and scholars. One main controversy since the early 1980s has involved the question of whether the concept of decentralisation should be restricted to the vertical process of shifting competencies and resources from the central state level to territorially defined sub-national levels of government, or whether the concept should also include the horizontal process of decentralising competencies and resources at a given level of government through processes such as delegation and privatisation. It was Rondinelli et al.'s (1983) influential book that first proposed a comprehensive typology encompassing both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of decentralisation. Subsequently Rondinelli came under strong attack (Slater, 1989) both for the analytical weakness of such a broad categorisation and the political agenda behind it, i.e. seeing administrative-political devolution in its instrumental role for economic liberalisation and for downsizing the role of the state in the development process. Many developing countries eventually introduced a mix of delegation, privatisation and deconcentration, while leaving out the politically most relevant sub-type of devolution.

Although the new emphasis on local governance in both industrialised and developing societies since the 1990s makes the analysis of non-state actors in politics and developmental processes and their coordination with public agents and institutions a priority, there are good reasons to adopt here a concept of vertical decentralisation, and to include its political, administrative and fiscal elements. While still allowing a range of conceptual differences, it makes empirical analysis and cross-national comparison possible by focussing on the decision space and discretionary power of sub-national levels of government.

In defining decentralisation from this perspective, it is common to outline three different forms that emphasise one or other of these elements, as exemplified by Manor (1999: 5):

Devolution (or democratic decentralisation), i.e. transfer of power and resources to sub-national authorities that are both (relatively) independent of central government and democratically elected.

Deconcentration (or administrative decentralisation), i.e. the transfer of authority to sub-national branches of the central state, often to line ministry officials based in local areas.

Fiscal decentralisation, i.e. authority over budgets ceded to deconcentrated officials and/or unelected appointees or to elected politicians.

One minor controversy concerns whether fiscal decentralisation is actually a third main type of decentralisation. Ribot (2002: iii) argues that it is a cross-cutting element of both deconcentration and devolution, rather than a separate category, an analysis which is accepted here. Thus two main forms of decentralisation can be distinguished – devolution and deconcentration – although it is recognised that this distinction is often blurred in practice, as highlighted in some of the chapters here. While decentralisation's popularity has been evident from the early 1980s (Conyers 1983), it has itself undergone a shift in emphasis from deconcentration in the 1980s to devolution in the 1990s. Whereas deconcentration (and privatisation) was closely related to structural adjustment programmes and attempts to break up the power of the centralised state, influenced by prevailing neo-liberalism, a shift towards democratic decentralisation was linked with the general democratisation trends from the early 1990s onwards, especially in Africa (Olowu and Wunsch, 2004: 38), and a related change in donor emphasis toward participatory governance.

Claims and expectations of decentralisation usually assume a devolved form and some have even proposed to disregard deconcentration as a form of decentralisation (Mawhood, 1993). In this book, we are concerned primarily with devolution (or democratic decentralisation) and its impact on poverty reduction and conflict management, with authors also drawing attention to the various limitations and obstacles to genuine devolution.

1.2. *Poverty and poverty reduction*

Since the turn of the millennium, it has become very common to take a multidimensional approach to poverty. This is evident from the work of two influential sources, the World Bank and the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In its *Attacking Poverty* report, the World Bank (2001: 15-19) defines poverty as multiple human deprivation, inclusive of economic deprivation as well as social and political dimensions. The traditional economic dimension entails low income levels and an inability to meet basic household consumption needs. The social dimension focuses on health and education levels, measured by such indicators as infant and under-five mortality rates, life expectancy, and primary school enrolment rates, as well as vulnerability over time to income or health poverty and other risks such as violence and crime. The political dimension of poverty entails what the World Bank terms 'voicelessness and powerlessness', measured by a combination of participatory methods and indicators such as the extent of civil and political liberties. Similarly the OECD DAC (2001) defines the multidimensionality of poverty as including economic, human, political, socio-cultural and protective dimensions. For the World Bank (2001: 7-8), a poverty reduction strategy entails three policy responses to the multidimensional nature of poverty, described as 'promoting opportunity, facilitating empowerment and enhancing security'. 'Promoting opportunity' encompasses both economic and social deprivation and involves the expansion of opportunities for poor people to increase incomes and to access basic services. 'Facilitating empowerment' addresses the political dimension and focuses both on strengthening the participation of poor people in political processes and on state institutions becoming more responsive and accountable to the poor. 'Enhancing security' pertains to measures aimed at reducing overall vulnerability, with a particular emphasis on health- and climate-related risks.

In exploring the relationship between decentralisation and poverty reduction, this book will take a multidimensional approach to poverty and examine various and interrelated aspects of poverty and poverty reduction. In particular it will focus on whether the anticipated positive linkages have been realised or not, as well as considering the adverse impact of various constraints and challenges.

1.3. *Conflict and conflict management*

The concept of conflict is at least as contested and multidimensional as poverty. Conflicts are ubiquitous in many dimensions of daily life. Some theories locate their sources in the nature of the protagonists (anthropological theories), or in relations between conflict parties (behavioural sociology and social psychology).

We follow here the structural approach of Galtung who sees conflicts emerging from contradictions in the structure of society. They then become manifest in conflicting attitudes and behaviour (Galtung, 1996). According to this 'conflict triangle', once conflicts are formed they undergo various processes of transformation, but all three dimensions (structural contradiction, behaviour, attitudes) remain equally important and have to be taken into account in any attempt to solve or transform a conflict.

In development policy debates, there is a strong tendency to identify structural factors such as unequal distribution of socio-economic resources or bad governance as key causes of conflicts. These factors are important, though they should not be overestimated in relation to factors which trigger the outbreak or escalation of conflicts on a more short-term basis. The latter include, for instance, a change of regime, reform measures impacting negatively on individual sections of the population, politically-motivated assassinations (or assassination attempts) and economic crises of a cyclical nature (Ropers, 2002).

If there is little agreement about the causes of conflict, there is even less consensus about the possibility of ending conflicts. Much policy-oriented analysis and political discourse within Africa suggests that conflicts are inherently negative and can be resolved by modifying conflictive behaviour and attitudes and removing the structural contradictions at the root of the conflict. Much of the scholarly debate is more sceptical for both empirical and theoretical reasons. Empirically we observe many protracted social conflicts over scarce resources where attempts at removing structural contradictions have constantly failed. A major strand in the theoretical debate has also defended the idea that conflict itself is not only an unavoidable element of social interaction but also a 'positive' element of development:

'Conflict is an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of social change. It is an expression of the heterogeneity of interests, values and beliefs that arise as new formations generated by social change come up against inherited constraints.' (Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, 1999)

These conflicts may lead to political crisis and destructive escalations of violence affecting whole societies primarily during phases of socio-economic and political transformation. The problem is then not the conflicts *per se*, but the way in which they are managed and resolved (Rupesinghe, 1998).

The traditional idea of conflict resolution which assumes the overcoming of the original incompatibility of interests has proven to be ambitious especially in conflicts over identity and values, while conflicts over material resources are more amenable to a solution by reframing of interests or compromises. It is in this context that the idea of conflict management has become prominent. It acknowledges

the structural contradictions in a social context as given for the time being, and restricts itself to modifying conflictive behaviour and attitudes. Although conflict management is often used in the restricted sense of limiting, mitigating or containing violent conflict, we will use it here as a concept that covers the various ways of positive conflict handling (Harris and Reilly, 1998).

2. Decentralisation: Motives, Claims and Issues

2.1. *Motives*

Although the forms and degrees of decentralisation vary greatly, not only is decentralisation very widespread geographically, but there appears to be a remarkable consensus on its desirability amongst diverse actors. It is a consensus that seems to encompass both the political left and right. The neo-liberal right supports decentralisation because it entails a further shrinking of the powers of the centralised state. The political left also supports decentralisation because it is associated with an agenda of democratic deepening, with some progressive civil society organisations seeing decentralisation as providing greater opportunities for influencing decision-making processes at the local level. Advocacy of decentralisation comes from various sources, inclusive of donor agencies and local pro-democracy movements (Devas and Delay, 2006: 678; Thede, 2008: 3) and ostensibly from central governments themselves. Yet, it is clear that this apparent consensus conceals a variety of interests and motives (Thede, 2008: 3). Goals have also evolved and altered somewhat over the past quarter of a century. As mentioned above, in the 1980s, decentralisation in Africa and elsewhere was closely associated with structural adjustment programmes and a neo-liberal reform agenda (Campbell, 2001), with decentralisation reforms largely a response to the perceived failures of the centralised state (Wunsch and Olowu, 1990), notably in Africa. The belief was that decentralisation would lead to greater economic efficiency in the allocation of goods and services. Thus an economic motivation prevailed, one closely connected to the neo-liberal mood of this period, with decentralisation portrayed as leading to improved service delivery at local level through deconcentration and privatisation and the mobilisation of local resources.

The 1990s saw two related developments: the rise of democratisation movements in Africa and the addition of 'good governance' to the reform agenda of the 'donors'. Both gave not only a further stimulus to decentralisation in general, but to democratic decentralisation in particular (Olowu and Wunsch, 2004: 38-39). The World Bank (1997), the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] (1997) and the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD (1997) all identified decentralisation as a key element of good governance. For UNDP, for in-

stance, 'decentralisation and support to local governance' was one of five focal areas for governance programming (UNDP, 1997). Improvements in governance were perceived as stemming from democratic local government in which local citizens could exert greater influence on public decision-making. Such an agenda struck a common chord with many civil society organisations who were interested in deepening democracy and in addressing the limits of national-level democratisation, which often remained dominated by an elite political class (Theede, 2008: 5). Despite this democratic turn, the decentralisation agenda in the 1990s continued to have a liberal underpinning, especially for those bilateral and multilateral agencies whose primary concern remained to limit the power and authority of the central state. Recently, more overt democratic goals appear to have been expressed by international agencies, with decentralisation favoured as a means of 'empowerment' and increasing the 'voice' of the poor and marginalised. But the use of such language can be deceptive at times, perhaps aimed at maintaining an outward show of sharing objectives with non-governmental actors.

It is worth reiterating that poverty reduction and conflict management did not feature initially as significant motives for decentralisation. More common rationales entailed greater efficiency in the allocation of economic resources through a redefinition of powers and responsibilities between central and local governments, and a better match between government programmes, local preferences and local conditions (Burki et al., 1999; Cohen and Peterson, 1999; Litvak et al., 1998).

2.2. *Claims*

As is somewhat apparent from the motives, proponents make great claims for decentralisation, with interrelated developmental and democratic benefits anticipated. Decentralisation is perceived as bringing government closer to the people, leading to greater political participation at the local level, with citizens more able to make claims on local government and to subject it to greater scrutiny. In turn, it is anticipated that local government will be more knowledgeable about and more responsive to the needs of local populations, inclusive of the majority poor. Crook (2003: 77) notes that this is 'an assumption questioned by few', while Smoke (2003: 11) remarks that decentralisation is 'commonly treated as an unambiguously desirable phenomenon'. Yet these claims often appear to be driven more by belief than by experience or empirical evidence. Three other expectations are commonly stated: increased equity and efficiency and decreased corruption. One consequence of the perceived 'informational advantage' of local government can be a more equitable distribution of public resources within their jurisdiction (Smoke, 2003: 9) and a better match of available resources with local demand. Similarly, it is thought that the closer proximity of local government to

taxpayers and beneficiaries will increase transparency in the use of local resources and strengthen downward accountability mechanisms, resulting in a decrease in corrupt practices (Devas and Delay, 2006: 691). There is also the expectation that decentralisation contributes to overall regime consolidation and increases the overall quality of the democratic process by guaranteeing accountability, fostering civic competence and social capital, or strengthening political parties and civil society (Vengroff, 1993; Rothchild, 1996; Smith, 1996; Stoker, 1996).

Claims of a positive role for decentralisation in mitigating social and political conflict are less openly stated. Following violent conflicts, political decentralisation is seen as a compromise strategy to maintain the integration of secessionist groups within the state, while at the same time allowing for a meaningful degree of autonomy over local resources and decision-making (Diamond, 1999: 129). In a similar way, the expectation of poverty reduction through decentralisation has been added more recently, corresponding with 'poverty reduction' becoming the stated overarching goal of most donor agencies. In two influential reports (World Bank, 2004; UNDP, 2004), decentralisation was seen as crucial to achieving poverty reduction and the Millennium Development Goals.

Yet does decentralisation deliver such positive outcomes? This book intends to subject these two specific claims, poverty reduction and conflict management, to empirical investigation through a series of country case studies.

2.3. *Issues*

Many writers also acknowledge that democratic decentralisation is a complex and multifaceted process (Smoke, 2003: 13), with prospects for realisation of the anticipated benefits adversely affected by a number of implementation issues and constraints. Nine potential issues are outlined here, identified mainly by analysts writing about the African context, with the later issues becoming more political in nature. While these are general constraints that impact adversely on the overall prospects for successful implementation of decentralisation reforms, it is evident that they are likely to have a detrimental effect on the potential of decentralisation to contribute to poverty reduction and conflict management.

First, there may be shortfalls in the legal framework (Olowu and Wunsch, 2004: 23). The strongest form of legal backing for decentralisation is through its inclusion in the national constitution, consolidated by specific local government law(s), but weaker legal frameworks entail decentralisation merely through central government policy or by decree (Thede, 2008: 9).

Second, a clear division of responsibilities between local and central government is essential, but the absence of such clarity can equate to a lack of local government autonomy (Agranoff, 2004) and discretionary powers. Addition-

ally, it can imply that a relatively high degree of central government control is maintained over local service provision, especially through deconcentrated sector ministries, indicating that the lack of a clear division of responsibilities may be by design rather than by default. Confusion over roles and responsibilities can also be intensified by the multiplicity of government agencies involved, inclusive of various central government departments (ministries of finance, local government, home affairs and sectoral departments) and different levels of sub-national government, as well as international donor agencies (Smoke, 2003: 13).

Third, in a context of general state weakness, a lack of local government capacity is likely, with inadequate financial and human resources (Olowu and Wunsch, 2004: 22; Steiner, 2007: 177). Regarding financial resources, central government financial transfers may not be commensurate with responsibilities, and the revenue raising powers of local government may be limited. In addition, the establishment of new local authorities, especially at district level, has high initial administrative costs. Regarding human resources, civil servants may be reluctant to move to rural areas, especially when it entails transferring from the relative security of a centralised career structure to a less certain future under the authority of a local government service (Olowu and Wunsch, 2004: 19).

Fourth, new legislative bodies may be relatively weak and ineffective in decision-making, with locally elected members unfamiliar with the exercise of their powers and grappling with the technicalities of public policies or the formal language requirements. One consequence could be inadequate control over policy implementation, resulting in executive dominance by the local administration, with power effectively in the hands of appointed district heads or municipal managers.

Fifth, the anticipated increase in local political participation may be limited in practice due to insufficient opportunities being provided to citizens by local officials, or a lack of information about opportunities being made available (Steiner, 2007: 179), or a weak organisational set-up of local civil society. In some parts of Africa, rural communities may view any new public programme or policy with indifference or scepticism, with the promise of participation having to overcome a high degree of civic apathy (Diamond, 1999: 144).

Sixth, closely related to the issue of participation is that of accountability. There is a tendency to assume that 'democratic participation will yield strong mechanisms of accountability' (Johnson, 2003: 8). Yet powers can be decentralised 'to actors who are not accountable to their constituents, or who are accountable only to themselves or to superior authorities within the structure of government' (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999: 478). The realisation of more accountable government through decentralisation is by no means automatic.

Seventh, the political will of national elites to seriously implement devolution cannot be taken for granted. National elites might have accepted a decentralisa-

tion scheme primarily to please donors, while remaining confident that they will be able to maintain control over resources. The veto-power of national elites in blocking the effective implementation of new legal rules, or in perverting them to their own advantage, is a critical constraint to any decentralisation policy (Blair, 2000).

Eighth, this leads to the related problem of local elite capture. Within the local arena there is an existing set-up of powerful players who might be negatively affected by decentralisation, such as traditional authorities or local bosses dominating trade and other economic activities (Olivier de Sardan, 1999). These local elites may also respond to decentralisation by attempting to capture the benefits that it provides, and the problem of such elite capture of decentralised resources is a commonly cited one in the literature. It is generally achieved by one of two means. First, it may stem from local class and caste structures and the ability of high-status groups to dominate local politics and gain control of local political institutions. Second, it may also be a function of the ability of central government actors to control the transfer of powers and resources into the local arena along lines of economic and political alliances, in other words to channel resources to their patronage networks in order to consolidate their local political base.

Ninth, a final issue concerns the overall lack of local democracy and the existence of a local democratic deficit. Many institutional arrangements established under decentralisation reforms are insufficiently democratic and do not create a clear line of accountability from decision-makers to the local population (Ribot, 2004: 3). Again, the failure to encourage local democratic processes raises questions concerning the motivation and intent of those central government actors that are tasked with the implementation of decentralisation reforms.

In particular the poverty case studies in this volume draw attention to various aspects of these implementation issues. For example, Steiner focuses on issues of participation, accountability and local government capacity in Uganda, and, usefully, she also provides a more detailed discussion of these particular challenges in her chapter; Chinsinga examines constraints in Malawi pertaining to the lack of political commitment shown by national elites as well as the capture of limited resources by local elites; Crawford also addresses issues of participation and accountability, investigating how the former has not led to the latter in the Ghana case; and Van Dijk, while generally more positive about outcomes, points to issues of national-level elite resistance to decentralisation and the lack of local revenue-raising capacity. Finally, the nine issues outlined above are returned to in the conclusion, with the findings from the country case studies summarised in relation to each one.

3. Decentralisation and Poverty Reduction: A Review of Recent Surveys

The three elements of the World Bank's poverty reduction strategy are recalled: 'promoting opportunity, facilitating empowerment and enhancing security' (2001: 7-8). Decentralisation is highlighted by the Bank as a key policy reform that enhances the 'facilitating empowerment' dimension, given the potential of decentralisation to both strengthen participation and increase government responsiveness to the poor (World Bank, 2001: 106). Subsequently, Steiner (2007), also a contributor to this volume, has further elaborated this analysis and indicated how decentralisation can contribute to all three elements of the Bank's poverty reduction strategy. As regards 'facilitating empowerment', she also notes the contribution of decentralisation through increased participation in public decision-making (ibid.: 177). In terms of 'promoting opportunities', the transferring of certain decision-making powers to local government involves an assumption that local authorities have an 'informational advantage' with regard to local needs and preferences, increasing the likelihood of greater correspondence between demand and supply of local services (ibid.: 177). Finally, the contribution of decentralisation to 'enhancing security' entails an overlap between the issues of poverty reduction and conflict management. Significantly though, Steiner also notes that these three potential channels of poverty reduction constitute an optimal model, one that is rarely fully realised. In practice, constraints in implementing democratic decentralisation are frequently encountered, thereby limiting the effects on poverty.

Yet, although decentralisation advocates have asserted likely pro-poor outcomes, such claims have generally not been well supported by academic evidence. It is only comparatively recently, in fact, that decentralisation research has specifically focused on the linkages with poverty reduction, with a number of studies published since the turn of the century, all reviews of secondary literature (Bossuyt and Gould, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Von Braun and Grote, 2002; Crook, 2003; Vedeld, 2003; Jütting et al., 2004, 2005).¹ Of these, the most extensive surveys of cases across Africa, Asia and Latin America have been undertaken by Crook and Sverrisson (2001) (ten countries and two states in India) and by Jütting et al. (2004) (eighteen countries and three states in India), while the other studies have been smaller in scale. The studies share a number of similar features, including the common finding that linkages between decentralisation and poverty reduction are generally negative, either in the sense of no clear attribution of poverty reduction to decentralisation or, more worryingly, that decentralisation can have a deleterious effect on poverty levels. These studies are reviewed here in four sub-sections: the methods used to measure the impact on poverty, their findings, the (pre-)conditions noted for pro-poor outcomes, and the shortcomings of the studies.

3.1. *Measuring poverty impact*

As is commonplace, poverty is defined as a multidimensional concept and measuring the impact of decentralisation on poverty is undertaken along both political and economic lines. In three studies, participation and empowerment are taken as the key political indicators, while the provision of basic social services is regarded as the crucial socio-economic outcome. Jütting et al. (2004, 2005) examine political and economic impacts in terms of 'empowerment' and 'access to services' respectively, where empowerment is assessed through considering levels of 'participation' and of 'local government capacity' (Jütting et al., 2005: 629-30). Von Braun and Grote (2002: 73-74) also highlight both political and economic linkages with poverty reduction, assessing 'participation/empowerment' and 'public services/pro-poor investment'. Crook and Sverrisson (2001: 5) look for evidence of poverty reduction through increased 'responsiveness and participation' and through improved 'social and economic outcomes'. They assess the responsiveness of local government to the needs of the poor through examining the degree of participation, while acknowledging that participation is a 'somewhat imperfect indication of the degree of responsiveness' (ibid.: 10). Positive social and economic outcomes are looked for in four areas: pro-poor growth; increased social equity; enhanced human development (health, education, sanitation); decreased spatial or inter-regional inequalities (ibid.: 10-11). One important economic indicator that appears to have been omitted from all studies, however, is the level of local incomes and whether decentralisation has contributed to poverty reduction through creating employment opportunities and enhancing household incomes.

3.2. *Impact of decentralisation on poverty reduction: survey findings*

The overall common finding is that decentralisation has *not* had a significant effect on poverty reduction. Crook and Sverrisson (2001: 52) concluded that:

'The notion that there is a predictable or general link between decentralisation of government and the development of more 'pro-poor' policies or poverty alleviating outcomes clearly lacks any convincing evidence.'

Jütting et al. (2004: 7) found that 'an unambiguous link between decentralisation and poverty reduction cannot be established'. From his review of literature on democratic decentralisation and poverty reduction, Vedeld (2003: 194) concludes that there is 'little convincing evidence that either democracy or decentralisation... will necessarily produce gains for the poor'. Drawing on three cases in Africa, Bossuyt and Gould (2000: 5) state that 'the link between decentralisation

and poverty reduction policies is weak. Only Von Braun and Grote (2002) deviate slightly from this consensus. Having posed the question 'Does decentralisation serve the poor?', their answer is 'Yes, but it depends' (ibid.: 89). However, their selected country evidence does not provide many positive examples.

There are few relatively successful cases, with the same ones often cited, most notably West Bengal in India (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Jütting et al., 2004; Vedeld, 2003) and Bolivia (Jütting et al., 2004; Vedeld, 2003). Of their twelve cases, Crook and Sverrisson (2001: 47) note that only West Bengal showed 'an unambiguously positive outcome', while three others (Karnataka, Colombia and Brazil) showed 'good results in some aspects'.

A further six countries, including four from Africa, were all regarded as 'examples of the failure of decentralisation to help the poor' (Crook and Sverrisson (2001: 47). Jütting et al. (2004: 14) classify countries by performance into four categories: positive (three countries); somewhat positive (four); somewhat negative (nine); and negative (five). The positive examples are West Bengal, Bolivia and the Philippines, while they note that decentralisation in two-thirds of cases has had a *negative* impact on poverty indicators. Vedeld (2003) focuses on relatively successful examples (West Bengal and Kerala in India, Bolivia, the Philippines, Uganda and Mali), yet none of these have attained 'substantial effects on poverty reduction' (ibid.: 195). It is in Africa that the negative impact of decentralisation is most evident (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Jütting et al., 2004; Bossuyt and Gould, 2000), though Ghana and South Africa are perceived by Jütting et al. (2004: 14) as partial exceptions, categorised as 'somewhat positive' performers.

3.3. *Conditions for pro-poor decentralisation*

Despite the failure to find an overall positive relationship between decentralisation and poverty reduction, most studies retain faith in decentralisation and seek to identify the conditions that will facilitate pro-poor outcomes.²

Jütting et al. (2005) identify a number of 'determinants' related to the design and implementation of decentralisation that can enhance its pro-poor nature. These are divided into political, administrative and fiscal factors. Political factors entail: political commitment to decentralisation by central government and political elites; policy coherence where local authority powers are *not* undermined by other means; and transparent and participatory processes (2005: 638-41). Administrative factors include an investment in local capacity building and a clear division of functions between local and central government (2005: 641-42). Fiscal factors entail adequate and secure resources, including tax-raising powers (2005: 642-43). From this list, political determinants are highlighted as decisive: 'Real devolution of power and resources while establishing accountability systems' (2005: 644).

From examples of 'relatively good practice', Vedeld (2003: 185-87) assembles a list of five pre-conditions for making democratic decentralisation more pro-poor. These are: central government commitment; civil society engagement; participation and accountability; donor support; and a public discourse on poverty. The political dimension is again emphasised. Echoing Jütting et al., central government commitment is highlighted as 'stand[ing] out as an *essential precondition*' (Vedeld, 2003: 186, emphasis added).

Crook and Sverrisson (2001) and Crook (2003) take a slightly different tack by seeking to explain differing poverty outcomes, both positive and negative. In identifying the key variables, however, they simultaneously suggest the necessary conditions for greater success. Again, the first and most significant variable pertains to central government commitment, though with an added ideological slant in the case of West Bengal. Successful poverty reduction here is understood as due to the state government's 'ideological commitment to anti-poverty policies' (Crook, 2003: 85). In this instance the ruling Left Front government has implemented decentralisation as a means to challenge local elite resistance to mass-based policies and to mobilise an electoral alliance in favour of such policies. Key variables that influenced the degree of poverty reduction elsewhere included: the extent to which political participation was effective in establishing accountable local government; the system for allocation of financial and administrative resources; and the length of time that decentralisation has been implemented, with ten to fifteen years needed to show results (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001: 4-5).

3.4. *Limitations and shortcomings*

Although these studies usefully provide an overall picture based on reviews of a significant number of country cases, such surveys also have their shortcomings. One limitation is that they are mainly dependent on secondary literature, including country studies of decentralisation whose original focus may not have been on poverty reduction. Judgements may be rudimentary and the distance from primary research also increases when one secondary survey quotes another as the source of its evidence – for example, Jütting et al. (2004: Table A-1) often cite Bossuyt and Gould (2000) and Von Braun and Grote (2002) as sources for their findings.

The reliability of judgements is questioned by the case of Ghana, for example, with differing assessments made. Jütting et al. (2004: 14) place Ghana in their 'somewhat positive' category, and Von Braun and Grote (2002: 90) state that 'the overall decentralization process has been judged as successful'. In contrast, Crook and Sverrisson (2001: 47) regard Ghana as an example 'of the failure of decentralisation to help the poor', with the qualification that it was the 'least bad' of six negative examples. This assessment is based on Crook's mid-1990s primary

research in Ghana, published in Crook and Manor (1998), as well as secondary sources. The source of Jütting et al.'s (2004: 36) evaluation is given as Von Braun and Grote (2002), while Von Braun and Grote themselves rely exclusively on secondary literature.

In sum, despite limitations, these cross-national surveys based on secondary sources provide valuable reviews of the 'big picture' regarding decentralisation and poverty reduction. They can be complemented, however, by country case studies based on primary data, which this book intends to provide.

4. **Decentralisation and Conflict Management: A Review of the Debate**

In stark contrast to the theoretical and empirical debate about the relationship between decentralisation and poverty reduction, there is no similar body of sophisticated approaches and empirical assessment concerning decentralisation's impact on conflict management. There are several reasons for this state of the art. While poverty reduction is the first of the UN Millennium Development Goals and no African government (with the possible exception of Mauritius) would reject poverty alleviation as one of its main policy objectives, many governments deny that there exist any conflicts within their countries or refuse the international community's competence to deal with them. In other words, while poverty reduction is a vague but undisputed commitment of most governments, conflict management (at least as far domestic conflicts are concerned) is not. Crisis prevention and conflict management is thus more a concern of the donor community and international governmental organisations (OECD, 2004).

Most policy-makers would argue that successful socio-economic development and democracy are the best way to prevent crisis and solve violent conflicts. By contributing to such aims, decentralisation can also contribute to the management of conflicts. This way of framing the problem still leaves us with the question of whether decentralisation – beyond these indirect effects – has a direct impact on the dynamics of conflicts. Policy-makers also tend to avoid the thorny question of whether decentralisation might also increase the likelihood of violent conflict.

There has not been any systematic and continuous academic debate on decentralisation and conflict management, i.e. both discourses have evolved largely separate from each other. We will thus discuss those three strands of literature that have to some extent tried to analyse the linkage. First, if federalism is perceived as one type of decentralised government, then it becomes possible to use scholarship from this tradition. A second strand of research is concerned with the largely indirect effects of decentralisation on various aspects of political stability.

Finally, there are some mainly conceptual studies that try to analyse the specific impact of decentralisation policies (in unitary states) on various types of conflicts, mostly in post-conflict settings.

4.1. *Federalism and conflict management*

There is a long research tradition on the conflict management potential of multi-ethnic federations. In contrast to decentralisation, federalism presupposes a division of sovereignty, a constitutionally protected status for the devolved units (usually states in their own right with parliaments, governments and a distinct political process whose rights can only be revoked by constitutional amendment), a constitutional procedure to solve conflicts between the central and the decentralized levels, and an organ at central level where the decentralized units have a veto power over national policy decisions affecting their rights. The provinces within a decentralized unitary state may, however, have more effective power than the member-states of a federation. This is one of the reasons why recent research on federalism (Bermeo and Amoretti, 2004) has proposed to replace the dichotomy between federalism and unitary states with a more differentiated typology of variables such as the degree of fiscal decentralisation or electoral systems.

Lake and Rothchild (2002) tried to statistically assess the role of federal institutions in the transition from war to peace and came to a relatively sober assessment. On the basis of their data they see decentralisation in the short run as a valuable tool for peace-making because it serves as a signal of moderation by the majority. In the long run it may work as a major incentive for secession and disintegration. Ghai (2002) in a qualitative comparison obtained a different result, claiming that only 'true autonomy prevents secession' (Ghai, 2002: 23). The track record of multi-national federations in Africa in managing conflict does certainly not allow for much optimism, whether one thinks of Nigeria or Ethiopia.

What then are the decisive elements that make a federal system stable? McGarry and O'Leary (2002) have identified a number of variables such as consociational forms of democratic rule at the central level, a minimum number of three major ethnic groups, and a certain level of socio-economic development that allows for instruments of fiscal equalisation and distributive fairness. Stepan (2003) has also argued that federalism would not be an easy model to adopt as only those federations who came together on a voluntary basis (by aggregation) have been able to manage internal conflict well, while the 'holding together' federations of former empires are *de facto* 'pseudo-federations' that were doomed to fail.

4.2. *Indirect effects of decentralisation on conflict and stability*

Schou and Haug (2005) have proposed a typology of conflict mitigating and conflict intensifying effects of decentralisation. One positive effect of decentralisation is the political inclusion of new groups, which is typically the case when opposition parties capture sub-national units such as in Mozambique or Mali. Decentralisation would thus increase the representative character of the political system especially in heterogeneous societies with territorially concentrated minorities (Diamond, 1999: 129). Decentralisation can also foster political stability and national unity through granting greater autonomy to conflicting groups, who are forced to enter into a formal bargaining process with the government (Rothchild, 1994: 1). Finally, it can also help the state to establish central government authority in areas where state penetration had been weak, thereby increasing the legitimacy of public institutions.

Schou and Haug (2005: 18) also recognise the danger of decentralisation leading to the intensification of conflicts. This might happen by giving political space to forces whose loyalty to the central government is not guaranteed, as was the case in Angola, or who are not interested in a peaceful transformation of conflicts. Decentralisation may also exacerbate regional differences in socio-economic development which might easily lead to a further polarisation along regional lines, especially when intergovernmental fiscal transfers include a high percentage of direct distributive interventions and exemption rules. One might add that decentralisation might also simply be irrelevant for conflict management, because conflicting parties might ignore new authorities and dispensations and continue to solve conflicts via established informal rules and power-brokers (Mehler, 2002).

While it is certainly an important and useful first step to point to the ambivalent role of decentralisation, any assessment of whether these potential effects occur depends on a number of critical variables. The specific contexts (both of countries but also of micro-social settings) and the prevailing constellation of actors certainly matter, but it can be assumed that the design of decentralisation itself is also important for conflict dynamics and management (Sisk, 2001).

4.3. *Decentralisation policies and conflict*

Little empirical research has been done to test these assumptions in African contexts. Some African governments have apparently used devolution as a conflict management tool (Mali, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda), and their experience has been analysed in various case studies. Seely (2001) has analysed the decentralisation policies enacted in Mali since 1992 as a deliberate attempt of the new democratic regime to co-opt the Tuareg rebels into the political system. The

Ugandan case has attracted much more interest, because decentralisation was designed as a strategy to appease the proponents of federalism (largely concentrated in wealthy Buganda). As the survival of the ruling coalition depended on the support of the new constitution in the constituent assembly, some concessions to autonomy demands had to be taken (Englebert, 2001; Griffiths and Katalikawe, 2003). Decentralisation had the additional advantage of being popular with donors. In the process, minorities emerged to demand an ever-stronger fragmentation of districts, thus denying the bigger ethno-nationalist movements any possibility of using decentralised units as springboards for secession while shifting the problem of ethnic conflict to local levels where it was supposedly less threatening to state integrity (see Schelnberger, in this volume).

The focus of these analyses has been, however, largely restricted to an analysis of governmental policies whose declared intention consisted in contributing to conflict management and political stability. Unintended effects of decentralisation policies are not analysed (Mehler, 2002). The empirical question of how local or national conflicts have actually been influenced by these policies and whether the new dispensation indeed helped to better manage ongoing and sometimes violent conflicts over land, natural resources and political power have rarely been addressed in the African context (with the notable exception of the South African case, see Munro, 2001 or Ntsebeza, 2005).

The contributions to this book intend to shed some fresh light on the relationship between decentralisation and conflict by proceeding with an empirical qualitative analysis of single or, in one instance, a small number of cases. These aim to help us in better understanding the critical variables that potentially lead to decentralisation in the African context having positive or negative effects with regard to conflict.

5. Structure of the Book

This book is structured into two main parts pertaining to the two main questions being investigated: the impact of decentralisation on poverty reduction and on the prevention and management of violent conflict respectively. Following this introductory chapter, the first part looks at decentralisation and poverty reduction with four country case studies in different regions of Africa: Uganda, Malawi, Ghana and Tanzania. Subsequently, the second part has three chapters that look at issues of decentralisation and conflict management. The first of these three chapters itself entails three country studies, those of South Africa, Namibia and Mauritius, while the other two chapters look at Uganda and Rwanda respectively. A brief introduction to each chapter follows.

In Chapter 2, Susan Steiner explores 'Constraints on the Implementation of Decentralisation and the Implications for Poverty Reduction' through the case study of Uganda. While it is often argued that decentralisation is effective for the reduction of poverty due to inherent opportunities for higher popular participation, responsiveness in policy-making and increased efficiency in public service delivery, this chapter qualifies such arguments and outlines potential challenges to the poverty reduction potential of decentralisation. It explains that achieving poverty alleviation through decentralisation is by no means automatic and can be seriously constrained by an insufficient increase in popular participation, lack of downward accountability, inadequate levels of competence as well as low human and financial capacity at the local level. The chapter examines the existence of these constraints in the case of Uganda. The Ugandan government initiated an ambitious decentralisation reform programme in 1992, which provides for the devolution of far-reaching responsibilities to local governments. However, several shortcomings, such as limited local autonomy, differences between local politicians and civil servants, conflicts between different local government levels, financial shortages and low information levels, as well as the prevalence of corruption, patronage and clientelism, all impede the proper implementation of the reform. This in turn puts improvements in participation, accountability and efficiency at risk and ultimately jeopardises the expected impact on poverty.

In Chapter 3, Blessings Chinsinga provides a critical appraisal of decentralisation and poverty reduction in Malawi. While acknowledging that decentralisation, democratisation and poverty reduction are widely seen as positively related, he demonstrates that the empirical track record of the decentralisation reforms in Malawi raises some serious doubts about this perception. As yet, democratic decentralisation policy reforms have had no discernible impact on poverty reduction, service delivery and political participation, despite a timeframe of over a decade since their introduction. Chinsinga argues, however, that this does not discount the potential of decentralisation to promote poverty reduction and political participation *per se*, but rather demonstrates that the success is greatly dependent on how decentralisation policy reforms are introduced, articulated and implemented. The Malawi case demonstrates that there is an inherent risk that the nature, form and scope of spaces that open up as a result of democratic decentralisation reforms can be strategically limited, controlled and even closed by powerful actors intent on promoting, defending and consolidating vested political interests. This in turn undermines the potential of decentralisation as a crucial element in reinventing state institutional capability as a foundation for an effective public sector as well as a means of bringing the state closer to the people.

In Chapter 4, Gordon Crawford subjects the conventional wisdom on the relationship between decentralisation and poverty reduction to further ques-

tioning in three ways through the case study of Ghana. First, he questions the assumption that 'democratic participation will yield strong mechanisms of accountability', as noted by Johnson (2003: 8). Findings in the Ghana case are that increased participation and popular input into local policy-making processes has not led to greater popular control of government, highlighting a de-linkage between participation and accountability. Second, he questions the 'ubiquitous claim' that political will is 'the principal requirement for success', as highlighted by Smoke (2003: 12). Reliance on central government political commitment is misplaced or paradoxical, with the Ghana case demonstrating how central governments often implement decentralisation in a manner intended to promote their own interests. Third, he questions the 'managerial thrust' of much public administration literature that assumes that 'if reforms are technically on target, the rest will follow automatically', as noted in ICHRP (2005: 15). Such literature emphasises the importance of decentralisation being implemented 'by design' and not 'by default' (Jütting et al., 2005: 638-9), yet the Ghana case indicates how structural constraints are precisely inherent in the design, with decentralisation as a political exercise not a technical one. The questioning in this chapter of these three aspects of conventional wisdom is underpinned by the concept of the politics of (de)centralisation. In other words, while central governments may implement (or be forced to implement) decentralisation for a variety of reasons, they invariably aim to retain (and even consolidate) their power and control over resources.

In Chapter 5, Meine Pieter van Dijk deals with the local government reform process in Tanzania by taking a closer look at the grass roots level in the capital city and in two districts. Van Dijk argues that decentralisation has contributed to local development, primarily due to the flows of goods, services, capital, ideas and people that it has generated. Decentralisation policies provide economic opportunities for local governments and entrepreneurs. It provides local people with the opportunity to take various initiatives and it makes available money for local investments by local government through the generation of local taxes. Although too much local tax collection can work as a disincentive for private sector development, it does allow local governments to undertake more development activities. With regard to the role of decentralisation for poverty alleviation, Van Dijk identifies three main instruments: income transfers, developing services and infrastructure, and creating employment at the local level. The importance of these instruments in the Tanzanian context is reviewed in the empirical part of the chapter. The paper ends by summarising the benefits of decentralisation, especially for poor people, while acknowledging implementation constraints and instances where impact has not been as positive as anticipated, for instance, a lack of success in diminishing rural-urban differences.

The next three chapters deal with the relationship between decentralisation and conflict. In Chapter 6, Christof Hartmann analyses the relationship between decentralisation and the management of conflict in the heterogeneous multi-racial societies of Southern Africa. In these countries decentralisation is less concerned with finding a way out of violent conflict but rather with establishing durable political institutions that are capable of peacefully regulating the high potential for social conflict. Hartmann's chapter first develops a theoretical statement concerning typical – both positive and negative – effects of decentralisation on conflict, and proposes to distinguish between conflicts that oppose different actors within a decentralised unit and those where a sub-national government clashes with central government. The empirical part of the paper analyses how these two types of conflicts have been influenced by decentralisation policies. Hartmann argues that the depoliticisation of local government in Namibia and South Africa has minimised the potential for centre-local conflicts, but at the same time further marginalised groups that do not belong to the ruling coalition. Decentralisation has been more important for local conflicts in so far the developmental role attributed to councils has both increased expectations of the population and led to conflicts with traditional authorities.

In Chapter 7, Anna Katharina Schelnberger uses a thick description of a local resource conflict in the Ugandan district of Kibaale to question the conventional wisdom of the beneficial impact of decentralisation policies on conflict. Resource-based conflicts between indigenous and migrant populations in the Kibaale area were transformed into political and ethnic conflicts through the establishment of a new district within the new Local Government Scheme. Schelnberger illustrates how the introduction of new rules affects the interests and expectations of various actors. The violent escalation of this conflict was brought to a halt only by the direct intervention of the President of the Republic, thus annulling both the democratic election of a migrant politician and the political autonomy of the decentralised authority. The second part of the chapter develops a theory-based explanation for what happened in Kibaale. It gives a detailed account of the institutional provisions within the Local Government Law, and of the role that different sources of conflict (concerning land ownership and use and the control of political institutions) had for the capacity of local government to manage the conflict.

Chapter 8 by Peter van Tilburg analyses the role of decentralisation for the political stability of Rwanda. Following the 1994 genocide there was an urgent need not only to rebuild the physical infrastructure but also to develop a new political dispensation and to create a deep reconciliation among the conflicting parties and populations. Within this overall process of political and social reconstruction, the government has also introduced a policy of decentralisation. Van Tilburg assesses

both the specific Rwandan model of decentralisation and the likely impact it will have both on the cohesion and national integration of the population. The chapter ends with the optimistic perspective that decentralisation and the resulting participation of the local population in planning their own future will support the drive towards stability in this African country which has become the symbol of particularly brutal and inhumane violence.

Finally, the concluding chapter summarises the country chapters in a comparative manner, highlighting both similarities and differences in the impact that decentralisation has had, and draws overall conclusions regarding the two main research questions: the extent to which decentralisation has contributed to poverty reduction and to the prevention and management of violent conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Notes

- 1 Vedeld (2003: 159) states that his literature review was supplemented by 'limited field visits to India, Mali and Uganda.'
- 2 The work of Crook and Sverriosen (2001) and Crook (2003) is an exception, maintaining a more non-committal stance.

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